



**MATTERS
OF STATE**

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

MATTERS OF STATE

By A. Phallus Si

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Cover Art by Bree Archer

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Photo Description

Black & white of two naked males in profile, passionately embracing. Musculature denotes that one is older than other; he hungrily leans in, teeth against the youth's neck. The younger male grasps his lover; one hand fist in his hair pulling him in and the other spanning his ribs, and as he arches backwards his lover covers him. Both are consumed in the moment.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Tomorrow marked his twenty-fourth birthday. Damien had longed for it the entire year, because it was the day the Rebellion would moor into the port. She had done so for six years in a row. The ship was magnificent, and always brought with her an abundance of wealth. But it was her captain that Damien longed to see the most. The enigmatic Hayden had captivated him from the first moment they met, six years earlier, on his eighteenth birthday. When Hayden turned those burning eyes upon him from across the room, he had the urge to go down on his knees and beg for his attention and whatever more he was willing to give. But despite the penetrating eyes, he didn't get anything more than a polite conversation and a congratulation when he learned it was his birthday. For six consecutive years, those eyes had roved his body and bared his needs, while every gesture and spoken word was distant and evasive. And each time Hayden left, Damien was yearning more. Tomorrow though, he would make Hayden stay and let him have his wicked way. Damien was making sure of that! He would wait no longer to be with the man he fell in love with! Tomorrow marked the first day of their HEA ...

Sincerely,

Tina

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: spacemen/aliens, interspecies, age gap, dirty talk, exhibitionism, alpha male attempting to woo

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Author's Note

As usual, I have been blessed. In return, I can only offer insufficient thanks to everyone who gave me feedback and support. Sunny, your humorous comments made editing a joy. Jenni, your catches were invaluable for clarity. Emma, your quiet presence at the ready was a comfort. And everyone who was boring when I asked—Thanks!

Tina, I hope you enjoy the fruits of your prompt. Damien and Hayden turned out to be intriguing men, stealing bits of my heart.

Again, a special thanks goes to [Bree Archer](#) for illuminating my story with such a lovely cover.

MATTERS OF STATE

By A. Phallus Si

Situated at the edge of the galaxy, SPV7Z-218 is the last stop before the Void of Between. Primarily accessible via a wormhole, it attracts a clientele of merchants, adventurers, and mercenaries. Hidden beneath its battered exterior, SPV houses a vibrant community of free-spirited species who adhere to a live-and-let-live policy.

Cycle One

Tugging his sleeves down, Damien adjusted his jacket and attempted as much with his mood. He sighed at his reflection, perfectly coiffed and attired for the evening's festivities. His eighteenth cycle celebration and instead of carousing with friends in the Pleasure District, he was stuck attending the Trade Gala.

Sometimes, being the captain's son really wasn't the advantage everyone thought. All right, most of the time it was great. He'd managed to sneak out of attending the last several official engagements, but he wasn't so lucky this time. He'd been lectured consistently about the increasing responsibilities with his studies. Tonight was a learning experience, and while he agreed with his father, why did the gala have to be tonight of all nights?

Every spiver, SPV kid, dreams about when their subdermal chips won't trigger the Pleasure District's security alarms and they finally get to see and try everything. Heck! Get to walk through without having to worry about being hauled out by the behemoths in black. Sure, everyone thinks they'll beat the system and then ends up in Detention—once. Damien is certain that there are provisions against that room somewhere in the Galactic Charter.

Instead, here he was shaking hands and smiling at a never-ending parade of dignitaries. Contacts, as his father referred to them. Invaluable assets and ones he needed to start cultivating. Sowing the seeds of his future when he'd rather be sowing some oats. Blah, blah... blah.

The reception had been going on for T-units upon T-units. Empty glasses littered trays, balustrades, and the planter housing some exotic floral monstrosity that Damien was sure had nipped him earlier. After his second glass of effervescence, he lost interest in the environmental recycling discussion Engineer Grayfeld was trying to have with his father between greetings with officials from Vector 7Z and various shipping conglomerates.

He was far more interested in the solitary figure that had just entered the hall. Damien tracked him as he traversed the concourse. As he strode forward, a path appeared as others drifted clear of his trajectory. His presence was commanding enough that he didn't have to pause once. Damien sighed quietly.

“Yes, I agree that we will need to re-examine our organic recycling capabilities, Jansen. Bring it up at the governance meeting, and we'll decide

which option to procure in the next trade manifest,” Captain Altamura said as he turned to greet the approaching party.

“Captain Ferrier, always a pleasure to have the *Rebellion* docked.” The grin on his face was warmer and wider than any other Damien had seen his father extend thus far.

There was an air of untamed elegance, ferocity evident in the way the man moved, powerfully, yet relaxed. If Damien had been in the Pleasure District, he would have wasted no time in making his interest known. But playing the SPV’s most influential citizen’s son at a public event meant that falling to his knees in supplication was not appropriate. Damien tried not to stare, but up close, the captain was even more impressive. Unusually young for the class of ship he commanded, not even a hint of gray yet. Then again, maybe he wasn’t human. He was still trying to determine if Ferrier spent a great deal of time planetside or his ancestors were genetically blessed with that deep golden skin, when he noted that he had become the object of attention. And if Damien thought his perusal of the captain was invasive, then he felt assuaged when those eyes turned to inspect him.

Amber ringed with ebony, the eyes were warm and piercing at the same time. Damien felt their progress as they slowly catalogued their way from the silver spikes on top to the glossy scarlet of his boots. It was as if each aspect of his personage was individually noted; did he count the eyelashes? Damien licked his lips when they finally passed on to his throat, and tried not to swallow or check his collar. He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed when his father interrupted the captain’s survey.

“This is my son, Damien Altamura. Damien, this is Captain Hayden Ferrier of the *Rebellion*, the Argonaut-class vessel that you were admiring the schematics of this week.” Damien bowed as his father elaborated. “He was assisting in docking assignments for the gala when he became intrigued by your dimensions.” Damien almost missed his quirked eyebrow as Captain Ferrier smiled and bowed slightly.

“May there always be a port left to you and a star right ahead,” Damien offered the formal greeting as Ferrier recommenced his avid examination. Straightening, he tried to ignore the effects of the captain’s unrelenting attention and the quiver beginning in his gut.

“SPV7Z-218 is not just any port, but the premier portal in Centaurus A. On behalf of the Esplendent League, I thank you for safe harbor,” he responded

formally. His voice was cool, and if Damien weren't presently being visually assaulted, then he'd almost think that Captain Ferrier was bored. His clothes felt tight, and he had to resist the urge to fidget.

"It is my pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. Your father speaks of little else but trade and you." And just like that, the laser focus was gone as Ferrier launched into a discussion of the *Rebellion's* cargo and what his father might want priority bidding on.

Overwhelmed with the desire to be the subject of the captain's attention again, Damien waited and let his mind run free with the possibilities. He wanted to feel more than the captain's eyes on him. Those hands, they were beautiful and strong. Their grip would be unyielding, commanding... bruising. In the last couple cycles, Damien had begun to realize that he enjoyed when his bed partners got a little rough, aggressive. It wasn't hard to imagine how Captain Ferrier would feel pressed against him, holding him down. A man in his prime with such a powerful build could subdue him physically no doubt, but it was the way Ferrier watched him that excited Damien. Here was a man for whom commanding was instinctual. Damien wouldn't have to lead him to take control; Ferrier would never release it.

Release. Ferrier tying him down would set him free. This man could make him fly. Damien let out a shaky breath; youth and excitement were getting the upper hand. He still only had erratic control of some reactions, so unless he wanted to embarrass himself, it would be better if he stopped thinking about that, right now.

Ferrier's nostrils flared and his eyes darted over and quickly glanced down Damien's body. Too late. A smile played at the edges of the captain's lips as Damien felt heat rush to his face.

Ferrier was addressing him when he caught the drift of their conversation again. "Felicitations on reaching your majority, Master Altamura."

Cycle Two

Gyrating against warm bodies under the spinning lights, Damien felt free. Free from expectations. Here he wasn't the captain's son or the port master's apprentice, just another body writhing en masse. The throbbing music and hands on him were more relaxing than T-units of massage. He leaned back, rubbing along the massive Bauman who had closed in behind him. Damien dipped his head back and smiled.

"Hello, pretty one," smiled the behemoth with a hand on his hip as he moved against him.

"Hi." It came out more breathless than he felt. Damien recognized him as part of SPV's security team. He'd seen him patrolling in uniform before, though they'd never done more than cross paths. Tonight that would change. Honestly, just knowing those large hands could snap him in two excited him.

"You have an admirer at the bar," said his dance partner. Damien hummed in disagreement. "Perhaps he's something more. Would he like to join us?" He asked as he gently plucked a nipple.

