I'll love me after I love you

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by yourdeargatsby

Summary

Ryland Grace had not ever, and likely would never experience a pain just as much as reentering the atmosphere of Earth with very little heat shield.

Colt Seavers had never had a brother. Let alone two. Standard procedure, they had said, to alert the family when a returning astronaut came home. When they woke up. Colt Seavers had grown to be alone.

Courtland Gentry did what he had to, to save his younger brothers. He hoped they didn't remember him. He knew that Ryland was gone. Colt would never hear of him. And this was the price he paid for their happiness. And then, it was feasible again. Sierra Six could be Courtland.

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Aka the coltlandgentry + bloodymary + human-ish adrocky + action but mostly fluff fic

Formerly named "Welcome Hail Mary to your last Parade" but i hated that name

Notes

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I am once again the first person to post about this niche subcategory on a fanfiction website. I have two nickels now
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Chapter 1: Luna Park

Ryland Grace had always been a very lonely man. Even before the Hail Mary, he hadn't had many friends. He had students, of course. But no friends. His biological family was presumed dead, and he had been tossed around foster care until age 16, where they adopted him for the 2 years until he turned 18.

The last name was the only thing he ever took from that family. That last name was the only thing they ever gave him. And he had taken it, and not looked back.

And for a very, very long time, all Ryland had was that name and himself.

They put him on the Hail Mary. For a while, Ryland didn't even have his name. He had nothing except a large ship, two dead bodies, and the loose threads of something he was supposed to be doing.

The only reason he had even remembered his name was because of his students. He started from there.

It worked, for the most part. Somewhat. Ryland was still lonely.

He had Rocky, after some time. It was a blessing, to have Rocky, out of the entire universe. But Ryland was still desperately lonely. Sometimes he felt like the very lonely caterpiller, desperate for more and more.

And Rocky was there, and then they said goodbye and Ryland was alone again. And then Ryland realized that like the very hungry—or lonely, caterpiller, there was no ability for him to see everyone on earth ever again.

It was them or Rocky.

Ryland Grace, the very very lonely school teacher, sobbed for a very long time. Ryland Grace, the very very lonely molecular microbiologist, sent the beetles back to earth. Ryland Grace, the very very lonely best friend of Rocky, turned the Hail Mary around.

In less than 6 hours combined, there were two times he was sent to the stars. Once Codemned, once Commended.

And Ryland waited.

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Adrian, the bright blue-ish green eridian, was every bit as pleasant as Rocky had described them to be.

For a long time, in the middle of the construction of the biodome and Grace's residence on the hail mary, Ryland spent much time with Adrian. He spent a while building a little diorama, so that Adrian could see what Ryland meant.

Rocky had been true to his word when he said that the Eridians revered him. Some were devastated, yes, Rocky knew this was true, he was the only one alive, but they couldn't be angry.

"How can ♪ ♫♫♮ be angry? Dead, dead yes. But star alive. Not waste. They know. They get on ship, and they remain there, and understand, statement." Rocky had said.

"It's too bad we can't give them a proper burial, or goodbye."

"Rocky did. Wait for Grace. Rocky could not fix, but dignity there. Peaceful. Grace did same thing for crew, question?"
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“Yeah, yeah I did.” Grace said, and sniffled.

For a species that was almost 17 light years away, they had almost the same grieving process.

“Died for star. Star brighter now. They are star.”

And Ryland Grace sobbed onto Rocky while Adrian watched, playing with the diorama Grace had set up.

He couldn’t really make out what was said, but it was probably along the lines of “leaky space blob.”

His friend—friends, never did change when it came to his tears. He choked out a laugh in between it.

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When Rocky had come to tell him the news, it was through a series of skittered chirps, ones that barely made sense, that were indistinguishable from one to the next.

When Rocky stopped talking, Ryland finally got a second to figure out what was being said.

“Human.” Human, over and over again.

Ryland pointed at himself.

Rocky shook his head, fervently, quickly, no.
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“Another one?”

Yes.

And that was how Simon came to Erid.

Ryland Grace was still greedy.

Even with Simon by his side, the feeling of human contact, and Rocky and Adrian and the few other Eridians he had met, it wasn’t enough for him.

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Ryland would wake up, early in the mornings, or what was meant to be the mornings. He wouldn’t wake Simon, or he’d try not to. He’d let the other man hold Ryland, a tether, and to remind Ryland he was there.

Even with Simon there, Ryland would lay at the ceiling. The faces in his mind were blurry, but he remembered the cheers of Lava, of kids running around at recess, the sun filtering through the trees, people taking shelter in his classroom when it was raining hard outside.

Ryland Grace couldn’t remember Carl nor Eva’s face. But he remembered standing outside next to Carl, letting the wind hit him in the face as they waited for the next instructions. Ryland remembered having a smoke with Eva on the ship of the deck just once, the wind burning his face.

Ryland Grace remembered the bright and loud crash of the waves against metal and wind.

He hadn’t decided if he was unlucky, or lucky for when he remembered when he was young.
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There was a trampoline, in one of his memories. There was another boy jumping on it. He looked like Ryland. Ryland took it to be himself, or an imaginary friend. There were distinct giggles, and the voice of someone older, but not by much.

They said his name fondly, and he remembered laughing as he got hit with a hose.

Ryland Grace remembered only one pillow fort, with one of those shitty projectors that plugged into the wall and displayed the stars.

These are the only things that he remembers about his childhood.

Ryland lets himself cry about them many mornings.

Simon was only a light sleeper when he slept next to Ryland.

Simon only really cared about Ryland. Simon was content with just having Ryland. And Ryland loved Simon, but he wanted more.

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Ryland Grace knew he wouldn't live forever. Ryland Grace knew radiation poisoning. He knew blood and iron poisoning. Ryland Grace knew that his heart beated in sync with Simon's.

Eridians didn't have hearts, not the same way humans did. But Ryland Grace knew that Rocky and Adrian's steps slowed, voices quieter.

On Ryland Grace's very last night on Erid, some part of him knew it was the last.
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It hurt to move. Gravity was a bitch. He pulled out the disco ball. One of the last things from the Hail Mary that still worked, miracolously.

With so much use, most of the music that had been sent with the Hail Mary had long since been fried away, or just worn out of use.

With almost 40 years, he knew it by heart.

It was scratchy, and the voice was gone, but Eridians really could sing, and he knew the lyrics by heart.

“I used to think that you'd string me along, the unknowing made me miserable, but you were crochetin' something beautiful, on our way to the thrill.”

Simon held Grace up in the world’s worst dance, but he was an infinitely better dance partner than the broomstick had been.

“I have this dream where we wake up together, we both surrender, our bodies tethered to one big wheel of death. You handed me the present wrapped in fluorescent and asked me the question on top of Luna Park.”

And they laughed. The light spots danced across all the walls and the ceilings, and Grace felt like he was 31 again, on the top of the Hail Mary, staring at the Petrova line.

“This time is different i caught you saying, after our summer spent apart, now your brother hates me you told me it'll pass as we sewed up all the gaps.”

Simon rested his forehead against Grace’s, and the broken melody was the best thing any of them had ever heard.

“You're the sandbar and I'm the lagoon 'cause the ripples, they don't hurt as much with you, hiding from the stars at night, through city shrill, I slept so tight 'cause you burned all our lullabies on a CD.”

Simon sang the next part, even though he was no better at singing than Grace was, but Ryland let him, because he had long since known it was his favourite.

“And asked me if we could wake up together, through any weather, through every endeavor, on top of Luna Park. I wrote you a letter with ink and feather, Let's sleep forever on top of Luna Park.”

And Rocky laughed and he pulled the door to the front down, and barricaded down the stairs. Adrian was always right behind him, and for a long time, Grace had followed Rocky too. Simon would go wherever Ryland went.

He barelled straight into the sea, and whatever was left of the music couldn’t be heard from out here, but Ryland’s chest could still feel it. He could feel the breeze and the beach and the sand and the sun and the stars.

“Let's sleep forever on top of Luna Park.” He didn’t sing. He just looked at Simon, who was stood, ankle deep in the water, while Rocky and Adrian swam around the depths, a mess that was more fun than anything else.

“On top of Luna Park.” Simon repeated, and they kissed, hands held together. It wasn’t deep, just a reminder.

Ryland Grace went to sleep that night, Simon grasping him just as tight as he always did. Rocky and Adrian sat at the edge of the bed, and if Eridians did have a heart, they surely stopped in time with Simon and Grace’s.

Ryland Grace died lonely. But he did not die alone.

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Ryland Grace had not ever, and likely would never experience a pain just as much as reentering the atmosphere of Earth with very little heat shield.

He was only awake for a few seconds, eyes blinking with more force than it had ever taken him in his life, to see burning fire outside the windows of the cockpit, and the tell tale “bad signs” of bright red flashing and Mary’s voice just screaming endlessly.

There was about 6 seconds of weightlessness where the fire stopped, and then Ryland, barely conscious was sent back down into his seat with enough force to give him a concussion that would last the rest of his life.

Wait.

His life?

There was nothing again, and Ryland Grace was knocked out.

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For the first time in a very long time, Ryland Grace woke up from a coma without the telltale “What is two plus two?”

There is a beeping. It’s repetetive, and Ryland’s entire body hurts. It hurts worse than anything else he’s ever known.

Still, Ryland Grace has known fight more than anything else, even when faced with the worst situations. He shifts his body up, little by little, his eyes burning too much to be completely open at one moment.

The beeping starts getting quicker.

His hearing hasn't really come back, from what Ryland can tell. In fact, whatever he can hear, is incredibly muted, and not very loud at all.

But he can feel the vibrations of pounding on the ground, getting louder progressively. Ryland's slow blinks see something shift, wherever he is, and then there are people.

People.

Ryland's brain recognizes human forms.

Yep, ok. He's awake. Forget the pain, Ryland is very awake, very terrified, somewhat angry, and now full of adrenaline.

In about 5 seconds Ryland has ripped several IV lines out of himself, as well as other medical equipment, fallen on his face on the ground, and backing himself slowly against the wall.

They looked like humans. Living, breathing humans. Ryland starts to laugh. That's not possible.

He points at one of them, that looks like the worlds most stereotypical doctor, laughs harder, and darts his way out the door.

Every step he takes against the cold, cold tile, feels like being shot 20 times in every part of his body. Ryland doesn't remember the last time he ran like this.

He shoves past what looks like a young man in a nurse's outfit, and he run past a room with another monitor, looking eerily similar to his, with Simon laying in the bed.

Simon. Simon.

Ryland gets maybe 50 feet away before he turns back around, runs into the mass of people trying to catch him, and barricades himself in Simon's room. The walls are made of glass, so they can see as Ryland painstakingly shifts a wooden dock under the door, and flips them off from the inside.

The Adrenaline is fading, even though Ryland still has no idea what the FUCK is happening, and his makeshift door block was never intended to be used like that, and it's not going to last long.

Ryland makes a simple list in his head, as quick as he can.

A. This is a hospital.

B. These people look human.

C. Simon is incapcitated

D. Ryland doesn't know who these people are.

Conclusion, Ryland needs to protect Simon until he can figure out what is happening.

Fear runs like a river in his body. He feels the same as he did when Eva had him trapped down to send him off to space. She was right, but it wasn't her choice to make. There is anger in forgiveness, no matter how much people say you feel alright.