"*Unf...*" Damien shook his head. Impossible. There was no one he shared more than a night or two with, but curiosity had him searching the long stretch at the back wall.

Finally, Damien caught sight of whom the Bauman was referring: Captain Ferrier. The *Rebellion* was back. If Damien thought he was hard before, that was nothing compared to how he felt knowing Ferrier was watching him.

Damien grabbed the hand wrapped around his chest and pulled it lower. The Bauman understood and slid it down over his trousers to fondle him. Gently rubbing, tracing the hardening length trapped inside.

"Harder," he begged. The pressure increased. Damien was torn between wanting release and balancing on the edge of ecstasy, between the hand on his cock and the eyes watching. Never once losing sight of Ferrier who moved forward, stopping at the edge of the dance floor.

His shirt was yanked up in the back, and Damien felt a thick cock rubbing in the furrow of his spine, sweat and precum letting it slide. He rode the pleasures of a hard male rutting against him as he thrust into his warm hand. All the while, Ferrier watched.

Those eyes never stopped touching him as Damien was brought to orgasm, nearly blacking out. Hearing a groan and feeling the hot splash on his back trickling down, he took deep breaths to clear the white spots dancing across his retinas. When he looked around, Ferrier was gone. *Where was he?*

Cycle Three

“On behalf of SPV7Z-218, I am willing to offer concessions to both you and the Esplendent League, if you are able to obtain and supply the requested shipment. Incentives have been earmarked for early delivery, substantial ones that will benefit you personally and professionally. As a Caurentian, I’m sure you’ll find the compensation worth your while.” Captain Altamura pushed a sheaf of papers across the table.

After his disastrous attempts at vying for Ferrier’s attention during dinner, Damien sat quietly observing as the captain reviewed the papers between sipping his Grogian fire. If there was ever a lubricant in negotiations, it was his father’s reserve of liquors. He nursed his glass as Ferrier hissed through the sweet burn of another mouthful.

“I think we can come to an agreement, but this will not be simple.”

“The rewards wouldn’t be so high if it was.”

Cycle Four

Lights swirled, the music thumped, and the bodies undulating all around Damien never lost contact. Immersed in this vortex of sensation, he floated, part of everything and nothing. The subvocal growl was unexpected, as was his sudden release and the whines from the group. Damien stumbled backwards into a familiar figure. Without a word, Ferrier hauled him up by the arm and out the door of Stripes. The cooler air slapped him awake.

Wait... Ferrier is Caurentian. How did he even get into the club? The rift between the Thylacines and the Caurentians was well known. They weren't precisely adversarial, but they didn't mingle either. Active disinterest was a better way of describing their relations. Yet somehow, he'd gained admittance to the private club.

"How did you... Why—"

"Say nothing." He growled as he pinned his arms and steered him. Damien couldn't decide if he wanted to fight this manhandling or revel in it as he was frog-marched back to his quarters. Which, by the way, how did Ferrier know where he resided?

"Open the door, Damien." Ferrier was pressed up against him.

He raised his recently liberated hand and disengaged the lock with a scan of his chip. Stepped inside and waited, but Ferrier didn't move. Now what? Damien gestured for him to enter, but the captain just looked, refusing to cross the threshold.

"Goodnight, Damien. And don't go back to Stripes, they won't let you in." With that admonishment and cryptic message, Ferrier left and Damien stared at the shut panel.

What in all the galaxies was that about?

Cycle Five

His team scattered to their assigned sectors. The sound of pressure locks and crowbars filled the hold as their inspection began. The weight allowances and crate ratio was off, way off for what was documented in the manifest. The Versyllians were attempting to trade more than barrels of klahouffe and bolts of Lyra silk. While no port could completely eliminate smuggling, Damien wanted to know what was going through his station, his quadrant.

He was investigating the rear of a container for false paneling when he heard a rapping on top. *What?* Banging his head, he crawled backwards—into a set of legs. Turned and looked up.

Captain Ferrier.

Funny, in all the times he'd imagined being on his knees for Ferrier over the cycles, and trust him, it was a lot, it was never like this. In all those fantasies fueled by a healthy, young male libido, in not one of them was he tired, covered in unidentifiable bits, and in the middle of a bustling cargo bay. Not that he had a problem with an audience. Clearly, dancing at Roots pretty much assured him that he was more than slightly inclined towards exhibitionism. Well that, and his participation in the Wheelbarrow Races.

Ferrier raised his hand towards him; Damien leaned in, wanting those fingers in his hair. But at the last moment, it dropped back to his side.

Sigh.

Damien rose and stepped to the side to give them more room. “Captain Ferrier, I trust your mooring is adequate.”

“As always.” The silence afterwards lingered. What was he expecting? What did he want? Ferrier had tracked him down and now nothing. Nothing but these stares, these looks like the captain was one minute away from ripping off his uniform and bending him over the crate beside them. If only.

Damien huffed. He was about to—

“Our schedule is tight and the *Rebellion* won't be here longer than it takes to unload her and restock.”

Fuckstars! He was leaving. This wasn't hello; it was good-bye. Not even a drink or dinner. No time to flirt or feel the pull of being visually undressed. No

new fuel for the next cycle's fantasies. Damien tried not to let his disappointment show.

"I know my father will miss seeing you." He wasn't the only one.

Ferrier cleared his throat. "Yes. I was told he was in meetings and wouldn't be available. Please, convey my regrets." Great. Now he was their lackey. After enduring some more awkward silence Damien gave up.

"I should probably get back to this, and you need to head out. See you next cycle, Captain." Damien turned to go.

"Wait." A warm hand wrapped around his bicep. "I—Here." Ferrier thrust a small box into his chest. "Twenty-three cycles, felicitations. I found this in a market on Timbango." He waited for Damien to grab hold of it before letting go. "I thought of you."

A present. Had he really thought of him? Seemed unlikely. Every cycle it was the same. Damien could feel the tension, the desire between them, but each time he was too timid to do anything, and Ferrier only looked. Maybe if the captain said something, gave more indication of interest, he would have pursued him. Damien wasn't shy, but with Ferrier he felt at a disadvantage, like an infatuated puppy constantly gamboling behind him.

Damien grinned and gave thanks. Ferrier smiled with a look of... fondness? Even if he continually made an idiot of himself, their growing friendship was worth all the embarrassment. He unlatched the box and lifted the carved lid.

A gold cuff lay on a silken bed. It flashed, encrusted in starfires and bloodstones, and the light danced off it. It was... it was too much.

"I can't—" Damien started to refuse. Ferrier plucked the cuff out of its box and fastened it around his left wrist. "It's—"

"Beautiful," he said. "Of course you can accept this token," Ferrier continued before he could further protest. It didn't look like a mere token. And it certainly didn't feel like one, the weight of it was a presence.

"Are you certain that it isn't too... valuable?" It did look expensive. Damien had never seen anything like it.

"It is common for young men like you to have such things with my people." Damien eyed Ferrier's rather austere black flight suit. Yes, it coordinated with the dark gold of his skin and the deep black brown of his hair, but he saw no evidence of similar adornments on him.

“But you have none.”

“I don’t wear cuffs because I am past the customary age.” Ferrier probably noted Damien’s dubiousness because he added, “Another time I will tell you more about them, but now, I must go. Keep it on you, yes?”

Ferrier stalked back towards the moorings. He turned one last time. “Don’t take it off, Damien.”

Cycle Six

Another guy walked away from him with nothing but a look of disgust. Either there was something wrong with him, or the Golden Jackal was definitely not his lucky bar. He hadn't been here in a couple cycles, but Damien didn't recall the patrons being so dismissive or outraged at his overtures before. Maybe there was something wrong with his scent. He discreetly tried to smell himself.

Fuck it. He ordered another Tamal brew and watched the vid screen.

"If you want any hope of finding company tonight, you'd better lose that Caurentian band," advised the bartender.

"What?"

"Your promise band." Indicating the cuff Ferrier had given him last cycle. "No one here is gonna fuck what belongs to another jackal. Least of all that one."

"My *what?*" Damien shook the wrist in question at the bartender. "This?"

"Yeah, that."

Promise band. Just what had Ferrier given him? "What does it mean?" he asked.

"It means a very powerful, ergo, dangerous person has decided that you're theirs. And no jackal with a lick of sense would even think about getting on the wrong side of it." The bartender shook his head and leaned in. "What you're wearing costs more than what most here earn in cycles."

"It was a gift." Damien stared at it as if surprised by its presence. He'd worn it for a cycle and quite forgotten it was there most times.

The bartender shook his head. "No. It was a declaration." Damien was trying to sort out what it all meant when he asked, "You need help, kid?"

Did he?

He threw some creds on the counter muttering, "No." Deciding things were definitely not going to improve, he walked out and headed towards home.

A constant barrage of beeping awoke him. Ugh! Damien struggled to untangle himself from the bed coverings and stumbled to the entry. Leaning against the wall, he engaged the comm unit and grumbled, “Who is it?”