The door breaks down. Ryland's hearing is slowly returning. He positions himself directly in front of Simon's comatose body, taking comfort in the beep beep of his heart monitor.

Alive. Alive was good. Alive how? Fuck if Ryland knew.

People barged in, and he stared at them, terrified, until one pushed forward through the crowd.

Oh. Ryland knows that presence.

Carl.

All of the adrenaline that seems to be keeping Ryland suspended, awake, leaves his body.

Earth. Either this was Earth, or some tormented version of the afterlife.

“Dr. Grace.” Carl says, and that’s his voice. Ryland doesn’t remember it, but he knows the tones. He would know them anywhere. “Welcome back.”

Dr. Captain Ryland Grace passes out.

Chapter 2: Jumpscare in your Garden

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Colton Seavers never got phone calls. Even before his accident, he didn't get phone calls. He wouldn't say he didn't have people to call, or people to call him, because he did. He had friends, granted, he cut almost all of them off after, but he still had friends.

They just didn't call first.

And Colt didn't either.

He left his home everyday or so, and he saw enough sunlight, and he took all the medicine they gave him, and he did the physical therapy. It wasn't enough. He went on runs occasionally, and he still longed for more. He wanted to feel the weightlessness of a freefall, or the pressure of a blank gun in his hands, bright lights burning into his skin, the knowledge that he was being watched, filmed, and that people loved it.

Colton Seavers wanted that feeling back.

But he couldn't have it.

A few of the other guys at the valet said he could probably feel that way if he tried a solution or two of theirs, but even in highschool, Colt had never been one for drugs. He was beyond stupid, this was true. It was probably the reason his foster families kept sending him back, but he never did drugs.

If he wanted to feel pure adrenaline, or fear, he was going to find a way to do it raw, without the influence, literally.

Unfortunately, this meant that he also had to experience the pain, raw and unfiltered.

You win some, you lose some, he supposes.

The point remains.

Colton Seavers spends his days alone, his nights working valet, and repeating. He does not get phone calls. Ever.

His phone rings.

He picks up on instinct.

“Hello?”

He doesn’t recognize the voice he’s connected to.

“Hello. May I speak with Colton Seavers please?” They ask, and the fresh wave of confusion and maybe a bit of dread comes rushing into Colt’s body.

“That’s me.”

“Oh! Wonderful. I’m Nurse Weiss with the University Hospital of Zurich.”

Ok yes, Colt was assuredly very, very confused. Why was a swiss hospital calling him at 7 pm on a tuesday night? He couldn’t think of an ounce of a good reason.

“I was hoping to get in contact with you today in accordance to the Petrova Line Taskforce. The official protocol is that upon the chance of any astronaut’s return, all blood family should be informed upon awakening.”

“What?”

Colt bluescreened. None of the words spoken made any sense.

“Ah well, according to our data and DNA analysis system, you are the second blood sibling of Doctor Ryland Grace, his twin, actually! If our data is correct.”

That wasn’t right.

Colt didn’t remember his childhood. Not most of it. Earlier he got, the harder it was to remember. He had family, sure, but always the siblings or children of foster families. Colt had always been told that his family was dead.

Had he been told that?

Had he just assumed that?

Did they give him up? Was he not worthy of their love?

“That can’t be right. I don’t have any family.” He told Weiss.

They laughed.

“According to our system you have two living family members, by blood at least. Ryland Grace is one of them.”

Colt paused.

“Well your system is wrong.” He thought for a second. “Isn’t Ryland Grace one of those guys to go up there and save the sun? One of them that killed themselves for everyone else? What kind of fucked up prank call is this-”

“Mr Seavers, I promise you I intend to not alarm or disturb you in anyway. This is not a prank call. I can provide you with my ID and any other credentials you would like, but I’m assuming you haven’t seen the news lately? I say this less as a nurse, and rather as a human to another.”

“I… haven’t. no.” Colt didn’t watch the news much. Tom Ryder’s face was unfortunately all over it.

“Ok then. I’m going to give you a list of information and a number to call, I’d like you to write this down, if you would?”

Fuck it, why not? He grabs a notepad, and a pen.

Weiss gives him an address, a room number, a UUID with his name on it, and a number to call.

“Turn on the news, Colt. I know enough about Dr. Grace’s early life from the files. You’ll want to see this.”

They use his first name. The dial tone hits Colt’s ears.

He looks down at the sticky note in his hand, and up at the shitty television that runs on hopes and dreams.

More than a surprise, it turns on the first try.

It’s an old channel, not the one that he wants, showing a black and white western that he couldn’t care less about.

He flips it to channel 4, the one where the news is regularily shown. It’s talking about some government asset, maybe the DOW, or something? Colt never really kept up with that stuff, nor did he particularily care.

He scoffs. Maybe he had been lead all around, in some stupid prank, just to see a hopeless person have the hope of something small even for a second.

What a stupid thing to be hopeful for. Colt knew well enough why he didn’t stick around in many families for very long. Why he cut Jody off, and Dan, and anyone else that might have cared about him. He was a burden. Loneliness was a small thing to carry in order to preserve other people from the heavy weight that he always had been and always would be.

But he still longed for it. Desperately so. He was ashamed to admit it, how could he?

Every child grows up watching shows about loving families that overcome their hardship. But Colt’s family was dead, and now, it seemed they just didn’t want him.

He had had a family.

He used to have a family.

Colt cried into the soggy couch cushion as the topic changed.

"Good Evening, I'm Sandra Newcomb and with the International Space Update Station. We're reporting to you folks in Alburqueque, New Mexico. Today is May 4th, 2026. Our updating top story tonight is that of the impossible return of the spacecraft the Hail Mary, carrying with

it 4 passengers, just 5 months after the beetles and video capsules recorded by Doctor Captain Ryland Grace returned.”

Colt’s breath stopped, and he shot up.

"First, to our breaking headline story. Not much is known to the public about the return of the Hail Mary, only that 3 unidentified personel and Doctor Ryland Grace were aboard. They crashed into the atlantic ocean just three days ago, into where the Chantal Ice Platform was forming, though the heat from the re-entry has said to have decimated this ice formation, and warmed the ocean in that spot to pre-astrophagic crisis temperatures. The crew inside the space vessel were rescued 12 hours after descent, and transported to a location undisclosed to the public, likely to recieve medical treatment. The people have taken to the streets with cheers and cries for this miracle, for Ryland Grace, the savior of the solar system. Local schools and government buildings are overrun with gifts to be delivered to Doctor Grace, so you may expect a small delay on your mail. The story is still updating as we speak. On the topic of space, David Hollins is working with some of the most renowned petrova task force, who are preparing the 7th probe to deliver a new batch of taumoeba to Venus. To you, David Hollins."

The screen flickers, and changes. Colt is crying. There’s a photo of Ryland on the screen. His hair is fluffier, and he has glasses. He looks like Colt. He could be Colt, if he tried. Holy fucking shit.

"Thank you, Sandra. I’m here with Doctor Henry Lee, an astrophage specialist..."

Colt’s mind trailed off.

He had a brother.

He had a brother that saved the universe.

And consequentially, his life.

The tv flickered off. It didn’t work well anyway. Colt saw his own reflection in the long gone place of Ryland Grace’s image.

He allowed himself one singular glance at the sticky note before making a call.

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The second time Ryland Grace woke up on earth, the pain was less bad.

He could think more clearly.

Additionally, there were already nurses in his room. They ran over to him the second he blinked his bleary eyes, and they poked and prodded him. His arms felt more sore than anything else.

There wasn’t enough time for Ryland to figure out what was happening. It was bold to assume he even remotely knew what was and or had happened.

What he did know was that he could see a blue sky outside glass. He could feel the warm blood underneath the skin of the people who had cared for him. He could recall Carl’s face, and he knew what tile felt like.

“Sim’n” Was the first word he grumbled. His vocal cords were dry and tense, and someone gently helped him suck from a straw. The taste of cold, pure water felt like Ryland had been born again.

He blinked more coherently at them, after they seemed to deem him not at risk for immeadiate death.

“Simon.” He repeated.
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A woman stepped forward. Some part of Ryland recognized her, but younger, with less dark roots and more bright makeup. Doctor Leonie Vogel had been one of the medical doctors assigned to the upkeep of the Hail Mary crew.

“Doctor Grace? Can you hear me?” She asked, and yeah, Ryland knew that voice. It was a voice he had grown to miss even though he had never even known the woman.

“Where’s Simon?” He demanded. His light blue eyes were ice cold, and all of the happiness he felt was overshadowed by fear for Simon. They didn’t know who he was. He couldn’t get hurt. Ryland knew what had happened the last time Simon had interacted with a human other than Ryland.

“Do you mean one of the people you arrived with?”

Plural. It wasn’t just him and Simon. Who the hell else was it?

Ryland nodded.

“ ‘e’s uhh short and got scars… no arm..” Ryland trailed off, thinking, trying to describe Simon. His Simon. There was a negative zero chance they wanted to hear him talk about how beautiful he was.

“John Doe in Room 14! That’s Simon.” She smiles, and she doesn’t seem condescending, or like she’s looking at Ryland like he’s insane, but Ryland still doesn’t like anything about this, and he tries to shift.

“Gotta go see him.”

“Doctor Grace, you are severely injured from your descent into Earth’s atmosphere. It’s imperative you stay put for the moment.”

Grace never swore outloud. It was a long habit ingrained in him from children, and while he might do it inside, never out loud. The urge to flip Vogel off was extremely, extremely strong.

“Fudge you.” Ryland said, getting up, shoving people away with his weak limbs. He left the upper IV in, and wrapped himself in the top bedding around himself like he was Emperor Comatose again.

“Dr. Grace-”

“If you have any more questions, I’m not answering them there. Need to see Simon.”

He told them straight up, and after everyone else looked too confused to apprehend the savior of the universe, they let Ryland slowly walk down the halls to room 14. Sure enough, Simon was still there, exactly how he had been when Ryland had seen him the first time.

Ryland pulled up a chair, and rested his head on the lower half of the bed, letting his eyes flick over the heartbeat monitor.

There was an audible sigh, and the shuffling of papers. Vogel sat down on the ground next to him. Ryland let himself look over at them for a second.

“It’s a miracle that I’m seeing you, Dr. Grace. I promise you I’m not trying to be cruel, we just need information. For your health, and his as well.”

It got through to Ryland.

“Ok.”

He never did think he would be the subject of an interrogation, but here he was.

“You said his name was Simon?” Vogel asked. Ryland nodded. “Does he have a last name?” She asked, and Ryland paused. Convict wasn’t even a name, though it was the first word that came to mind. Ryland let himself gently hold Simon’s hand, limp and asleep as he spoke.

“Grace.”

“I was wondering.” Vogel said, and there was a smile in her voice. “I’ve been one of the few privy to your most recent video journals. Does Simon hail from Erid?” She asks, and Grace shakes his head.

“Eden. It’s a space station that doesn’t exist anymore. He’s human, tho’ .” Ryland told her. “Put down Earth. He’s come from Earth. He’s just home again.”

“Thank you. Would you be willing to answer our questions about the other two?” She asks.

Ryland looks up.

“What?”

He and Simon were the only two humans he knew. Well, two humans aside from the dead ones, and Eridians.