“Hayden Ferrier.”

Damien was suddenly alert. The captain? Here? Ferrier never visited. Giving up on any attempt of appearing less disheveled, he disengaged the security measures, and the barrier slid open.

“What do you need, Captain?”

He seemed taken aback. “You were sleeping,” stating the obvious.

“Yeah, I started a switch schedule. Come in.” He turned towards the nutrition unit and requested an energy protein beverage. “Do you want anything?”

Ferrier looked conflicted and then stepped inside, allowing the panel to slide closed. “No. I’ve already dined.” And then blurted out, “You’re not dressed.”

“Yeah, I thought we covered that. I was sleeping.” He pulled up the thin pants that had fallen low on hips up and secured the ties, scratched his naked chest, and yawned before taking a gulp of his drink. “So, what can I do for you?”

Oh god, not the staring again.

“Problem with the *Rebellion*?” Damien was getting tired of carrying their conversations, especially since he wasn’t the one seeking them out. *Comets, collisions, and solar flares!* What did he want?

Ferrier was staring at his wrist, then his face, and points in between.

Noting his regard, Damien said, “Might have told me what the hell this cuff meant before you let me put it on last cycle.” He leaned back against the counter. Ferrier quickly glanced at his wrist again and smiled. He looked smug. Yep, definitely pleased.

“Did this mean something, Ferrier? Because—”

“Hayden.”

“Sure, *Hayden*.” Glad to know he was an adult now. He wagged his left arm. “Did you mean something by this?”

“I assume you were in the Golden Jackal during the last cycle.”

“Does it matter where I went last cycle?” he exclaimed. He was grumpy now. “I walked in there and I was a pariah. What the hell is a promise band?” Damien’s irritation had overridden his usual obsequiousness, and the interrupted sleep no doubt added to it.

“*When* did we make any promises?” He slammed down his cup, stepping closer.

Hayden grabbed him by the band. “I made a promise to myself. I made one every cycle, but it wasn’t until last cycle that I knew I was close enough to achieving my goals to make it formal.”

“Don’t you think you should have told me?” Damien tried to pull free unsuccessfully. Then his brain caught up with what Hayden had said. “Make what formal?”

Hayden grabbed his other wrist and pulled him closer. “To court you.”

Damien searched his face, looking for the joke. Surely? Then he started laughing.

“You’ve got to be kidding me? Six cycles and... and now you want to date?” The hands tightened around his wrists. Damien abandoned his feeble attempts at escaping as the warmth from Hayden’s body surrounded him. Lured him.

“How much do you know about Caurentians?” Little puffs of breath caressed his cheek as Hayden inhaled and exhaled deeply, as if he was drawing in all that was Damien, piece by piece, sense by sense.

“Only what’s available in the cultural logs. I didn’t even know you weren’t human until it came up in negotiations during father’s private dinner three cycles ago,” he huffed. “There isn’t a lot in the records beyond the basics, mostly trade conglomerations, and certainly nothing about courting or mating if that’s what you’re asking.”

Hayden nodded, looking unsurprised. The deep tenor of his voice drew Damien in as he began, “There are rules. Certain requirements, you might say, that a Caurentian must achieve prior to bonding. Financial and professional accomplishments one must meet before they can pursue personal entailments.”

“Wait. You had to acquire enough money and rank before you could fuck me?”

Hayden looked incensed as he yanked Damien flush against him. “I didn’t need to do any of that to *fuck* you, but I never planned to settle for that. Fucking

was never going to be enough, not after I met you.” His lips brushed lightly against his ear, temple, then cheek.

“So what? You secretly want me and have planned for cycles to commence a relationship, and yet, at some point, wouldn’t it have made sense to... oh, I don’t know, express that interest?” Damien was trying to ignore how amazing it felt to be held by Hayden. Cycles of imagining didn’t come close to reality, even if they were nearer to fighting than fucking.

“Did you ever think I might want it?” He leaned into Hayden, whispering, “Want to know?”

“I couldn’t. I couldn’t tell you. Couldn’t tie you to me for the brief time the *Rebellion* docked!” Hayden bit out in frustration. His body was rigid with tension, too hard to relax against, but Damien tried to inch closer.

“You’re young! You deserve the freedom to explore. To experience life before you were to consider bonding. You’re still too young, but I’m too impatient to wait any longer.” Hayden seemed embarrassed now. “To be honest, after that evening when I escorted you out of Stripes—”

“You mean dragged me.” Indeed the captain was flustered.

“Yes. When I interrupted your evening—”

“—And took me home before leaving me alone.”

“Yes. Not one of my better moments. I know you enjoy companionship,” Hayden growled, and then cringed when he realized it. “—And I had... have no right to comment on it. But seeing those Thylacines circling you in a mock dance of mounting brought out a possessiveness I wasn’t aware I had.” Hayden leaned down and rubbed his cheek against Damien’s.

“They never did let me back in.”

“No they wouldn’t have.” Hayden seemed even more uncomfortable. There were a few moments of silence before he explained. “I claimed you when I challenged your companions.”

“Oh stardust.” Damien thumped his forehead against Hayden’s chest. “Do I want to know how?”

“Probably not, but it was mostly verbal.” That explained the snarling.

“Except for when you rubbed against my front, then spun me around and repeated the procedure while forcing me out?”

“Yes.” And the marking.

“And then, the next cycle you claimed me with this promise band.”

Ferrier smiled. As annoyed as Damien was, it was hard not to get lost in it. But that was beside the point!

“Were you ever going to tell me, or was your plan to eventually just kidnap me, and I’d be mated when I woke up again?” Damien was pissed. After all this time they could have been doing... doing lots of things. Maybe even things he’d been dreaming of.

“The *Rebellion* is being demagnetized and the hull resurfaced.”

Great non sequiturs! Of course, Hayden would deflect. It was the one constant thing in all their interactions over the cycles. Damien was too tired to try and figure it out, drag him back to his point. He just went along.

“That’ll take 25 T-cycles to finish.”

“At least a flare,” Hayden agreed. “I was hoping to woo you.”

Damien snorted. “Yeah, I don’t think those words mean the same thing to me as they do to you.”

“It means” —Hayden grabbed hold of his chin, angling it up—“I intend to convince you of all the advantages to being bonded with me. Starting now.” The amber of his eyes was almost swallowed by the black of his pupils.

Hayden’s mouth descended, paused just before impact, and then gently pressed against his. Softly, they met, lips warm and firm. Teeth nibbled at the edges, and with his exhale Hayden’s tongue traced the opening. Damien yielded to their request, his lips parting. Hayden’s tongue slipped in further. Hot and wet, but what started so tenderly became hungry. Gentle became fervid, and soon he was being ravished. Damien’s tongue was sucked and stroked, and the rest of his body took notice.

He broke free and panted. “My shift starts soon.” Damien’s cock was throbbing, the loose pants tented.

“Should I send you out like this?” Hayden’s hand stroked his shaft.

A whimper escaped Damien’s lips. He was trying to formulate a response.

“Or should I relieve you?” His hand picked up the pace. “Well?”

Damien thrust into the firm grip. “Please.”

“As you wish.” He spun Damien and pulled him back, his head resting on Hayden’s shoulder as that wicked hand pushed down his pants and resumed stroking his naked flesh. Sliding easily with the precum Hayden had collected from the slit as it continued to ooze.

“Look how your pretty cock weeps for my touch.” Oh, the filthy words Hayden uttered as he ruthlessly stroked him made Damien keen, and they just kept coming. “I want to tie you up and see how wet you become without a single touch. Just leave you tied up as I play with you. Would you beg for me?”

“Oh god, yes,” Damien moaned. Inhibition gone, he thrust into his fist harder as Hayden licked his throat. “Yes, yes...” His words dissolving under the onslaught.

“Thought about it, haven’t you?” Hayden’s unrelenting focus was consuming him. His cock was spitting under his grip. Damien was more than ready for Hayden’s games. “Wishing, wondering, and wanting,” he leaned close and whispered. “Weren’t you?”

Damien grunted in reply. Hayden’s dirty talk was turning him on more than he would’ve imagined. He wanted more. “Always... always want,” Damien moaned as he fucked into his fist.

“Are you my little hedonist?” he queried. “Just chasing the next sensation, you wanton,” he growled. “Available for any hand or cock to please you—slut.” He chuckled. “You can’t even think anymore.”

He couldn’t. Damien twisted his head around and licked at Hayden’s throat, whining desperately. The salt and flavor of him exploded across his tongue. *Just a little more.* He bucked harder.

“Aren’t you eager.” Hayden chuckled as another spurt dribbled down. “I bet you’d be pretty like that, all spread out, immobile, begging, but not today.” The hand was moving faster, squeezing and twisting. His large thumb rubbing across the head, pushing into the slit, and he kissed him, collecting Damien’s gasps. Hayden was on a mission to find each spot to torment and delight him, cataloging the responses. Finally, after the rough, twisting pulls, he squeezed the head and strummed lightly underneath—gently, back and forth.

“Today you’re just going to come for me, beautiful.”

“Yes,” Damien whined. His hips stopped thrusting as his whole body seized while pulse after pulse of cum painted his stomach and Hayden’s forearm and

hand. Damien slumped, all his weight leaning against the captain. Hayden kept stroking him through each pulse, stopping just before it hurt.

He felt like he'd been melted. "Let me." He tried to let his knees fold, but Hayden wrapped a forearm under his chest, holding him up.

"Later. Time to clean up." Hayden kissed his temple as he drew a cum-coated finger across his lips and then into Damien's mouth when it eagerly opened. He licked it clean and was fed another until they were all immaculate. The soft growls finally stopped when Damien finished laving the webbing between them. "You need to prepare for your shift." With a smack to his ass, he herded Damien towards the cleansing unit.

Damien was still riding his Hayden-inspired euphoria when he finally got to Inspections HQ. Sipping another energy infusion after the last T-unit with Hayden—in the kitchen, and the cleansing, and trying to get dressed when his hands were slapped away, and then manipulated like a doll into his uniform, which honestly did nothing to calm him down or get him here on time—Damien needed his rejuvenation elixir. Which is why, when half of it nearly ended up on him, he was rudely drawn out of his erotic daydreaming by the hyper wall that suddenly blocked his path.

"We got the clearances to inspect the Versyllian ship."

Damien's liaison was practically bouncing up and down in excitement, which seemed incongruent with both his position and sheer size as a Bauman. D'spyros was nearly half again as tall as Damien and twice his width; he was massive. And here he was gleefully twitching.

Well, there went getting back to Hayden anytime soon. He sent a quick message to the captain and then grabbed the tablet to review any stipulations the GCC, Galactic Commerce Commission, imposed. None. They had *carte blanche* on all cargo, interior, and exterior spaces for the Nautilus-class vessel, *Silken Caravan*.

"Let's get the team briefed."

"Already on it," D'spyros said. "They're waiting outside the bay." He grinned at Damien. The paperwork had taken two dockings to finally get. This was their chance, after cycles, to get the proof that the Versyllians were subverting regulations.

Damien grinned back, clapped him on the bicep, and said, “Spyros, let’s do this.”

After nine T-units, they still hadn’t found anything. Each crate’s contents matched the manifest perfectly, all the quarters were searched, maintenance access areas cleared, and nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The *Silken Caravan*’s senior crewmembers stood quietly along the bay wall. Captain Akros appeared unconcerned, arrogantly detached. As did the other members of his crew to varying degrees, except for one. Flavian, the engineer in charge, kept glancing at the security team and rubbing his neck. But they’d already been through the propulsion and environmental operations.

Why was he so agitated? Damien reviewed the ship’s readings again. No obvious flags, but then there wouldn’t be if they were adept smugglers. And, with as many times as Captain Akros had been through SPV7Z-218, he was undoubtedly quite good. Something one wouldn’t notice in a general inspection. *Think. What don’t we look at?* Damien quizzed himself, running through screen after screen of data. *Not the engines. Environmental? What should I be looking for?* Damien ran by them once. Backtracking, he slowed his scanning down. The gas exchange values were off. Even accounting for Damien’s team, the nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and oxygen levels were imbalanced.

“Rescan for life signs.” Damien looked over at the *Silken Caravan*’s EIC. “Start with the engineering sectors.”

Whatever it was—It was aspirating. It was alive.

Damien was shooting off a quick communiqué to his father about the inspection when a tall figure brushed against him. Breathing softly in his ear, “When I awoke alone, I tracked you down.”

He chuckled. “I wish I were in bed.”

“Hmm... yes, warm and naked under me.” Hayden’s tongue traced the edge of his ear, nipping the lobe. The sharp pain woke him up faster than one of his revitalization boosts.

“Remember, I still have to show you how important you are to me.” The hard cock rubbing against his ass was making it difficult to think of anything else. “Take care of you properly.” Hayden ground against him harder.

“Fuck,” Damien groaned. “I can’t leave right now.” Hayden pushed harder. “Please...” Stop? No, definitely not that. This was not going to end well. “After the investigation, Hayden.”

His tormentor was murmuring his disagreement, nipping just above his collar when a throat cleared. Damien had noted the approaching footsteps, but he was having a hard time focusing. Thankfully, Hayden ceased his ministrations. Spyros was looking at him with a smirk that if he didn’t know the guy as well as he did, would have pissed him off.

“Environmental sector is cleared and the team is moving into Propulsion.”

Damien was just about to respond when Hayden started growling loudly. He felt it reverberating against his back, and then he was tossed to the side as Hayden lunged at Spyros. Damien didn’t even have time to think before canines were glinting and the two bodies crashed together.

He dove forward to break up the grappling before blood was shed.

“Whoa, WHOA!” Damien pushed in between them, ignoring the bared teeth and fists ready to fly. He pointed to Hayden, who continued to growl menacingly. “No.”

Then turned to D’spyros, giving him an incredulous look at the posturing and egging. “Don’t.” Damien needed everyone to just dial it back.

Hayden was bordering on enraged. Damien looked at him and couldn’t imagine what prompted the outburst of aggression. He made sure to stay between them before asking somewhat exasperatedly, “What are you doing?”

The growling picked up volume and speed. Hayden then spat out, “He was the one in the club satisfying you!”

Warning bells started going off in Damien’s head, that night in Roots so many cycles ago—the bodies, the dancing, and Ferrier’s eyes on him. *Oh, fuckstars.* Hayden thought Spyros was a rival claimant.

“There is nothing going on,” Damien stated. He pushed Hayden back, lengthening the distance between the hostile parties. “There hasn’t been anything for cycles.” Hayden growled some more.

Hayden, recklessly unimpressed with his size disadvantage, charged D’spyros again. Damien grabbed a hold and wrestled him backward. *Oh starlights, help him.* Hayden wasn’t just a little possessive; he was practically feral. That should definitely be added to the cultural logs.

Spyros's smirk was not helping the situation. The Bauman had folded his arms and leaned back on his heels, his expression mocking Hayden. *Fuckstars!* He did not need this. He grabbed Hayden by the arm and pulled him to the other side of the bay where it was quieter with Spyros and the ruckus at the far end.

"I work with Spyros. Nothing more."

Hayden wasn't listening. He kept glancing over at Spyros and growling while his perceived nemesis just smiled and waved. Damien was more than a little grateful when an inspection team member distracted him with some questions so he could no longer taunt Hayden.

"I never even left the club with him. What you saw is all that happened." Damien was petting his arm, trying to reassure. At the same time, he was rather annoyed.

"I didn't spend the last six cycles waiting for you, Hayden," he snapped, finally getting his full attention.

"I was living my life because, frankly, I believed you thought I was a dumb kid." He smacked him in the chest, which surprisingly made Hayden less angry, though he huffed.

"I wanted to fall to my knees from the first moment I saw you, but you... you were never available. You never gave me any clue that you would welcome my interest." Damien ignored Hayden's grimace and carried on, "So, no. You don't get to say anything about what I've been doing or whom I've been doing it with. You're the one who never said anything, never told me."

He allowed Hayden's contrition to pull him closer, but refused to fall into his embrace. Besides his annoyance, he was on duty and didn't need the heckling. A warm hand cradled the nape of his neck and gently kneaded.

Hayden huffed. "I'm sorry. You're right, I just—"

"Hate to break up this little make up session, Damien. But we've found something."

Damien sighed loudly. *Fuckstars!*

Hayden started growling.

"Later," said Damien. "Nothing happened or will happen." He kissed him quickly and turned to D'spyros. "Finally."

“We need to lockdown the bay, contact the wrights and tell them to bring the welders, and make sure the crew doesn’t go anywhere,” Damien shouted out orders to the assembled.

It wasn’t long before Spyros had the crew under heavy guard. He led Damien down corridor after corridor. Crossing a gangway in the engine room, they slid down a ladder to join the security regiment surrounding a single welder. With a last pass of the arclight torch, the metal groaned as it began to sag.

“You should wait outside until the area is secure,” hissed D’spyros.

“I trust your team, Spyros.”

“It might not be a physical force,” he said and then shouted to his men, “Scan the opening before pulling the panel clear.”

The welder was shunted backward behind a phalanx of armored bodies. Then the area behind the makeshift access panel was probed, everyone holding position until the All Clear was given. Two other team members used magnetic handles to pull it loose, moving it to the side.

A symphony of indrawn breaths, and then the lead lowered his weapon. “They’re younglings.”

Shock. One didn’t have to be an empath to feel it.