“They’re being monitored more closely on a different floor, as due to all of our tests come back extremely wrong, and we’re concerned.”

There’s more paper shuffling. Ryland is offered two images.

They’re asleep. Ryland Grace recognized his best friend even when he didn’t look like his best friend. Tan skin, lines and dots in graceful patterns that were the stars against it. Uncut

brown hair, Rocky looked peaceful. He looked human.

Horrifyingly human.

It wasn't like Ryland hadn't thought about it, but to see it, to see the literal impossible, it was something else entirely.

Impossible.

What did the word even mean anymore? Ryland had died. Ryland was alive! Ryland had saved the world. Ryland had come home. Ryland's different species best friend looked human.

Justifiable conclusion, the word impossible meant nothing anymore.

The other photo was similar. Adrian had a longer face, somewhat, when compared to Rocky. Their hair was vibrant colours of blue and purple and some green, which didn't surprise Ryland, considering the colours that Adrian had.

The same patterns danced on their skin.

"That's Rocky. and Adrian." He said, voice riddled with confusion and shock.

"Rocky like… the Eridian from your video journal?" He was asked. Yes. Yes that Rocky. "Well." Vogel laughed. "I suppose that solves the question about the extremely impossible anatomy I was going to have to ask."

Ryland perked up. He was no medical doctor, but if there was something he was more than adept at, it was Eridian anatomy and knowledge. He was quite literally the only human being in the universe that had a decent amount of knowledge on it.

Ryland was given projective diagrams.

“We can’t use X-Rays, or any heavy metal machinery on them. As far as we can tell, their blood is quite literally mercury. From the practical tests we’ve done, the only anatomical traits they share with humans are a throat and a stomach, as well as the basic digestive system. Their endocrine system doesn’t exist, and their nervous system practically doesn’t exist. By all human measures, they shouldn’t exist.”

Ryland laughed. For the first time, since returning to Earth, Ryland laughed.

“Start thinking by alien measures. I- I don’t suppose you have any of my documents from the Hail Mary.”

“If we do, I don’t have access to them. I was assigned to your care, and nothing else is being given out. The public knows next to nothing.”

“I’ve got documents on basic Eridian anatomy on there, probably. Not really sure. I don’t know how any of this works. Last thing I remember was a disco party on a fake beach on Erid, and then the feeling of burning.”

“Nobody is trying to figure it out. We’ve got most of the worlds scientists on your taumoeba, and this will be accepted as a miracle. There’s no logic or reason behind this, and nothing explains it. A Miracle. The Hail Mary has delivered a miracle. One final one.”

“Hail Mary, full of Grace.” Ryland said, half a joke, half a choked sob.

“Welcome home, Doctor Grace. The world has never been happier to see you.”

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Colt stares at himself in the mirror for a very long time on the airplane, wondering whether or not to shave his beard. Cut his hair too. He didn't like how he looked, but in these 14 months, he's never had a reason to change.

Eva Stratt, was her name.

She'd gotten him on this flight, like she said she would on the phone.

"I wasn't aware that Doctor Grace had any family."

"I wasn't aware I had any." Was Colt's response.

Regardless, she had gotten him the second closest flight out of New Mexico and to Switzerland, which is where Ryland Grace was being treated.

Colt decides to cut and shave it himself.

It looks like shit by the time it's done, but the uneven strands and faintly visible stubble look like him. He's reminded of the image of Ryland again, and looking at his face in the mirror, it's uncanny. The concept of a twin.

It was stupid.

Colt had always known in all the movies where there were twins, the concept of twin intution was bullshit.

Family.

Would he hate him?

Colt couldn’t hate him.

Colt didn’t even know Ryland, and he loved him. The concept of a man, and Colt loved him more than anything else.

Colt could share phone calls with him about stupid stuff, and Colt could show him the previous technical work he’d done on movies. He’s show him cool car tricks, was he a car guy? A molecular microbiologist car guy. It wasn’t impossible.

The rest of the flight was time Colt spent out planning on what he thought Ryland was like. How he would be.

The unpredictable dilemma of learning to be known.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and Kudos Appreciated!

Check out my server if you're interested :D

Chapter 3: Courtland Gentry, Cognition Assessment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Courtland was no stranger to cold walls and damp concrete. The same variation of the grey tone had become the most constant thing in his life a long time ago.

He knew raw pain, unfiltered and utterly destructive. He knew how to fight and how to get hit and to get thrown back and forth so many times he couldn't even regain a sense of humanity. This was all he was doomed to be.

Utterly nothing, now and forever.

Courtland Gentry was dead. Sierra Six lay practically unresponsive on the ground of the high containment cell they had for him, deep underground. It was a horrible cell, considering the elevator that lead into it had no security measures, and Six knew that the security team at this location was infamous for not doing their job.

And so Six lay there, on his back, wallowing in his woes, and how he got to this point. 30 years of this. Fitz had saved him. Fitz was dead.

Sierra Six had no family left.

What about Courtland Gentry?

It was better nobody ever knew about Colt or Ryland. Not that much mattered with Ryland.

Courtland had cried for a week when they sent the hail mary away. Not in front of other people. But the second he was alone, the terror and destruction that buried itself in his chest clawed it's way out through his eyes and he buried his head in his legs.

Sierra Six didn’t have emotions.

Courtland Gentry did.

Sierra Six didn’t sacrifice everything.

Courtland Gentry did.

And Ryland died anyway.

He had spent 30 years suffering, for protecting his brothers. He wouldn’t change a thing. But he still couldn’t save Ryland. Sweet Ryland, with ladybugs on his skin and kneecaps dyed green from grass, Ryland with his textbooks and Ryland laughing as Colt hit him with the hose.

Ryland crying, terrified, in the back nook of the closet because their father was home and he was loud.

Ryland who stared up at him with the love of a thousand people, Ryland who suffered endlessly.

Colt was no better.

He wasn’t brave. He wasn’t a coward, but every one of his movements were filled with fear. Colt, covered in bruises, standing in front of Ryland. Colt that looked at Courtland like he held the secrets to the universe.

Courtland, that carried Colt on his shoulders and pretended to know what Ryland’s rants meant.

Courtland held no regret. Sierra Six held no regret. Not a molecule in his body went to what he did. Not when he saw Ryland see the gun for the last time, and the softness in him dissipating, covered by fear. Not when he saw Colt eye the window.

Fight or Flight.

That was how everyone described it.

It would never have to fall to them.

Courtland wanted nothing more than to see them again. Sierra Six never wanted to ever see them again. So he didn't have to face the fact he had left them alone. That he had let Ryland leave. That everything that had happened, he wasn't there for.

Courtland wondered how Claire was doing.

He used his thumb to trace the numbers on the side of his pointer finger.

She was alone now. She was just as alone as Colt and Ryland had been, and she didn't have a sibling with her.

Courtland's heart siezed. It was far too late to save Colt or Ryland. But Claire was only 12. She had nothing left. Only him. Only Six.

He forced himself off the floor, coarse palm against rough concrete, tearing and still firm.

They'd be coming back to visit him again. To see if they had damaged his brain, or if he was laying there out of will. Six's stomach clenched with hunger, and he moved past it.

There was a solid chance that his method of escaping would get him flattened into a pancake, but he could take that chance.

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Courtland was really, really bad at driving.

No mind, he was better at sneaking in. The record and the earplugs wouldn’t be enough, but as long as she remained safe.

The house was desolate. There was no ounce of personality or warmth in it. Six’s childhood home had had more life than this.

Granted, it was an ironic sentence considering most of the lives inside of it had been removed.

There was about a 20 minute escape window, he deduced. They would be looking for him, but the CIA was going to take a second. Thank god they were lazier than the FBI.

For what it was worth, they did have food. A blessing, to both Six and Courtland. He tore into an orange more like an animal than a genuine human. Throwing boxes of food into the duffel bag, and wolfing down whatever he could in the limited amount of time, the blaring sound of a television playing in the background.

He hadn’t paid it any mind while he was killing the other men, but the sound was loud and piercing now that he wasn’t tuning it out.

"Good Evening, I'm Sandra Newcomb and with the International Space Update Station. We're reporting to you folks in Alburqueque, New Mexico. Today is May 4th, 2026. Our updating top story tonight is that of the impossible return of the spacecraft the Hail Mary, carrying with
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it 4 passengers, just 5 months after the beetles and video capsules recorded by Doctor Captain Ryland Grace returned.”

Six was gone with the wind. Courtland focused all his attention on the television as orange rind slipped from his lips.

"First, to our breaking headline story. Not much is known to the public about the return of the Hail Mary, only that 3 unidentified personel and Doctor Ryland Grace were aboard. They crashed into the atlantic ocean just three days ago, into where the Chantal Ice Platform was forming, though the heat from the re-entry has said to have decimated this ice formation, and warmed the ocean in that spot to pre-astrophagic crisis temperatures. The crew inside the space vessel were rescued 12 hours after descent, and transported to a location undisclosed to the public, likely to recieve medical treatment. The people have taken to the streets with cheers and cries for this miracle, for Ryland Grace, the savior of the solar system. Local schools and government buildings are overrun with gifts to be delivered to Doctor Grace, so you may expect a small delay on your mail. The story is still updating as we speak. On the topic of space, David Hollins is working with some of the most renowned petrova task force, who are preparing the 7th probe to deliver a new batch of taumoeba to Venus. To you, David Hollins."

The rest of the sound was tuned out. They were extremely far from New Mexico, being in Virginia, and the grainy footage showed it was clearly running on something that was showing external channels, but that didn’t change what was being shown. An old re-run of the news or not, there was only one person named Ryland Grace.

There had only ever been one. He smashed the tv, ignoring the tears welling in his eyes.

Six made his way to the sound of Silver Bird playing.

Three knocks.

She was crying on the ground when he opened the door. His throat was choked and he resisted everything in him telling him to sob, for any reason.

“Am I allowed to chew gum in here?” He asks, and her eyes land on him and she shoots up, wrapping her arms around him.

Courtland let himself relish the hug for several moments. Six picked up Claire, throwing the records and the few other things they seemed to have given her into the bag.

She seemed to realize that they were leaving as Six carried her out of the house, and she stared at the car and the long driveway away.

“Mr. Six.”

“Yeah?” He replied, trying his best to make sure his tone didn’t come off as rude or destructive. She was just a kid.

“Where are we going?”

Six set Claire down on the ground. Courtland opened the door and thought.

“I think.” He paused, and she looked at him. “I think we’ll go see some family.”

Ryland. Colt, too. Claire was his family now. They didn’t have anyone else, and despite whatever risks she might bring, he could protect her. He’d get her the best life he could, however he could.

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Colton Seavers stepped off the plane, sick to his stomach with nerves and confusion.

Should he buy flowers? You got those things for people in a hospital, right?
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He walked to the hospital, 30 minutes from the airport. True to the pictures, Switzerland was beautiful. He had no euros on him, but he paid with venmo for some sunflowers and… other flowers. Colt wasn't going to pretend like he recognized any of the flowers other than the tulips and sunflowers. But they were pretty.

Hopefully it would do a good enough job.

What was Colt even going to say?

"Hey, what's up? I know you're the saviour of the universe and all, but it turns out I'm your twin brother you didn't know you had- or I hope you didn't- and also I'm a pathetic loser?"

Yes, this was sure to win him over.

He wasn't even sure he was going to have to explain the twin thing. It was uncanny. Jody would have laughed. She loved Ryland Grace. She loved space in general, and the way she spoke about the noble cause of the project hail mary, she was sure to freak out.

It was fucked up to use your apparent twin brother's status to get back together with your ex after you ghosted her because you didn't want to burden her when you broke your back, right? Yeah. Definitely fucked up.

They recognized him at the door. Hilarious. One of the nurses did a double take, but there was a tall guy there, introduced himself as Carl.

"Colton Seavers?" He said.

"The only one." He said, with a choked laugh, and he was sure he was panicking, and man he really felt like throwing up.

“Follow me.” Carl had directed, and with the given lack of literally anything else to do, Colt followed. “I should warn you, he’s got a pretty severe concussion and is still readjusting to being on earth.”

Colt did laugh again.

“If you’re worried about him not remembering me, don’t worry. I didn’t even know I had a brother until about 24 hours ago.”

Carl’s forehead knots, but they’re stood outside a glass room, with three people inside. Someone carrying a gun, presumably in case of break in, a man that Colt has never seen before, with long black hair and stubble, comatose on a bed, and far at the other end, a person he can only assume is Ryland.

They’re drawing on a whiteboard, a large diagram of what looked like an Eridian, and a human, several photos taped to it that Colt couldn’t make out from here.

“You’re never going to meet him if you stand here.” Carl says, and he raises an eyebrow at Colt, and Colt laughs and gives him finger guns, which he immeadiately regrets, but he knocks gently on the door, and pushes it open.

“Carl?” Ryland asks, and it sounds like Colt’s voice. It’s got a lower timber, but it’s the same voice Colt can’t stand hearing on old videos, same perkiness when he’s happy. God. It’s uncanny. “Would you mind getting me some paperclips? I’m trying to format potential resolutions for cases of blood- er- Mercurium loss, but I don’t have any-”

When Colt was staring, pulling everything away from tuck tail and running, and not saying, Ryland turned around, presumably to see why Carl wasn’t responded.

The expo marker dropped out of Ryland’s hand.

“Who are you?” He asks, and Colt fumbles with the flowers, offering them out.

“Uh.” He says. “Colt. Colton. Seavers. Colton is my full name. But nobody calls me that.” He has no idea what he’s saying. He feels like he’s in high school and he’s trying to make friends all over again.

“You look like me.” Ryland says, an astute observation. “You sound like me. Did they give me hallucinogenetics? No, I’ve been keeping track, I know that the more drugs you take when you return to earth the harder it is-” He pauses, and he looks back up at Colt.

Colt scuffs his shoes, and looks down. His Miami Vice jacket sits tight around his shoulders.

“I’m your brother. Twin. I think they said that. Uh. Sorry.” He apologized, and Ryland’s eyes went wide. “I only found out yesterday. I- I didn’t know I had any family.”

Ryland was frozen. Colt panicked. Ryland fumbled for a chair, and Colt grabbed one to slide underneath him. Colt did not feel like having the astronaut of all time die under his watch.

There was the click of the door behind him, and Colt turned to see that the bodyguard or whoever it had been had left.

Colt set the flowers down on the table next to the sleeping man, and Ryland was still frozen, head in his hands.

“Sorry.” He apologized again. He didn’t know what for.

Ryland spoke.

“Can- Can I hug you?” He asked, and he was crying when Colt looked at him next, and Colt nodded his head. He couldn’t remember the last time he had had a hug anyway.

Ryland's grip was firm, clutching and digging into Colt's back, and Colt held him back, and Ryland smelled like hospital and expo and tea and saline. He couldn't imagine he normally smelled like that.

They held each other for a very, very long time.

Ryland sobbed into Colt's shoulder. Colt let some tears slip out too. Alone. He wasn't alone. A brother. He had a brother.

He had a brother that was painstakingly human, and just as hurt as Colt was.

Ryland pulled away, and wiped his tears on his cardigan arm as he coughed and looked away.

"Sorry. The only people I've had to hug in the last 60 years or so were Simon and Rocky, who are great, don't get me wrong- but." He paused. "Are you sure?" He asked.

"Other than the fact that I saw you on the tv and it flickered off and I could still see you in my own reflection? They said it was a DNA match. That's the only reason I knew." He repeated.

Ryland sat down again.

"Please tell me I can use you to shove it in Eva's face." Was the next thing Ryland said, with the tone of laughter, and Colt tilted his head like a confused cat, and Ryland looked at him and laughed even harder. "I haven't slept in like 7 hours and I'm super drugged right now, excuse me." Ryland says through giggles and more tears, but not as sad.

"Are you alright?" Colt asks, terrified. He's a stuntman, for all hell's sake. He has no idea whether or not this is risky, if Ryland is sick or not.

"I'm happier than I have been in a long, long time."

Oh. What a thing to hear.

“Do you like talking?” Ryland asks him. Colt shrugs.

“I don’t know. I don’t talk to many people.”

Ryland laughed again.

“I’ve been talking to a sentient space rock- multiple, and one other human, as well as Mary, for years. Just because you’ve got nobody to talk to, doesn’t mean you can’t talk.” He says, and it’s obvious even now that he was a teacher.

“I saw your video logs.” Colt deadpanned. He knew about Rocky. They were good friends. Ryland smiled at him, and it was toothy, and it was softer than Colt’s smiles were. His smiles were full of teeth, but pointed, and smirking most of the time.

“Carl mentioned they got back a few months before I did.” Ryland remarked, and Colt nodded. He felt awkward.

“How did you get back?” He asked, the only thing that was coming to mind.

Ryland looked away, and shrugged.

“I don’t know. I was on Erid on day, the next i’m experiencing what it feels like to go through 25,000 kelvins of heat in a metal box and then the next I’m in a hospital. It’s beyond me.”

He doesn’t seem concerned. He doesn’t seem concerned at all about this fact, this miracle of nothingness. 20 light years away, that’s what the media said. Dead or Alive, they didn’t know.

But Ryland Grace was much further away than he could have ever been. And then he wasn't. And nobody was concerned.

"Do you want me to talk about it? What it was like up there?" Ryland asks, after Colt trails off into thought, thinking everything through.

No, Colt doesn't want to hear.

He knows that whatever Ryland did up there, it was devastating. He knows it took him years to get back on his feet. He knows that Ryland was alone, completely and painfully alone, and Colt didn't even know or care. He's seen the video logs. He knows the basics.

"No."

Ryland looks somewhat taken aback.

"Talk about before?" He asks, and Ryland smiles.

"How much do you want to hear?" Ryland asks, and Colt's got some years to catch up on.

"As much as you want to tell me."

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The lights are bright even behind Simon's eyelids. His body feels limp, asleep.

He can hear voices, but they're not distinguishable. He can hear Ryland, his tone of voice every once in a while, and Simon is very, very tired.
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Still, he manages to move his hand just a bit, reaching out towards where his ears pick up the sound. There's a second pause, and then there's the feeling of Ryland's hand in his. He knows it's Ryland's. The feeling of his palm and the creases of his skin are more intimately familiar to Simon than anything else.

Ryland squeezes his hand.

He's here. Simon is safe.

The lights are bright, and Simon is tired. The voices lull him to sleep.

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Bonus

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"Are you two… together?" Colt gestures to Ryland, and the man in the bed. Simon, he supposes. He's pretty sure the guys name is Simon, from what Ryland's said.

They're holding hands, after Simon made some quiet noises and outstretched his hand towards Ryland, who grabbed it.

In a split second, Ryland's demeanor flips from the warm, smart man that Colt is getting to know as his brother, to someone defensive and afraid.

"Yes. Is there an issue?" He asks, and Colt knows that voice too. He's angry.

Oh.

He thinks Colt is homophobic.

Colt startles back, putting his hands up in the air, shaking his head fervently.

“Oh-” He pauses, eyes wide. “Not at all. I’m Bi- I think? I had this fling with Tom Ryder- and obviously there was highschool- we all know what high school was like-” He rambles, and he doesn’t know why he admits to the thing with Tom Ryder, that bastard, and he groans into his hands, and there’s a few seconds of silence before Ryland laughs again.

“Who’s Tom Ryder?” He asks, and Colt looks up with he can only assume is an acidic expression, and Ryland starts laughing all over again.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and Kudos appreciated!!

Check out my server if you want :D

Chapter 4: Colours of the Wind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rocky has never known light. He’s never known darkness, either, to be entirely fair. He knew the concept inside and out, he’d spent years having it taught to him by Grace, but he’d never seen it.

Rocky knew love. He knew warmth, aside from heat, and he knew excitement and he knew fear and terror and grief and happiness and inconsolable despair.

Rocky knew Adrian, knew their faint outlines, the ridges of their carapace, the way their feet sounded when they walked, the melody of their song, the way they slotted together as Rocky slept.

Rocky knew Grace. He was loud, and chaotic. There was constantly a thousand sounds coming from him at any point, and his steps echoed in the dark like a guiding light. He knew his language, and he knew the sweetness of the fast heartbeat that came from Grace.

Begrudgingly, Rocky knew Simon. Grace made jokes about “Rocky and the other human he didn’t want” but he had never explained, even when Rocky asked, and so he took it as some stupid human thing. He knew Simon’s slow heartbeat, it’s brief quickenings when he grew afraid. He knew him by the sound of his low breaths, or the way his entire being seemed to yearn for Grace.

These were the fundamentals of everything Rocky needed. He didn’t need light. He didn’t need darkness, or colour, or taste or “real touch” or 5 fingers and four limbs, or wet gross human stuff. Just this.

Unfortunately, Rocky has the luck of a very unlucky Rocky.

When Rocky first opens the eyes he shouldn’t have, he is bombarded with the absolute BURN of light. That’s what it must be. Rocky’s never seen light before, but what else could it be?

It’s white, and it burns like nothing comparable. Rocky can’t feel the way he’s supposed to, and he moves to let out an upset trill, only to find his gas bags aren’t there either. There’s someting, and he can command it, and it makes a similar noise, but it doesn’t rumble, it strings, and it feels weird.

There is the shine of something, and thank god for Grace, because there is no thoughts on what else this could possibly be. There are vague outlines, and that is something that Rocky knows, even if it’s different. Outlines. Shapes.

They’re jagged, and unfamiliar. Rocky can’t hear them, but he can hear a high pitched sound he can only compare to a scream. There is a beep, repeating over and over like a pattern. He knows this too, because it was on the Hail Mary. It is what surronds Grace when Grace was hurt, when Rocky needed to fix it.

There is more noise, and less screaming. The outlines are moving. Where is Grace? Adrian? Simon? Who is watching him sleep? He does not trust these outlines, who are they? Where is he? Why is nothing right? Where is Grace?

A noise, one that Rocky knows. English, Human Language. Rocky knows it by heart, but they’re speaking weirdly, and it doesn’t make sense. There’s plastic gloves that go under the shine that is preventing the burn of the white from hitting him directly.

There is pain. They’re touching him. They’re hurting him.

Rocky screams. He has a mouth, apparently. And so he screams.

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There’s a gentle hum of a voice Simon knows well. It’s nudging him on his shoulder, speaking quietly.

“Simon.” It says. The afterlife, he supposes.