Huddled in the cramped space between the bulkhead and the hull were small humanoids. They shivered, whether in fear or from the cool air flooding into the fetid space Damien was unsure.

“Fall back,” D’spyros ordered. All but two agents lowered their weapons and made way. “Get the meditechs in here, now!”

They stepped around their agents to come face to face with the younglings.

“Ten younglings, sir. Species indeterminate. Age indeterminate. Gender indeterminate.”

“Is there something we can determine?” Damien sighed, rubbing his neck. The quick nap he caught at his desk wasn’t enough to battle the oncoming headache or deal with Hayden, who stood stiffly beside him during the medical briefing after tracking him down in his office and shoving sustenance at him.

“Healthy, in as much as their systems seem to be functioning adequately, they’re not complaining of discomfort, and they’re eating,” said Lead Medic Fessis. “Follow me, you’ll see for yourselves.” He led the contingent down a pale pink corridor into the Cultivation areas of the Medical Ward.

Hayden took one look at the younglings and turned to Damien. “Have the room cleared immediately. No new personnel in there. A list of the personnel who have come in proximity of them needs to be compiled.”

“Who are they?” Damien asked as he observed the ten young children quietly entertaining themselves, preternaturally calm. Or at least he assumed were young. Maybe they were mature, but with no weapons or obvious physical defenses they seemed innocuous. Hayden was right; appearances could be deceiving. “What threat do they pose?”

“They are Hetaerae.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“If they’re lucky—nothing.”

At last. Slowly rising from the depths of sleep, Damien smiled and stretched. An arm brushed against him. Hayden watched the youth rolling over as he blinked awake. He brought a hand up to cup his cheek. “Good sleep?” Damien wiggled closer into his touch, bringing his arm around Hayden’s waist.

“The best,” he murmured with a soft kiss.

After nearly two T-cycles, Damien had been exhausted when he finally let Hayden steer him back to his quarters. Leaving the *Silken Caravan*, its illicit cargo, and all the questions behind. Chaos could wait an additional few thousand T-units, especially since their kissing awakened more.

Hayden drew out his lip as he ended the kiss and nipped his jaw. Damien moaned as he licked his way down his neck, suckling lightly. Slipping his thigh between Damien’s as he moved over him, pushing him onto his back.

“Why didn’t we do this before?” Damien whined as Hayden’s mouth continued to blaze a trail down his body, leaving marks along the way, sucking, biting, and his tongue laving long, lazy pathways.

“If we had, I never would have been able to stop. To leave you.” He tugged the flesh between his teeth before he let go, enjoying the desperate sounds

coming from his *beskert*. He licked and kissed those marks until whines became moans.

“Faster,” Damien demanded. “I need more.” Hands were running through his hair, pulling as Damien arched into him.

“You are needy,” Hayden hummed as he worried a bit of skin dark purple and then moved on.

“Now. Please, Hayden. Please...” he babbled, arms flying wide, trying to hold onto the bed.

“No.” His thumb and finger tweaked Damien’s nipple. “I’ve waited this long to have you and I plan on tasting you thoroughly.” Damien’s fingers clawed at the sheets as he licked into his navel. Hayden nudged the eager cock aside to pull on the delicate hairs leading down until he reached the soft curls at its base. With a deep breath, he pulled in the scent of his boy, his beloved.

“So hard and desperate with your cock dripping.” He wrapped a hand around it and gave a couple firm tugs along the shaft. “This is mine, now. Mine.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Damien panted. “No more dancing at Roots.” His voice broke as Hayden’s pace quickened.

“No dancing without me,” he clarified, watching his lover thrust up into his hand. Eagerly chasing what Hayden was offering. “I will be the one who sees to your pleasure. It is my responsibility; no one else.”

“Fuck me,” begged Damien as his hips eagerly sought more.

Hayden chuckled. *Impatient boy*. He grabbed hold of the wildly thrusting pelvis and pushed down, pinning him to the bed. “Don’t worry, beautiful.” He swirled his tongue around Damien’s cock, lapping up the errant dribbles. “I didn’t traverse 12,000 kiloparsecs in the last six cycles, achieve the rank of Kapit, and smuggle Boson lasers for your father just to fuck you.” Hayden’s tongue slid beneath the delicate foreskin to caress what was still hidden. “By the time I’m done, you’ll know to beg for more.”

Hayden guided his legs back, wrapping Damien’s hands behind his own knees. He caressed the backs of the pale thighs with their dusting of near invisible, baby-fine hairs. “Gorgeous.”

Breaths stuttered in and out of Damien, and a blush began to bloom across his face and creep down as his inspection continued. Hayden leaned down and kissed his testicles, high and tight—so full. His boy was ready to blow.

“Control yourself. I want to feel you come around my cock.”

Damien groaned as another small spurt oozed from the tip of his penis, and Hayden chuckled. Patience and endurance, two things they could work on together. No more fast fumbblings, it was time for his lovely to learn the long game.

He moved lower, pulling Damien onto his lap, bending him in half to get a taste of what he wanted, finally. Licking the curves of his ass, salty and sweet, and every bit as delicious as Hayden imagined over the cycles. All his—all of it. He suckled and bit, leaving marks of his possession. Damien was his. He gentled his attentions on the tender skin, so smooth, usually hidden from sight, with long licks and soft draws of his teeth. *Poor boy*. Damien was already incoherent and crying out in anticipation.

“No one thought to worship where they conquer?” Hayden asked. He smiled at Damien’s frantic head shaking. “Idiots, unworthy of you.”

He licked deep between Damien’s cheeks. The skin so soft, getting darker and guiding him to the rosy furl. He broadened his tongue and lapped gently across it. Each lick asking for entrance; open up, pretty boy.

As Damien’s body began to relax, the muscle loosened and reflexively clenched. Hayden pointed his tongue and pushed in with a hungry moan. Fucking into his boy at last.

“Ohhh... FUCKSTARS!” Damien shouted. Definitely not a quiet one. He panted and whined with each thrust. “HAY—DEN!”

He got kicked in the back as Damien lost purchase on his left knee, and felt him scramble to grab it again as Hayden continued his onslaught, sliding a thumb in beside his tongue. Stretching the rim wider and delving deeper, reveling in the sounds that escaped Damien as he licked. Needy and desperate. Hayden slid his second thumb in alongside the other and started stretching the rim wide, preparing him for more. Pulling them apart and licking deep into his boy.

“Almost ready, sweet one,” he reassured.

Damien moaned wantonly, undulating, his muscles flexing, trying to push back onto Hayden’s tongue. “Yes—So ready,” he averred.

His boy was ready. They were both ready. Kneeling up, Hayden stroked himself, lubricating his cock with the copious fluid it had been emitting while

he was eating that sweet ass. All slick, he notched the head of his cock against the spit-slicked hole. Damien mewled and tried to satisfy himself by arching backwards.

“Hungry?” He teased, pushing, breaching, and then pulling back. Hayden chuckled at Damien’s frustration, his grunts. Sweet thing needed to learn the pleasure in not rushing. He kept at it, slowly pushing in—underestimating his boy.

Damien rolled himself up, grabbed hold of his shoulders, and impaled himself on his cock. Hard, and sliding deep all at once. They both held their breath, trying to process the sensations.

So tight and hot, Damien’s body was gripping him in a strangle hold. His hands slid under the boy’s ass to feel where his thick cock breached, running his fingertips around the edge stretched tight. *Mercy*. He fought for control. Control, not to throw the boy down and fuck into him like an animal, pounding swift and hard until he’d grunt out his load.

Damien hadn’t hurt himself thankfully. “Impetuous,” Hayden admonished and slapped his ass. Damien keened loudly, and Hayden smiled. Oh yes, he could work with this.

He gently circled his hips. Small increments, which if the continuous moans were anything to judge by, had Damien’s undivided attention. “You naughty boy.” Each word was accompanied by a sharp smack, the reverberations magnifying the sensations.

Damien whimpered, his eyes were blown wide, mouth open as Hayden licked a nipple. Slowly, the tension eased in his boy’s body and he began to move him on his cock. Lifting him up and down, thrusting into him on the downstroke. Still tight, and so good. So pretty with his silver blond hair in damp tendrils, his slim body slick from his efforts as Damien’s ass clenched around him.

“That’s it. Use your tight hole to milk my cock,” he demanded. Damien whined as he worked those muscles to please him. “Gorgeous,” he grunted as the rhythm of their bodies synchronized.

Damien’s wet cock made trails on Hayden’s stomach as he lifted him up and down. He moved Damien’s flopping arms to his shoulders and tapped his flank.

“Ride me, boy. Show me how much you want it.”

Damien moaned as he pulled himself up, using Hayden as leverage, and then lowered himself again. Damien quickened his pace, his slick body sliding against Hayden's hands, which kept him steady. It wasn't long before the movements became uncoordinated as Damien panted, his ass clenching harder as cum painted stripes on Hayden's abs.