At least Ryland was here.

Oh. That’s who it was. Ryland.

“My Harmony, you gotta wake up.” Ryland says, and Simon blinks blearily. The lights are bright, and blinding him, and he’s blinking fast.

He can see Ryland sat next to him, smiling. He looks young, and is wearing a cardigan that Simon’s never seen before.

Ryland is grinning, and Simon wants to smile back, because his Ryland is happy. Ryland sees him for two more seconds before shaking with laughter and trying so hard to keep the hand that is holding Simon’s balanced with the one holding a cup of water.

“Oh my gosh you are so high right now.” He giggles, which confuses Simon. There’s no reason for him to be high. He hasn’t gotten hurt recently. Ryland is staring at him, and still smiling. If Ryland is smiling, everything must be ok. “Can you drink this for me?” Ryland says, and there’s a straw in the glass of water.

Of course he can.

Ryland nurses it under him while Simon drinks, and it is colder and harsh and more enticing than any water he has ever had before.

The water on eden was clean, but that was it. Safe for human consumption. It was chunky, ish. It never slid over your tongue smoothly.

The water that Ryland had first given him tasted dry, and sweet. Ryland said they added extra vitamins, electrolytes, so that he could heal faster. Simon didn't know what those were. He liked it.

The normal Erid water was wonderful. Plain, sometimes cold, sometimes hot. The same as the ocean, as Simon assumed.

Nothing compared to this. Where on earth had they gotten it. He felt starstruck.

Ryland was grinning at him, and staring in a way of pure adoration.

"Mineral water. Cold, Mineral Water. One of my favourite drinks, I think. I'm going to make you try so many types of water." Ryland spoke, and Simon furrowed his brow as he swallowed it fast.

There was only one type of water. Sure, Ryland had explained how technically ocean water wasn't drinkable on Earth, but Simon hadn't really believed him. They just had so much of it.

His eyes slowly adjusted to the enviroment around him as he drank, and the next realization that he had was that he was in a ton of pain. It hurt. It wasn't really as bad as the iron lung, no, but it felt like he had been rescued by Ryland and had to recover all over again.

The straw slipped from his mouth and he groaned in pain and agony, and Ryland frowned, Simon could feel the frown even though his eyes still felt glossy, and he reached over and pressed a button. There was a shuffling sound, and more noise that Simon either couldn't see or couldn't place.

A figure just outside of Simon's ever-returning vision appeared, and spoke.

“Weren’t you just saying how being loaded up on drugs makes it harder to readjust?” They said, and holy shit they sounded like Ryland. Well, Ryland if he was an avid smoker and way less cool. They move over, and they’re stood behind Ryland. They look like Ryland.

None of this was real.

Not-Ryland had the same face structure, but his hair was extremely fucked up. The remnants of a beard on his face where Ryland was obsessed with keeping himself clean shaven almost all of the time, and a different kind of blue in his eyes. It was the same shade of blue, but it was still different. They weren’t Ryland’s eyes.

“Wh’t the fuck?” Simon managed to get out, and he pulled his hand out of Ryland’s, who let it go, to grab at Not-Ryland’s face. He didn’t like this. He was squishier than Ryland, and Simon could definitely crush his head if he proved to be a threat. Ryland seemed to be ok, seemed to be happy, and it was ok for now, but what the fuck?

Ryland laughed.

“Simon? You with me?” Ryland asked gently, smirking in a way that he knew something that Simon didn’t. Simon turned to look at him, and Ryland bit his lip to keep from laughing again.

“He’s definitely somewhere.” Not-Ryland said.

Ryland choked on a laugh.

“Sorry. Sorry. Si, this is my twin brother.” He spoke slowly, and Simon blinked slowly. Twin? It was when there was multiple of one person, right? Ryland had explained this, one time, when he found out that Simon didn’t get much (any) education. “His name is Colt.” Ryland told him.

Colt. His tongue felt like lead, and also, Simon didn't want to say it. He preferred normal Ryland. Not Not-Ryland Colt.

He looked at Ryland with the one thing he had an answer for.

"Mitos's?" He asked, and it took less than 5 seconds for Not-Ryland Colt to start laughing, and another few for Ryland to bite his lip so hard he drew blood and tears welled up in his eyes.

"There has got to be a video of this." Ryland mumbled under his breath, while using his hands to soothe the blankets around Simon. Simon's arm had fallen limp at some point and he hadn't noticed, and his fingers felt funny.

He lifted his arm up, moving it under the light.

"Th're are ligh'bulbs on my fing'rs, Ry-land.." He said, and then started crying. This was devastating. Who had put them there? Why were they there? He only had one working arm left, and they put lights on his hand? How was he supposed to be helpful now.

There was more distant laughter outside of Simon's crying, and Ryland was there comforting him.

"Don't worry about that, Si. It's ok. You get some sleep, and I'll take them off. Can you do that for me?" Ryland asked, and Simon sniffled and nodded as Ryland tucked him in.

He was out in mere seconds.

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The second Simon's eyes had closed and the heartbeat monitor evened out, Ryland hunched over and laughed so hard he genuinely cried.
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“Is-” Colt started, matching Ryland almost exactly, though he’d been laughing for longer. “Is he always like this?” This made Ryland laugh even harder.

Carl opened the door at all the noise, presumably to make sure everything was ok, and looked entirely baffled by what was happening. Colt gave a thumbs up, and Ryland did too, but on instinct gave a thumbs down, a habit that had built up over decades. He realized, and flipped it.

“No- No!” Ryland cry-laughed and Colt was taking heaving breaths. “He is so unbelievably high, oh my gosh.” Ryland wiped his tears off his face, trying to even his breathing out. “Oh my gosh. I don’t think I’ve laughed like that in years. He really was not built for morphine, holy shit.”

“Cal-” Colt started, before frowning, and having Carl reply first.

“It’s Carl.”

“My bad. Carl, are there video tapes in here?”

Carl smirked and raised an eyebrow.

“You’re in one of the world’s most prestigious hospitals stood next to the saviour of the universe while they’re keeping literal aliens upstairs. You’ve never been more watched in your entire life, Mr. Seavers.”

Ryland and Colt both just stared at him.

“Well, that’s horrifying.” Ryland said and whistled.

“You- You can call me Colt, if you want?” He said, seeming to be at a lack for anything else to say.

Carl doesn’t even acknoledge him. It’s not harsh, Ryland knows this Carl, and Colt will too. He hopes so.

They get along well. Frighteningly well. They both seemed terrified that the other would hate them for the first little while, and then that feeling faded into nothingness as they grew aware with how familiar they were.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen the sun.” Ryland commented, sat at the window in one of the world’s shittiest hospital chairs. You’d think they’d have better ones, but no.

“It’s still here.” Colt said. “It waited for you.”

“After what I did for it? I’d hope so.” Ryland joked, and Colt’s lips tilted up. “Where did you grow up?”

“That’s a tough question. San Fransico, before I was put into protective care, and then all over. Never stayed in one place for long.”

“We must have known each other, before. I mean, I can’t really be mad at my 7 year old self for forgetting that I had a whole brother, but I’m pretty mad.”

“I think I knew, somewhat. Maybe. It’s hard to tell. There are nights where I remember things better than the next. My therapist said that trauma can cancel out memories if it’s horrifying enough.”

“That makes sense. I always stayed around San Fran. It’s where I taught my kids, before all of this.”

Colt hummed under his breath in a way so distinctly Ryland that anyone who didn't know the two would have assumed he picked it up from him.

"Beach day, after this? When you can walk stable and your boyfriend's not passed out and we're not being stalked by 100 government agents?"

"I think the government agents are here to stay. Hazard of the job." There was silence. "But yes. Please. Don't tell Rocky this, but the Erid beach wasn't all that close to Earth's beaches. It was nice. Similar, but still distinctly not-Earth."

Colt nodded like he knew Rocky well enough to even consider telling him what Ryland had said.

There was a quiet grief in him that had been quelled with Colt's presence. One that he didn't even knew existed. His head had long forgotten, but his heart never did. They probably held each other as children, and even when Simon held Ryland, or Rocky hugged Grace, it wasn't the same as what his body had learned to love. They could never be Colt, and he could never blame them for that.

But now he was here. He was here and he had everything he wanted.

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Ryland woke up to warm sheets, the beep of Simon's heart monitor, the distant rushing of the air conditioning, and Colt snoring. He'd been brought a "visitor bed" which was simply a mattress, pillow, and some blankets, and he had accepted it. Carl passed out on the couch some hours earlier, as he wasn't supposed to even work this long, his shift had ended hours ago, but was no longer there to work.