Hayden didn't wait for him to finish before he rolled him over. Pushing Damien's knees to his ears and fucking into him hard. Relentlessly pounding into Damien's lax body, his eyes glazed and small grunts escaping as he took each thrust.

"Want to take you out, let people see just how pretty you look wrecked on my cock."

Damien whimpered, trying to clench around him. Trying so hard and half-hard already.

"How good you are." Slowing down, Hayden leaned back to watch his cock in his boy. Letting Damien catch up again by rocking slowly, enjoying the hot grip. He ran a finger around the rim, and Damien gasped. Tender and swollen, Hayden couldn't wait to see his come dripping out.

"And have someone lick you clean."

Damien shuddered, completely hard again.

"My precious boy." Hayden thrust harder, a punishing pace that was in contrast to how calmly he spoke. "I could have a line waiting to soothe your swollen hole when I finished with you. Begging to lick my come out of you."

Damien groaned, reaching for his own cock.

"No." Hayden grabbed both wrists, pinning them over his head. Damien looked shocked, a shiver running through his body, and then started bucking back onto Hayden's cock again. "Would you be good, so good and beg?"

"Yes," Damien whined, pushing against the hands holding him down. "Please..."

"Beg me for more, or to make them stop as I held you wide open for them?"

Damien froze and groaned as he ejaculated a second load of cum. Damn. Hayden followed Damien, pumping hard and hot at his boy's unexpected response. He could definitely work with this.

“Why, in all of the galaxies, is there no mention of this race in the logs?” demanded Captain Altamura. Damien had rarely seen his father so incensed. Vox, head of Security and Intelligence, was unperturbed by the outburst. He scanned through a couple screens and then looked up.

Vox began, “Interviews with the Hetaerae have yielded little. Contrary to original assumptions, they are not mute. They are the strongest empaths I’ve come into contact with and communicate exclusively among themselves, unless separated for questioning. We also believe that they are significantly older than they appear; they have no difficulty acquiring new behaviors to interact and demonstrate advanced reasoning and abstraction abilities.”

After pausing to consult some notes, Vox continued briefing. “None of the ten have, are able, or are willing to share any memories prior to their boarding the *Silken Caravan*. Other than their names, they are virtual blank slates. Perhaps Captain Ferrier would share with the assembly what he knows?”

All eyes shifted to the man on Damien’s right.

Hayden had refused to speak more about the Hetaerae, after identifying them in the ward, other than ensuring rigorous access protocols were established and overseen by the Port Security. “My knowledge is limited and based solely on what I’ve observed in less *rigorously managed* ports’ markets. As far as I know, the race has no self-identification. They were given the name ‘Hetaerae’ by the Fraxians, a race of ship-dwellers that trade in all things, including slaves. It is an ancient name reflective of their primary function.”

“What job do the younglings do?” an assembly member asked.

“If the *Silken Caravan*’s shipment was not intercepted, they were slated to serve in brothels or harems.”

A horror-filled silence blanketed the room. While there were many adults who worked in the Pleasure District, they did so of their own volition. Any coercion was illegal and faced severe penalties. The Pleasure District was a restricted area on SPV and access was based on a species’ maturity. Younglings were forbidden from entering the area.

“B-but,” Altamura stammered. Damien felt just as stunned as his father. “They’re younglings.”

“Perhaps, possibly not. Hetaerae mature differently than most species,” Hayden continued. All eyes had turned to the image of the ten small figures entertaining themselves in the ward. “They retain a prepubescent state until

they are exposed to an individual that is compatible for mating. When a chance of successful fertilization is present, they transition into their mature form. We have no idea how old those ten individuals are. They might be older than all of us.”

The assembly was quiet. Captain Altamura cleared his throat noisily. “Thank you, Captain Ferrier.”

The room was trying to absorb Ferrier’s briefing. They turned back to Vox, obviously waiting for him to continue.

“Fraxians are not interested in records. They maintain an oral tradition,” said Vox. “And unfortunately, our interrogations of the Versyllians have provided nothing further.”

How could there exist an entire race of people that no one in the galaxy knew enough about them to share it or write it down? Is this what happens when people forget? The lost are cast forth to wander, taken advantage of, and disposed of without comment.

“What is Akros’s official statement on this matter of illegal transport?” demanded Captain Altamura.

Vox steepled his fingers. “He claims that the *Silken Caravan* exchanged goods with the Fraxian vessel, *Taraxacum*, near an asteroid belt outside of Alpha Centauri.” Vox paused and then continued, “Akros claims that the Het—Freed were willing passengers that paid for transit to Kurabyss.”

Captain Altamura, as well as the majority of the assembled, looked unconvinced. “Willing?” He snorted.

“Neither physical monitoring nor our empaths detected deceit during the interrogations of the crew,” said Vox.

“That was the accommodation they paid for?” scoffed Altamura.

“They were only to be relocated for the duration of the *Silken Caravan*’s layover in port. Akros was quite upset at the welder’s mangling of his propulsion paneling when there was an access panel.”

“Wouldn’t have happened if they had cooperated, or didn’t try to hide them.”

Vox nodded in agreement. “As I explained to the Versyllians. Trouble could have been spared for many if they had followed regulations. Akros and another

senior crewmember were most upset, but claimed that they acted upon the wishes of their passengers. And... since none left the ship, they broke no customs.”

“The manifests were incorrect. They failed to reflect the ship’s cargo,” Damien asserted. He’d be damned if the *Silken Caravan* circumvented their infractions. He had the GCC’s approval and authority for SPV’s actions.

Vox didn’t counter his statement, merely added, “Apparently, there have been seizures of previous passengers in other ports that now the ship’s standard procedure is to hide them for the duration of the stay—at the request of the Freed.”

Could this get anymore complicated? A squeak emanated from the opposite end of the table. Medic Fessis looked distraught.

“Now what?” asked Altamura.

Fessis fidgeted. “One of the Freed has transitioned, Captain.”

His father looked exasperated and turned to Hayden.

Hayden looked grim. “You need to recall all the individuals on the contact list. Once they transition, they have a finite amount of time to absorb the catalyst’s hormones before they expire.”

A frown marred that perfect visage as Damien searched through screen after screen. Vox had told them the extent of the data, but he stubbornly refused to accept that they knew nothing. Concern and annoyance were quickly manifesting into something less healthy—irritation, frustration, and anger. Hayden had no intention of watching his boy brood when he had wooing to do. The Hetaerae situation had been around for generations and wouldn’t be resolved soon, so there was no sense in thinking it would be.

“Let’s go out. I am not eating simulated food again.”

Damien didn’t look up from the screen. “I’m not hungry. Go ahead.”

“Regardless, you need to eat. Up,” he said, smacking him on the flank.

Damien whirled around, shouting, “This needs us! I can’t... I need to make sure we have all that’s available.”

“Is SPV’s intelligence usually wrong? Is Vox incompetent?”

“No.”

“Then you need to trust him to do his job, as others trust you to do yours.”

“But—” Damien stammered, his fists clenched at his sides.

“I understand. But as much as you want this fixed now, it’s going to take time. There is a solution, and we’ll work towards it, but you need to let this go. Keep your focus and we can solve this together.” Hayden kissed him on the forehead. “Go get changed.”

“I’m fine,” Damien responded.

“Yes. Yes, you are, but I want you pretty.” Damien raised a brow at that, and Hayden continued, “I need to show you off.” And his boy blushed.

Infinitely better. Damien looked sated. The succulent, fresh food, fine klahouffe, and phenomenal view of the Dragonfly Nebula had fed their senses and soothed them.

It had been a long time since he’d spent more than a few T-units with another, worrying about their needs and desires. The more time he spent with him, the stronger Hayden’s protective instincts became. Even if Damien refused him, he would be bound to him—to care for him and watch over him.

A stroll along the Promenade had brought them to the Aquatic District. Damien fiddled in his pocket; he held a gold coin in his outstretched hand.

“What is this for?” Hayden asked.

“Toss it in The Well. A mer will tell your future,” Damien urged.

“I do not need my future told; I see it before me.” He closed Damien’s fingers around the gold. He seemed embarrassed, yet pleased; he slid the token back into his pocket. Hayden was content to merely watch his boy observe the beauty of SPV’s aquatic life even though he was convinced that one of the mer was following them and attempting to get Damien’s attention. He allowed his hand to slide down from the small of his back and rest on the curve of that delectable ass. It might be crude, but he was not allowing anyone to mistake his intentions. Including Damien.

“With one appetite satisfied, maybe it is time to take care of another,” he whispered in Damien’s ear.

Damien grinned. “What did you have in mind?”

“Somewhere public. I am finding the idea of an audience most satisfactory, and I know you enjoy being the center of attention.”