There was a rush of words coming from outside the room, and Ryland pulled himself out of the warm blankets and into the cold air to see what it was about. He felt dizzy upon putting his feet down, and it felt wrong to step onto tile and not the mock-hardwood of his Erid home. Simon wasn't behind his back, rather in front of him in a seperate bed, and Rocky wasn't banging the door down.
~~~

Hilariously, Ryland missed Armando. He wonders if they'd let him take it.

He goes for the door, to step outside. At the same time, the door swings inward, hitting Ryland directly in the face.

Stumbling back with a groan of loud pain, he makes sure his nose isn't bleeding as Dr. Vogel stares at him with horror.

"Dr. Grace!" She exclaims, making sure he was ok as her first priority. He gave her a thumbs up, and while it hurt like hell, there was no blood, and his nose had been broken enough times to be strong now.

"I'm good!" He says, looking over his shoulder to make sure neither Colt nor Carl had woken up. They were both still passed out. With how badly hurt Simon was, he shouldn't wake up for another 12 hours or so.

He had never known Earth's enviroment to adjust to it, which means that regardless of drugs, he was going to have a hell of a hard time adjusting.

"What's the haps?" He asks, and Dr. Vogel guides him outside the room and into the hallway.

In about 5 seconds Ryland Grace spots Eva Stratt, feels every feeling he's gotten over come back up to the surface and he turns and walks the opposite direction.

"Dr. Grace." Both Vogel and Stratt say at the same time, and Ryland ignores them.

He couldn't cry here. It wasn't allowed. He needed to be strong. It was fine. She was right. He had to do it. He needed to get over it.

His feet hurt. Surprisingly, the skin hadn't come clean off, thank you centrifuge, but being in natural earth gravity was still so starkly different it was weird.

There was a door down a long hallway. Ryland had spent enough time just staring outside, out the window, to learn that he was on the first floor, it was the smartest place to keep him, in all generality. He wasn't sure if his legs could even handle the stairs yet. He wanted to try. He wanted to try so bad, but Ryland Grace was, above all else, a smart man.

He pushed outside.

A courtyard.

It wasn't the largest, but the brief concrete pathways led off into dirt and grass and thin trees with their leaves barely hanging on. The air was cold enough to nip and bite at Ryland's skin, and he relished it. It was wonderful, to feel the gentle pain of the air.

There wasn't any wind, due to the fact that Ryland was surrounded on all sides by more hospital, and any working staff members quickly vacated the area as soon as they noticed his presence.

He could hear them behind him, he knew they were there. Of course he knew they were there, but if he didn't face them he didn't have to deal with them.

"Dr. Grace." It was her voice.

Ryland gently lowered himself to the ground, where he began to pick at the grass strains and search for the dirt.

"Dr. Grace." She says again.

"I'm not talking without Carl present." Ryland announces to them behind him.

“Officer Carl is asleep at the moment.”

Ryland does not reply.

He continues picking at the grass, although it isn’t very soft, and rather spiky. He tries to braid with it, but it’s too short and well manicured.

There’s a distant sigh behind him, and someone leaves. Ryland flexes his hand once, twice, looks down at the ground, and grips it with all the strength he can manage.

He tears a straight chunk out of the ground, and the squish of disgusting dirt and grass poking out between his fingers makes him want to sob. There’s dirt under his fingernails, he should really clip them, and he smooths it out onto his palm.

It’s real. It’s real dirt, and real grass and real greenery.

His nails are also still too long.

The door opens and closes again.

“As requested, Dr. Grace.” Dr. Vogel says.

Carl looks exhausted, and he walks over to where Ryland is sat down. There’s a concrete bench with more mulch and a tree planted behind it, and Carl sits down on it. He can surely see Ryland’s red face, and trembling lip.

It is fear, once again running through his body.

He had trusted Eva so much. So much. She gave him a choice.

She gave him a choice that led to the stars.

Ryland could never speak the simple fact that although that choice had lead him to Rocky and to Simon and to Erid and to everyone he loved, he still wouldn't do it. If he had known everything of what was to happen when they sat him down, he still wouldn't have wanted to go.

Maybe Ryland should adopt a dog. He was allergic. But it could prevent them from sending him back, maybe. He didn't want to go back.

He wanted a pair of nail clippers and to feel more dirt and to sit on the beach and sob. He wanted to go to England, past Cambridge where he had spent a semester and up to Nottingham, where the Great Oak lay. He wanted to touch it and he wanted to live, not just survive.

He wanted a hamburger, a real one, made by a teenager during the summer, he wanted to bike ride, for exercise. He wanted to pet a cat, and hear the birds cry, he wanted to meet his kids again. God, where were his kids?

He wanted to sit in his classroom and never open the door.

The tears slipped down his face and he didn't even recognize it.

Carl put a hand on his shoulder, and Ryland sniffled, still messing with his handful of dirt.

"Anything- hic." Ryland pauses, wondering if they heard that. "Anything they want to say to me they can say to you first." He says, to Carl.

They, of course, meaning Eva.

There is a pause, and Carl removes his hand, and another deep sigh.

“Please tell Dr. Grace that his companion Rocky woke up earlier today. They seemed confused and very frightened. We would like to call you in to wake them up again, so that any apparent signs of distress might be quelled.”

Oh.

Rocky.

How had he forgotten?

The Hail Mary’s miracles. Was this a miracle? He didn’t really think it counted as anything, nor in particular, not to save anyone. It wasn’t a miracle to do what it had done to Adrian and Rocky. He hoped they weren’t in pain.

Did they sedate them?

‘Hi, welcome to earth, let’s put you in this iron lung and feed you sedatives because you look weird!’ It did sound like something the Petrova Task Force would do. Ryland had been terrified for ages that if he ever were to go to earth, back to earth with Rocky, that they would chain Rocky and dissect him. They would tear him limb from limb to see what made him work.

Humans were not kind. Not like the Eridians had been. There was barely enough space for all of the people in the world, the last time Ryland had been here. Granted, a lot of the population died, but nobody in any government would agree with knocking down some dead people’s houses to build a biodome for a rock.

Grace was not strong enough to protect Rocky.

“I can do that.” He mumbles, and Carl transmits it back.

There’s movement, and Ryland doesn’t know what. Papers flipping.

“Additionally, your other companion, Simon, his healing is at a molecular rate not seen before.” Ryland chortles a laugh. “While your conditions were fairly unstable upon arrival, it is to our knowledge that both you and he could be discharged within the week. The Eridians on floor 3 will take a longer while to judge, depending on what information we get about their biology.”

Ryland nodded silently.

“You cannot simply go home, I am afraid. In your absence, your flat has been renovated into a museum-”

What? What the hell?

“and while we have retrieved your personal items and replaced them with duplicates so that the museum can keep operating, you still are unable to return.” Ryland didn’t even remember what posessions he had to his name.

“I have personally selected a number of homes you can choose from, to stay in for the time being, or however so long you wish. At some point in the near future when your health is fully returned, you will be expected to make some public appearances, Dr. Grace.”

Carl stands up and grabs something that is handed to him, and that is then handed to Ryland.

They’re addresses, and descriptions. The first option is in Juneau, Alaska. Ryland was pretty sure everything was like Juneau now. We all love the freezing temperatures. He skips over this one.

The second is in Florida. Why this is even an option, Ryland doesn't know. Nobody likes Florida, especially not a guy from San Fransico.

He flips through the pages, looking for San Fransico. It's not on there.

There's one in Scotland, way far out, and while it sounds relaxing, a nice beach, it would be less than freezing. A hard no, for right now.

Nearer to the end, there was a house in Seattle. North of Seattle, probably. A cabin, it stated. Waterfront, backed up to a forest and some fields with cattle and the likes. The best of every world, well, for the most part.

"Seattle." He says, and hands.

"Seattle." Carl says louder, so that they can hear.

"We will dispatch several federal agents and a caretaker there, so that you can readjust with no complications." Dr. Vogel states this part.

"No." Ryland says, and it's loud enough for them to hear.

"Pardon me?" Vogel asks.

"I said no. None of them. I don't want them there."

"Dr. Grace, it is crucial that you have someone to take care of you, and several people to guard you in the case of your location being leaked."

Rage boiled up inside of Ryland. Rage and Fear and every unpleasant emotion he hadn't allowed himself to feel in years.

He turned his torso and head in a motion that was excruciating to look at the two of them. His tear stained face and his blue eyes bloodshot and filled with an emotion they had never seen before. Quiet Dr. Grace. Happy Ryland, Safe Ryland, Quiet Ryland.

"I said no." He hisses, and it's somewhat negated by the fact that he's still crying. "You sent me there. I saved the stars. I came back. I don't want you to ask how. I don't want to you to ask anything. I don't want them there."

There's a quiet voice from the side, and Ryland notices Colt for the first time, standing timid over to the side, like he wasn't supposed to be there (he wasn't) and he didn't know what to do (he didn't).

"I can always take care of him? And uh, Simon."

He offers with a lopsided smile that seems more like Ryland than Ryland feels right now.

"Yes." Ryland grits out.

The look in Eva Stratt's eyes is not anger. It is not pity. It is guilt. A deep, resounding guilt that Ryland hopes has hounded her for years.

He has forgiven her, because it worked. But he's not going to forget. He will never forget. His hand untenses from where he didn't even realized he had balled it up and the last of the dirt spills out of his hand.

She turns away.

"Very well."

There is a blinding light and a ringing in his ears the moment she is gone and Colt is by his side and hugging him, and Colt doesn’t even know why he’s in this state, why he’s so upset, and he’s still here. He’s still here even though Ryland is a selfish coward.

There’s time, and Colt hold Ryland like something he had lost and wants to treasure again, and Ryland sobs into his shoulder.

Carl comes back with some green jello and skittles, to which Grace tries to grab, but is moved out of the way in favour for some carrots and basic mashed potatos first. Nutrients before the stuff that causes cancer.

He wants to go back to the room, and so he gnaws on a carrot while Colt guides him like he’s scared he will shatter and Carl eats a twizzler. Ryland sits back down next to Simon and eats the stupid carrots.

He leaves most of the bag of skittles for Rocky, Adrian and Simon.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos and Comments Appreciated!

Check out my server if you'd like!

Chapter 5: Rubber Band Man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire wasn't really sure what was happening, or what had been happening. She did, on the contrary, know, she felt the safest she had in a long time. Which was stupid, all things considered. Mostly considering she was smart enough to put together that most of the US Government's departments were after them.

But she trusted Six. More than anything, she trusted him. He was all she had left, granted, but it was more than that. He wouldn't tell her what had happened in the times they were away, until he came to get her; twice. But she could put it together. She wasn't stupid.

She missed her uncle. Everytime she closed her eyes she was back on that passage, and he was collapsed and Six was holding her back. She knew that he was like family to Six too. Which made them family.

Claire didn't remember much of her parents.

She had never had much of a family, all things considered.

Her parents had died when she was young. She had been given to her Uncle Donald, who adored her, but never had much time for her. She moved houses a lot. Housekeepers and bodyguards changed.

She stopped trying to attend public school after awhile. It was hard making friends only to leave again, and after she got older, the kids thought she was too weird, and didn't want to be friends anyway. She was desperately lonely.

Her bodyguards didn't really care much, she was just a stupid kid, who hadn't even graduated elementary yet. Her housekeepers were too terrified of messing up to form a bond with. Six was different. Not in the usual sense, like the books where it was an instant connection.

No, he was still an indifferent asshole. But he cared about Claire in a way nobody else seemed to before. He stared at her sometimes, like he was seeing someone else. She didn't really know what that was all about, but he did his job, kept her safe, and made her feel safe. He barely answered questions, but he'd let her show him her Sims 4 house, or pretend to play guard while she played Minecraft.

She knew he was only pretending to do his job as she narrated, because he would have to look away every few minutes from nausea. Old people didn't like looking at moving screens too long. He didn't leave often, but he'd come back with flowers, that the housekeeper adored. They didn't make her nose hurt or make her heart act up, and they were pretty to look at.

None of the houses really had any colour in them, and it was always a nice change.

She liked it. She liked it more than she would admit, because she was scared that Six would leave and she would be alone again. And she would never admit that when she hid in that room in that stupid castle, afraid, she didn't want her uncle. She wanted Six.

She wanted him to hold her like she had when her muscles were tensed up, she wanted him to hold her hand when he was speeding, she wanted to him to sit at her bedside longer than until her uncle showed up, because even when her uncle was there, he was there for a few seconds and then taking a call. He never bothered to stay for long, if he bothered to even show up.

But Six had done it. Six had stayed. Over and over, not even because it was his job, just because he cared. It was late out, and they were staying in the middle of a forest at the moment. Six had lit a small campfire where he was cooking, while Claire relaxed in the car with his airpods in, thinking.

It wasn't the same as a record player, but it was close enough.

"Mr. Six?" She mumbled, her voice a bit dry and sore from disuse. He looked up, and Claire could see the bags under his eyes. He handed her a bottle of water without even thinking about it.

“What’s up?” He asked, giving her his full attention.

“Why are you called Six?”

There was a deep intake of breath, and his eyes darted away from her, like he wanted to avoid the question.

“That’s a long story, kid.” He said, and Claire frowned.

“Do you have somewhere to be?” She deadpanned right back at him, and his hands trembled ever slightly as he took deep breaths in and out.

“I had-” He began, only to pause. “I have two brothers.” He corrected. “They’re younger than me. By about 6 years.”

His speaking was shaky and cut off, like he had never spoken any of this out loud before. Claire wouldn’t be surprised if he hadn’t.

“Our Mother left after they were born. I was hard enough to handle, but with two new twin boys, it was too much for her.” He played with the kindling in his hands. “My father claimed he loved my mother. That’s what he always said. That’s why it was our fault she left. He had to make sure we remembered.”

Claire took in a sharp intake of breath. She could see where this was going.

“What are their names?” She asked, curious.

“Colton and Ryland. Well. Colt. He doesn’t like to be called Colton. Never has.” Six smiled. His tone was sweet. He loved them. “I could endure the way he would make us remember.

But they were just kids. They were ok when he was out of the house, when they were at school or he was too drunk to walk, but they couldn't take it. They were just kids." He repeated.

Claire started to tear up. She wiped it away before Six could see.

"They were each others safe place. They'd protect each other when I couldn't." He wasn't looking at her. He wasn't looking at anything. He was trying to look away, from all of this. "Ryland kept eyeing the gun. He kept it in his nightstand. I don't know what he was thinking, when he saw it. But he kept looking at it and I realized it could never be him." His voice choked, an abrupt stop.

"He was holding Colt under water when I shot him. I could have hurt Colt on accident. I came so close, and he was still so frail. But I shot him, 11 times in his back. Colt gasped for air, and I dropped the gun and put him in the closet with some of his items and Ryland while I called 911. I was tried as an adult. First Degree Murder, Child Endangerment, along with several other charges. Ryland and Colt were placed into protective services. I was sent to Prison."

Claire wondered how old Six was. She didn't even know how old he was now. For all he spoke about just being kids, he was just a kid. He had gone through all of that, and she couldn't even escape. He was so much stronger than she could ever be.

"Donald came to offer me a choice when I was 17. I could work for the Sierra Program, and leave prison on the condition I would continue to work for them until I died. It was that or a life sentence."

"And you chose Sierra."

He nods.

"They killed Courtland Gentry, legally. That's my name. It was my name. They gave me a new one. Sierra Six. Because I was the Sixth. And the last."

Claire didn’t know how to even react to something like that.

“The Sierra Program isn’t exciting. It’s not anything you want to hear about, or anything I want to tell you about. What happened there, stays there.”

“Not true.” She bites out. He looks at her, and his eyes are blue but they seem wet, and the thought of a Six that cries is a thought that’s never even crossed Claire’s mind before. “It can’t stay there. Because if it does it means I have to stay there too.”

Six smiles, gently, delicate, fragile, in a way. Six stares at Claire like she’s his whole world.

“You are my one exception.” He offers her, and it is wonderful.

“I’m not calling you Six anymore.” She decides.

“I don’t have another nam-” He starts, and Claire throws the plastic bottle at him. “I am not letting you call me Courtland.” He reprimands her, even though he’s tensed up like she’s got more plastic bottles to throw at him.

“Ew, no.” She says the first thing that comes to mind. He raises an eyebrow. The second thing that comes to mind is; ‘Can I call you Dad?’ But that’s weird, and Claire doesn’t want him to think that she’s weird.

A sausage finishes cooking, and he gives it to her to eat.

“We’re going to go see my brothers. I don’t think they remember me, but-”

“You miss them?”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” He pauses, watching and letting the fire burn out. “Yeah. I miss them a lot.”

He pulls down the chairs so they lay almost entirely flat, and it’s uncomfortable, but Claire makes do by laying mostly on top of him. He says nothing. She is very cold, and it is cold in the night and he is warm.

“Hey Six?” She asks, muttering to the small slip of open air her mouth can reach.

“Thought you weren’t callin me that.” He retorts.

“Can…” She trails off. “Is it ok if I call you Dad?”

A deep intake of breath. Claire worries.

“Sure kid.”

She hugs him tighter as she forces her arms around his ribcage, pretending she wants the warmth. He holds her gently, and she knows his hands are covered in blood, and she has seen him kill, but they cradle her.

“You’re all I’ve got, Dad.” She mutters, and she’s scared. More scared than she’ll let herself admit.

“I will never let anything happen to you.” He says after a period of time, and she drifts off to sleep, slowly, nestled against him, like a baby penguin hiding under it’s father.

Courtland, because he seems to be Courtland again, because not a single soul left seems to be calling him Six, Courtland looks at his daughter with more love than he could ever manage to

explain.

It was the same way he felt when it came to keeping track of Colt or Ryland, but more precious. Courtland had a daughter. She loved him, and he loved her, and he would keep her safe no matter what. He would bring her somewhere safe and she would make tons of friends and she wouldn't be lonely but she would be loved.

Maybe Courtland sees himself in her. Maybe he sees Colt and Ryland. But it doesn't really matter.

What matters to him is his name and the small, breathing being he has tucked against him, that he cherishes more than all of the stars in the sky.

~~

The second time Rocky woke up, it still burned. It felt like he was scrambling outside of Grace's atmosphere again, and he didn't know how to fix it. How did he fix this? He needed to fix it.

And suddenly the burn stopped. The weird thing lifted. Grace. Rocky knew him, even when Rocky didn't know anything.

The footsteps, the smell, the presence, the voice, the looks, the feeling, it was Grace.

"…Grace?" He asks, and his gas bladders hurt, and as Grace frowns and helps him sit up, Rocky remembers he doesn't really have gas bladders anymore, not like he used to. Ryland is supporting him, and Rocky can feel his hands, as Grace guides a cup towards him. On Instinct, one he didn't know he had, Rocky opens his mouth.

A small tube enters, and he sucks on curiosity. He's not sure what's going on. He doesn't know what he's doing. Grace, he stares at Rocky kindly, and he seems alright, and he doesn't look at Rocky like Rocky is something horrific, and he gently relaxes.

It feels different, like his body is not taut, when he does so.

The liquid entering his body is warm, and sweet. The cup is empty, and Grace pulls the cup away. Rocky sticks out his tongue. He has one of those apparently. It's wet and gross. He has eyes too. Like Grace. Not Eridian. Like Grace.

"How… 're… you… feeling?" Someone speaks, and Rocky realizes it's Grace. His voice is the same, but like it was on Mary, many cycles ago.

Rocky doesn't reply, instead opting to stare at Grace, dead in the face, observing him.

His eyes. The weird leaky crevices that Rocky can still 'see' somewhat in his head, but they look so much different.

An arm. A familiar concept. Rocky raises his right arm up, pointing at Grace.

"Colour?" He asks, and his voice is raw. It is exactly how it always has been, but it feels like he has been asleep for many cycles or he is coming out of a healing molt. Grace smiles.

Rocky watches still as the skin on his face is pulled taut and wrinkles in all the right places. It doesn't look creepy, like it did. It looked beautiful. It felt like Adrian stretching after sleeping, or chirping. Rocky tried to mimic the motion.

"My eyes?" Grace asked, and Rocky nodded jerkily. "Blue. They're blue." Rocky stared at him, dead in the face. "Yours seem to be brown. Like your Carapace! And your hair is brown too, and it gets a lot more detailed when it comes to where it looks like you're from, objectively obviously you're still from Erid but there's so many details-" Grace starts talking, and Rocky reaches up to touch his so called hair.

"Talk too much." Rocky replies.

“It’ll involve puppet shows later.” Grace counters, as Rocky learns to run his fingers through his hair.

“Continue talk.” Rocky replies, perked up.

Grace laughs, and Rocky has never been more sure of his best friend.

“This is beige.” Grace says, pointing to the fabric covering Rocky’s legs. “It’s like a mix of white and brown. Shoot, you don’t know what white and brown is.”

“Hair and eyes brown. Grace tell me.” Rocky says, and Grace nods and laughs, and Rocky looks around.

“The lights are dim right now, they’re yellow-ish. Normally they’re bright white. Best for seeing.”

“Human sight require bright bright lights.” Rocky quoted.

“Most of this room is white. Hospitals are generally white because it’s easier to tell when there’s a material on the surface, so you can clean it. Better sterility.”

Rocky glanced around. The abundance of one specific thing lead him to correlate white to… white. It looked blank. Boring. Still interesting. This was what Grace meant when colours were pretty.

“I’ll turn up the lights a little bit. I’m not sure if you can get headaches, it’s all really a big mess right now, but uh, if your head starts to ache.., let me know?” Grace sounded confused. Rocky wasn’t paying attention.

The ‘dim yellow’ turned a bit more white, and Rocky could see more. See further. He could see differences in location and shape, just the same as he normally would, and it was so weird. Taking in more of the room, his eyes land on a figure laying on a matching bed just a few yards away.

“Adrian!” Rocky screams, and jumps, trying to get over to them. Several items were yanked forcefully out of his body, and he collapses on the ground, in lots of pain. A catheter and IV and drip lines lay torn dangling above him.

Grace was by his side in an instant.

“Hey hey hey-” He soothed as Rocky rocked himself back and forth, whimpering. “It’s ok, the pain will fade in a little bit. I’ll try giving you some tylenol. Please don’t explode.” Grace rubs the palms of his hands up and down on Rocky’s forearms, and it’s nice, it distracts from the searing pain in several locations.

He’s gone, for a bit, and Rocky freaks. Gone. Gone. Something about Tylenol. Medication. Tylenol was a popular brand name for american medicine acetaminophen. Painkiller. Rocky liked to chide Grace for calling acetaminophen tylenol even though it was not tylenol because it was an eridian recreation, and not from the U S of A.

He never dropped the habit.

Grace comes back in to vision before Rocky hears him, which is weird. He’s got another glass, and a small white pill.

“Got some more water, you seem to be able to intake it fine. Take this with the water, don’t chug it.”

Rocky did as instructed, and resisted his urges to pour all of it down his throat, it was a lot colder than the water he had originally been given, and it felt great, but Rocky spent a long time watching his leaky space blob friend suffer the consequences of chugging or eating too fast.

It was disgust when Grace did it. Rocky did not repeat behaviors.

Grace sat with him for a few minutes, holding Rocky's hands, as Rocky stared blankly down at the ground, attempting to rationalize his pain. Grace rubbed Rocky's hands, tracing over the indents and outdents that faintly made up the tattooes he had had on his carapace.

Rocky burped after 6 minutes or so, and hiccuped right after that, which caused him to freak out.

Grace laughed.

"What that, question!"

"It's ok! Calm down, It's something the human body does when your body intakes food or fluids. The hiccup is because your diaphragm got offset." Grace explained, exactly like the teacher he was. It was the same lesson he taught Eridian students when he had to stop class to drink water because he couldn't stop hiccuping.