“The Golden Jackal, so your kin can see us together?”

Hayden growled. “No.” He tightened his arm around Damien. “You will need two bands before I take you back there.” He steered them towards the Pleasure District.

“I was fine before,” Damien quipped.

“Yes. Because you were alone and wearing my band.” Hayden could hear the irritation creeping into his voice.

Damien and he were still establishing the boundaries of their relationship, and he didn’t want Caurentian customs interfering. Damien’s natural inclinations, thus far, and youth already followed traditional protocols, and while Hayden could see them comfortably settling into a liberal hierarchy, he didn’t need some archaic Caurentian attempting to impose his views on them or recognizing Damien from before and challenging Hayden. It would not be fair to subject his boy to consequences when Damien had no knowledge of the infraction. Neither would a complaint, against him and his standing, be well timed with the Hetaerae situation in which they were both embroiled. The Golden Jackal and his kin would have to wait.

“And I’m still wearing your band... and have you, too.”

He caressed Damien’s cheek. “Trust me when I say that is not a good idea. We should discuss Caurentian culture soon. But, unless you want to be stripped down, bent over my lap, spanked and displayed for the patrons—then that is not a good place.” He watched Damien’s pulse race as he swallowed a gasp. He drew his fingers through the silver strands, tucking them behind his ear. “If anyone recognized you, they would expect me to punish you. If you were wearing two, they’d assume I already had.”

Damien nodded. He looked a little bit excited by the prospect and a great deal scared. But Hayden was right, it would never be appropriate to impose punishment on his *beskert* for this, and he had no interest in doing so. He had better ways of exciting his boy.

“What I would like is to dance with you,” Hayden crooned while grabbing hold of Damien’s ass with both hands. “And watch others watching you.”

Damien's vigorous gyrations had rendered the thin material transparent as it stuck to his body. Nudity was gauche, not that it wasn't in evidence at Roots. Damien, on the other hand, sheathed and cradled in a diaphanous mist of color, was enticing. Nothing exuded power more than displaying that which was most desired—and right now, that was Damien.

His boy was not oblivious. He knew quite well what he was doing when he rubbed against Hayden or himself, adhering the silk to outline every contour. Eyes followed every pinch, every squeeze, and every hand wandering Damien's form. On the floor, he'd already had several males and females caress him in passing, each one observant of the possessive hand upon him and seeking approval first. Hayden nodded at the Cirrina who ventured forward tentatively with three tentacles wavering.

Damien gasped as they wrapped around him.

"There isn't anything I would not give to you," Hayden whispered as the tentacles suctioned on and off. The tendrils gently exploring, seeking out sensitive places as Damien's admirer flushed in pleasure with each gasp and moan. Only releasing him and moving on when ink coated the floor. Then Hayden reclaimed the territory others traversed.

"You will never want as my bondmate. All I ask... is that you allow me to give it to you."

The tenuous truce forged in the hangar made the small room smaller. Awkward as the situation was, the three had no choice but to assist. Damien was in charge of the SPV's galactic oversight team, D'spyros headed the investigation team, and Hayden was the only one who knew anything about the younglings, the Hetaerae. Though that name was one Damien was finding increasingly unacceptable since he'd learned of its meaning and imposed origin. What they'd thought was a minor smuggling issue turned out to be a political supernova. He'd be in debriefings for the foreseeable future.

Damien closed the file and handed it back to D'spyros. He wandered over to Hayden who was staring at the viewer and the transformed figure pacing in the adjacent room. Then leaned over and shut it off.

"Do you think your agent will be willing?" Damien asked.

"Can't imagine he says no without trying," D'spyros answered.

They were all mulling over the consequences of the situation when the panel opened. A large security agent waited for permission before entering. He seemed surprised by all the occupants; he greeted Ferrier formally upon introduction, and then waited to be addressed.

“Thank you for coming in, Brixton.” Damien smiled at the Thylacine who entered the viewing chamber. “I appreciate your quick response.”

“No problem, sir.” He shifted uneasily from foot to foot. “Is something wrong?”

“Not exactly,” said D’spyros. “Remember your physical after the Versyllian ship incident?”

“Of course, sir.” Brixton nodded. “After what we saw, I don’t reckon I’ll be forgetting anytime soon.” His voice was laced with regret. The whole crew had been stunned by the younglings’ discovery and all attended the mandated counseling sessions after debriefing.

“Yes. I don’t think any of us will.” D’spyros stepped closer to his agent, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Thing is, those younglings are a species we were unfamiliar with.”

“Is there something wrong with me, sir?” The agent kept his voice even, but Damien could sense a thread of panic starting to unravel his calm.

“No. You’re fine, Brixton. Just fine,” reassured D’spyros. “But there is something you need to know, now.” At his nod, Damien reengaged the viewer.

Brixton’s attention was immediately taken by the sight on the screen. A healthy, young male was circling the room impatiently. He was gorgeous, wide-shouldered and narrow-hipped with a defined musculature that seemed unreal. He was designed to be desired. Suddenly, as if he sensed he was being watched, he stopped and stared straight at them, at the reciprocal screen, his pale-green eyes searching.

“Who’s that?” asked the young security agent, stepping closer to the image.

“One of the younglings.” Brixton snorted in disbelief and looked at Damien like he’d lost his mind. “Yes, he was one of those small huddling figures you freed from the *Silken Caravan*.”

“But... That’s impossible,” sputtered the confused Thylacine. The big agent looked between his commanding officers as if he expected a joke. Their seriousness must have assured him that it was no such thing.

Damien stepped to Brixton's other side. "He is one of the Freed and he needs your help."

"You don't have any bondings noted in your records," D'spyros stated. Thylacines are a pack species. They lived in groups. Mated in groups. Brixton was still young, but a bonding or two would not have been unusual. "Are they up to date?"

"No bondings, sir." Brixton was staring at the young Hetaerae. "Yes, they are current."

"Do you find him attractive?" Hayden quietly asked.

Brixton turned at the newly posed question, blinked, and then turned back to watch the screen. "Yes."

"Good," said Hayden. Hayden let him view the male for a while and then asked, "Enough to consider a relationship?"

This time Brixton didn't bother to stop staring at the screen when he quietly answered, "Yes."

"Excellent. There's no easy way to say this," Hayden calmly continued. "You are why he transformed. You are his mate."

Brixton spun around at the revelation. He seemed perplexed. "Me?" Then looked back at the screen. "I can't bond with him. He's a male."

There was a moment of silence before Damien bristled, "He's gonna—"

Hayden put a hand on Damien to wait. "Why not?"

"I'm a sentry, sir." He stated it as if obvious. "My bondmate was going to carry our pups. I can't—" Brixton collected himself and stopped rambling. He was shaking his head, then jerked upright. "Do they... Can he breed?"

"We don't really know anything, but tests and scans have not shown any reproductive organs capable of nurturing or carrying offspring."

Each one of them understood Brixton's dilemma. While both male and female Thylacines could carry young, it altered their physiology significantly to nurture a litter successfully. Hormones and reassignment of body resources meant that Brixton would unlikely be able to resume fieldwork as a sentry. Add in any pack obligations he might have, changing position from sentry to a breeder would be highly disruptive both personally and professionally. The young male looked stunned.

D'spyros put his arm around his subordinate and gave him a squeeze. "I know this is a shock. I know it is something you never thought you'd have to face."

Damien felt sympathy for Brixton and the abrupt, imminent changes. Even now he could see the male leaning to touch the screen, almost as if he could connect with his waiting bondmate.

"I don't want you to feel compelled, but there are extenuating circumstances—his well-being is dependent on you agreeing to a bonding," D'spyros concluded.

Brixton nodded.

Both Hayden and Spyros were avoiding the truth, but like the black hole at the center of every galaxy, it couldn't be ignored. "If nothing else, meet him and then decide. If you deny him, Brixton, he's going to die," said Damien.

Spyros glared at him, and Damien ignored him. If Brixton had to make a decision, he needed to know all the consequences.

Damien stared at the GCC logo when the message concluded. A full investigation was underway and intel assets were being sought to infiltrate the ports and starbases Ferrier had given in his testimony for the Hetaerae. Damien knew that Hayden had signed up for a mission as he lay in his arms last night.

"Are you interested?" asked Captain Altamura. He was definitely the captain and not his father at this moment. "I will only accept volunteers for the GCC's mission." His father stopped pacing and turned to look Damien in the eye. "I'd much rather you refuse, but with your interest in Ferrier, I don't think either of you is ready to separate."

Damien knew his father was worried he'd choose to accompany Hayden to the questionable ports where he'd seen others like the Freed, and that he'd be in danger. But to send Hayden alone into danger seemed worse than leaving his father to wait.

"Yes, Captain."

His father sighed. "Review the restricted files you've been sent and then confirm your agreement. Teams are being assembled, but obviously you'll be slated with Ferrier." Damien opened his mouth, and his father waved him off, interrupting before he began. "I know what you're going to ask. Between all the

missives and communiqués this past flare, I think everyone is aware of your championing Brixton and Kol’s request. If you just read the files, you’d know that they have been assigned to Kurabyss as well.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

His father shook his head. “I had nothing do with the decision. The appeal was made directly to the GCC and approved. I have my doubts about Kol’s lack of training and noted it in my report.”

Damien was grinning. “I’m sure Brixton and Hayden will rectify that immediately.”

“Undoubtedly.”

They both stood. They were nearly the same height now, and Damien felt like the last bond of childhood was falling away. His father looked aggravated, but Damien knew that he was just hiding his unease and that he was genuinely proud. It had just been the two of them for as long as Damien could remember. Since the Doryl Incident that claimed his mother’s life while she was investigating new flora on Rhiz. Over the cycles, he had worked hard to earn a place in his father’s regard, and now he was beginning to realize that he’d always had it.

While Damien had only a few vague recollections of silvery strands wrapped around his fingers and laughter, he’d watched the vidlogs compulsively growing up. His mother might be a stranger, but Damien knew every laugh he ever heard from his father was because of her. That she’d loved them both. And he knew that his father still loved her, and as the last piece of her—him, too.

“I trust him, Damien, and I know you. Do what you must and come home.”

Damien pocketed the memchip from his accommodation’s computer. He was putting the last few things in his trunk. Packing for this trip had been relatively simple, and the rest was being sent to storage. He was just securing the latches when he heard the entry panel open.

“We have things to discuss,” said Hayden.

It was probably a good idea to review their situation before boarding the *Rebellion*. As excited as Damien was about their mission and spending more

time with Hayden, the prospect of meeting the crew was making him uneasy. In all the dockings over the cycles, he never once met the *Rebellion*'s crew.

"Before we join the *Rebellion*, I want to know if you wish to proceed regarding our courtship."

Were there uncertainties? Damien thought Hayden wanted this, wanted him. What if he didn't? Oh... what if he now had to spend cycles on the same ship and Hayden had no interest in continuing.

"Stop," commanded Hayden. "Whatever you are contemplating—Stop." He rested his hand on his arm. His arm.

"Would you like—"

"No." Hayden shook his head slowly. "I am not asking about me. I am committed, but you—What do you want, Damien?"

"I—I want..." He paused for too long and Hayden continued.

"Do you still wish to seek others without me?" Hayden's face was solemn, neither angry nor agitated. He didn't look disinterested, but he seemed unusually calm. "I would remove the cuff if you have decided against my suit or remain uncertain about pursuing a bond. I never should have placed it upon you without counseling you."

Damien felt the pressure of their situation. How should Hayden introduce him to the crew? Over the last flare, he and Hayden had grown close. Being with him was everything Damien had dreamt and more. Hayden had done things he never would've suggested, things beyond his imagination. Their mission was easy compared to the idea of traveling on the *Rebellion* with the crew's expectations of their captain's 'promised one'.

"Am I enough for the *Rebellion*'s captain?"

Hayden kissed him gently. "You exceed expectations."

"What of your crew?"

Hayden visibly stiffened. "The *Rebellion*'s crew serves me," he said coolly. "And in no manner are you beholden to anyone but me. As a representative of the Galactic Commerce Commission, you are an honored guest on the *Rebellion*, and as my *besht*, you are a cherished one."

Damien found himself nodding in agreement.

"I promise we will make this work."

“If you’re sure. I haven’t any doubts about us,” said Damien.

“What would I doubt? I wandered every port, starbase, and planet hoping to find the one who would bring balance to me, my complement. From that first moment, I knew that I could stop searching. I had found the one thing I truly wanted, desired above all else—you. Every thing I did from that moment on was in service to the goal of garnering your attention.”

“You had that when you walked down the promenade for the Trade Gala.”

“Yes, but to keep it I had to earn your regard, be more than one of your diversions,” he admitted somewhat ruefully as he waved his hand. “You had so many choices, and I had so few chances—even then, I squandered more than I should have.”

Damien laughed, and drew his fingers lightly across Hayden’s jaw. “You should have come in that night after Stripes.”

Hayden shook his head. “No. I really could not.” He cradled Damien’s face in his hands. “I would have gone mad. To have one taste and leave—” Hayden broke off, passionately kissing him then resting his forehead against Damien’s. “The sounds of your pleasure alone would have haunted me.” Hayden’s words fell off as their lips met again.

Damien was about to beg for more when Hayden stopped.

“You accept our courtship.” It was more statement than question, but he understood that Hayden was awaiting a response.

“Eagerly.”

Hayden grinned. “Then before we depart, I would ask for one concession from you.”

Damien waited as he pulled out a box and handed it to him. It was plain, but made of fragrant wood. He lifted the lid, and on a silken bed lay another cuff. Silvered and embossed with black starburst patterns, a starfire at the center of each. Hayden took the cuff and placed the box to the side.

He looked at Damien, saying, “I never truly explained the meaning of the first cuff. As you know, it is a promise of courtship and of my intentions to seek a bonding with you. What you did not realize was that by wearing it, you accepted my pledge and made your own. The first cuff is an oath of fealty.”

Damien looked down at his cuff. The gold and jewels glinting as he turned his wrist. “Fealty, that is an archaic term. I know of only one instance in the historical records.”

Hayden nodded. “It has not changed meaning.”

“An oath of fidelity to my lord?”

Hayden gently pulled the golden cuff to his lips and kissed it. “You shall put none before me, and attend me alone.”

“Yes,” sighed Damien. The amber of Hayden’s eyes and the gold of his cuff in that moment were forever entwined in his mind. As long as he wore that cuff, Damien would always feel Hayden’s eyes on him. He looked to the second cuff, disappointed. “Why doesn’t it match?”

“The mate to your golden cuff is locked away until such a time as you and I agree to the final binding.” Hayden lifted the silver one up. “This samarium cuff signifies your accordance to... to serve me. It is temporal. When, and if, you decide to wear the second golden cuff, it will be eternal.”

“But—”

Hayden shook his head. “Bonding is not to be rushed. I have waited cycles and I am willing to wait many more.” He laced his fingers with those on Damien’s unencumbered wrist, bringing them to his lips. “Time is not our enemy.”

He finally felt balanced. Smiling, Damien played with the samarium cuff on his right wrist. The unfamiliar weight soothed more than his equilibrium, heavy like the one on his left, it grounded him. Even better, the two might be locked together, as he found out during Hayden’s demonstration.

It was a fantastic diversion. Damien stopped worrying about Brixton and Kol settling in, or the privacy levels in their accommodations—no the vidscreen should not automatically engage when Hayden was hailed by the crew. The *Rebellion*’s crew was disturbing enough, let alone when their faces just popped up in the room where they might or might not be presently engaged in personal activities, such as testing the advantages of Damien’s new cuff. The cleansing unit seemed to be the only safe place.

Beyond that imposition, which Hayden failed to see as intrusive, not a single one had addressed him yet. They were silent wraiths roaming the corridors. Hayden laughed when he said that and told him that, until the official presentation, no one would. Damien wasn’t sure how formal introductions were necessary to offer greetings, but he was still learning about Caurentian customs.

Rigid was not the term Damien used last night, but after a few smacks to his posterior that were not the fun kind, he conceded to Hayden's request to not refer to him and his crew in such vulgar terms—ever again.

“There has been a change to our schedule,” Hayden announced to the crew of the *Rebellion*. Not the slightest of murmurs or movement. Damien was nervous to meet them before, and after observing their strict protocols, he worried more. As a spiver, he never had to adhere to ship rules. Even when he apprenticed briefly with Security and Intelligence, they didn't observe this strict hierarchy.

“Navigator, set a course for Kurabyss. We have a special shipment to collect.”

With that proclamation, the personnel took their positions in silence. There were no extraneous sounds, and the crew moved as if choreographed. It was both impressive and terrifying. And they all served his mate.

“Captain Ferrier, course laid,” said the navigator.

“All systems ready,” said the commander.

“Take us out of port, Commander Arlois,” Hayden directed.

Damien stood beside him. The view of the wormhole as they approached was amazing. He'd seen it his whole life, but it looked nothing like this from the Tower Room. Damien leaned forward and nearly tumbled onto the navigator's back, unused to the ship's momentum. None of this was anything like SPV.

“You will get used to it,” Hayden whispered, pulling Damien back against him as the gravity hooks disengaged and the *Rebellion* shunted towards the wormhole.

The End

Author Bio

APS is a Jack-of-all-trades and master of none. Self-defined as terminally curious and prone to self-indulgence, APS excels at frittering. Diagnosed as having issues with authority from a young age, APS frolics in being a perpetrator of general ridiculousness and a defender of the irreverent.

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