They had thought he was dying, which was a fair assumption, as humans were mostly built to self destruct, it seemed. It had taken an entire trip to space for Grace to realize how poorly built humans were.

Rocky hiccuped again, and drank some more water. Grace guided his chin back so his neck was almost vertical, and he swallowed, the normal fix that worked for Grace. Other than choking himself so he didn't have oxygen, but he figured Rocky wouldn't like that very much.

He calmed down, and the pills seemed to kick in somewhat as the glossy look of pain in Rocky's eyes faded.

He looked down at himself, taking in the small bleeding areas that Grace was gently applying gauze to.

“Human now, question?” He asked.

“Yeah bud. You look human. I mean you’re not, but you sure look it.” Grace said, using the standard human medical recipe for injured leaky spots. Gauze and poorly wrapped tape.

“What mean, question.”

“Hmm? What do you mean? I mean it’s somewhat obvious you appear human- and you seem to be able to able to function as one-”

Rocky cut him off.

“No. What mean not entirely human. Still some part Eridian? Rocky fucked up mess of human and eridian? Rocky monster question? Radiation question? Simon mutation question? Rocky Simon Mutation gross ugly leaky statement?”

He wasn’t hyperventilating, but Grace could see the way his eyes flickered back and forth and all around like he was beginning to panic. Luckily enough, when dealing with a space creature that didn’t breathe the same way, they generally didn’t know how to have a panic attack the same way.

“No, not at all. You’re human appearing, I mean.” Grace said calmly, and giving Rocky direct eye contact with a steady voice. He had freaked out when he first saw Simon, so maybe Rocky was ok. Maybe. “Your blood is made of Mercury, and if you listen to your voice you still sound Eridani. You’re boiling hot still, and you’ve got natural tattoos and inlays of stones, which aren’t human.”

“Rocky see.” Rocky stated.

“I don’t really know what caused this. Adrian is similar, but you’re both ok. Nothing is wrong with you medically.”

“Grace.”

“Yeah bud?”

“Where are we? Not Erid.”

Grace took a deep breath.

“Earth, bud. We’re on Earth.”

Rocky made a long whistling sound.

“Wow. Many wow. Make no sense.” Rocky stood up, and holding onto Grace for support makes his way over to Adrian. Grace mutters something like ‘I feel the same way’ and Rocky stares down at his beloved.

He would recognize them in any lifetime. In any shape, in any form. Always his. Always Adrian.

“Colour?” He asked, pointing at Adrian’s head. Their eyes were closed, and their skin was pale, paler than Grace. White. Not white. Beige.

“Blue. and Purple. Not natural hair colours for humans, but pretty.” Grace watched as Rocky hovered his hand. “You won’t hurt them. It’s ok. They’re just asleep. The meds wore off faster on you.”

“Sleep. Not dead.”

“Yeah bud. I was watching you guys sleep.”

“Good. Adrian dead. No no. Adrian dead Rocky kill himsel-”

Grace slapped a hand over Rocky’s mouth.

“Language!” He hissed, and Rocky astonished in the pain it caused. Weird hurt so much and it didn’t even fracture anything. Rocky opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue to Grace’s palm. Sweaty and yucky. Grace yelped and pulled his hand away, jumping away from Rocky.

There were shouts of ew and also maybe a few hisses of pain, but Grace was dramatic. Human mouth cavity did not cause pain. Grace lick Rocky many times as torture. Very gross.

“Holy fudgers Rock, your spit burns like all fire dude.” Grace complained from across the room.

“Grace dramatics statement.”

Rocky could feel Grace staring at him with a glare. That’s what that had meant. He had read about glares burning before. No wonder Grace could tell Rocky was hearing him when he wasn’t facing Rocky. So weird.

There was a gentle force Rocky knew as Gravity sagging on him, and it hurt, so he let himself bend down, hugging close to Adrian. Their hair was soft. It was a different soft than what he felt before, not the same, but it was nice. So nice.

“Wake up soon?”

“They’ll wake up soon.”

Rocky hummed a low tune. Fear and hope. Rocky didn’t care what he looked like. Where he was. Grace was here. Adrian was here. That was what he needed. As long as they were alive, he was ok. Simon was applicable to each scenario.

Not really, because Rocky did care about him more than he would like to admit. Grace certainly cared about Simon. God damn it, he supposed Simon would end up having to be there too.

“Glad Grace is here.” Rocky told Grace, who’s hand was on his back, rubbing circles. Comforting. It was weird to be a leaky blob. Rocky didn’t mind.

“I’ve never been happier to have you somewhere with me, Rock.” Grace said, and smiled.

~~

Colt was so unbelievably fucked.

Ryland had left some time ago after eating to go up and visit his Rock friends, because they would be upset if they woke up and he wasn’t there. Sure. Whatever. That made sense.

Carl had left on the basis of scoping out wherever they were headed next—whenever Simon and Rocky and Adrian were discharged. The names were ingrained into Colt’s head. He’d only been around his brother for a few days and it felt like the man didn’t even know how to talk about himself.

It wasn’t horrible, and Colt certainly knew how important they were to Ryland. It made them important to Colt. The bigger concern was that Ryland spoke like he was terrified they were

going to be taken away from him.

He'd seen the video logs. Somewhat. Didn't pay much attention. But he knew the other two Hail Mary members were dead. Ryland must have been alone a very long time. Colt was ok being alone. Ok, no he wasn't. He pretended he was.

Colt pretended a lot of things. It was easier to see those things in Ryland than they were in himself. His stupid brother. Late night dreams of an imaginary friend he thought he had made up although it turns out to be a whole other person.

He'd only had Ryland for a few days, but if anything ever happened to him, Colt would probably lose his shit and then hurt himself. He wasn't strong enough to really hurt other people. Stunt work was really deceiving. Nobody tell Jody the muscles were for show.

Well. It's not like he could tell Jody much of anything.

It wasn't really the point in the end, was it?

He could sit here and feel sorry for himself for a long time, but Ryland was gone at the moment, and so was Carl which left Colt with a Simon that seemed to be waking up leaving Colt in a very precarious position.

The hospital gown wasn't great for anything really, and considering Simon had the muscles of someone who was on three tours, and when he wasn't looking at Ryland looked like he had the count of someone on three tours, Colt wasn't sure he could survive an encounter without Ryland.

From the jerky twitches and groans of pain, Colt was going to have to try and improvise at the very least. He didn't think touching Simon in any way would help, but being hidden in the corner of the room probably might cause some fear as well.

He gently brought his chair closer to the bedside and watched dutifully to make sure his heart monitor didn’t beep out—or something. Colt wasn’t really sure what he was supposed to do.

He sat like that, alone with a comatose guy that may or may not be awake until Colt managed to get the nerve to work his phone out of his pocket. He didn’t have many games, aside from Block Blast, Roblox (it was a guilty pleasure. He doesn’t talk about it.) and maybe one or two of the shitty mobile ad games he kept forgetting to delete.

He didn’t want his focus to be entirely gone, so he tapped blockblast, silently cursing when he noticed how low his phone was on battery. He was struck with the thought of the youtube shorts where it had AI generated reddit posts of people pulling the cord to charge their phones, and Colt took a second to sit up and wonder what he was doing with his life.

Carl had a phone charger brought in from earlier, and standing up, Colt disconnected it from the one port, and plugged it into an extension cord closer by. His high score blinked at him from the screen as he tapped new game, and sat there, the ominous sounds of a man groaning in the background being the only music.

Mobile game music had always pissed Colt off. It was extremely fucking annoying, and he wasn’t going to have it.

He lost most of his games. It wasn’t a necessarily hard game, but Colt had always struggled for some reason. Distantly, he wondered if Ryland was good at it. Hopefully not. Ryland would probably tease him.

It took another second for Colt to realize he probably wouldn’t tease him in a way Colt didn’t like. Ryland was his brother. Not Tom Ryder. Colt hadn’t trauma dumped everything onto Ryland, but through everything he did know, Ryland had never once looked at Colt with mocking pity or fake sympathy. Outrage and upset, empathy and the likes, but nothing unkind.

Colt wasn’t sure he had ever met anyone that wasn’t entirely judgemental of every part of him. Even Jody and Dan sometimes judged him for something.

His hands tapped the screen as he resisted the urge to cry. There were so many issues and so many things to deal with, and Colt was sat there, crying about the fact that his stupid twin wasn't going to call him a loser for something pathetic he did.

Colt was too engrossed in his thoughts and feelings to notice the sound of rustling sheets, or to feel the pair of brown eyes boring into his skull as Colt pulled his legs up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. It was a pose that relaxed his back a lot, which had been aggravated the last few days.

Colt wasn't going to complain though. Never. He was silently afraid of what was going to happen to Simon and Ryland, he knew astronauts bones liquified in space or something. That and the skin just came off their body. Unlimited access to the internet had told him so.

"What's that?" A low, grumbly voice asked him, and Colt jumped so hard his chair tipped over, successfully knocking the plug out of the socket, but just barely keeping Colt from cracking his skull open on the tile floor as he gripped the handlebars of Simon's bed, panting for breath.

"Holy fucking shit." Colt cursed.

The air in the room turned tense. Colt could certainly feel the stare now. It felt more like a glare and Colt would absolutely lose if this man decided he was a threat.

"You're not Ryland." Simon gritted out, and his voice was rough. Colt looked up, and realized instinctually that the anger in Simon's eyes was fear. He wasn't upset because he wanted Colt hurt, he was afraid.

Colt blinked twice, before springing into action.

"No, uh no." He reached over for the water pitcher they had left in the room as Ryland got thirsty easily, and the cup Simon had been using before. "Sorry, you were pretty out of it when we met the first time. I'm uh, Colt. Colton. Call me Colt."

He offered Simon the glass of water, which was snatched out of his hand like any lingering contact would cause extreme irritation and rot to come over Simon. He accepted it greedily, swallowing it down quicker. Colt watched, and as Simon finished, he offered some more water. Simon accepted that too.

“You done-” Colt started, but was cut off.

“Where’s Ryland? Who are you.” Simon repeated, with an even more harsh tone, but all Colt could see was a cat scrunched up. He was really cute. Not in the same way Ryland probably considered him cute, but in the way that Colt found stray cats that he wanted to pet cute.

“Ryland’s upstairs, he just left for a little bit to go see your friends Rocky and Adrian.” Colt spoke slowly, like he was talking to a small child. He hoped it didn’t come off demeaning. “I’m uh, Ryland’s twin. It’s a new thing.”

“Twins come together at birth. You can’t just be a new thing.” Simon snarled.

Colt snorted. Simon glared.

“Sorry, sorry. You’re right. It’s new as in, we were seperated when we were young and only recently did we realize each other existed.”

Simon seemed to accept it, if nothing else, but was still glaring daggers, and backing himself up to the corner of his bed.

“Where are we?” He asked. Colt debated his answer.

“I think you might want to discuss that with Ry? No diss, I just don’t want to freak you out considering we met like 8 hours ago or something? Time isn’t real here- not the point.” He cursed himself. He picked up his phone, plugging it back in quietly. “You wanted to see this?” He asked.

Simon changed the focus of his eyes from Colt to the phone, watching him carefully as he moved closer to show Simon.

“Is it a bomb?” He asked first.

Colt laughed again. Simon’s frown deepened.

“Sorry, I guess they didn’t have phones on the Mary, or Erid- whatever. It’s a phone. Short for cellphone, which is short for cellular phone. They connect to cell towers to get signal to do shit, I guess.” Colt explained, and Simon stared at him like he was insane. “I was playing a game on it, when you woke up.”

“I saw the colours. Like tetris.” Simon deadpanned.

Colt lit up.

“You know Tetris! Yes, it’s pretty similar to that. It’s called block blast, it’s a really stupid endless game where you try and rack up points.” Colt said, and put in his passcode to give the phone to Simon. “You can try if you want.”

Simon stared at it like Colt was insane.

“I like tetris.” He mumbled, and gently used one finger to poke the resume game button.

“Sorry, you can ignore that. It’s my game, but like I said, it’s infinite, so it doesn’t really matter.”

Simon nodded quietly, not speaking more. He got the concept quick, which was probably because it wasn’t a very abstract concept. Colt gently eased himself closer over time,

watching Simon do far better at the game than he ever had, until Colt could peer over his shoulder, and worked up the courage to mumble some ideas on what to do next.

Simon didn't accept any of his ideas, but he hadn't punched Colt yet, which was a good sign! Great. If this went great then Colt could have a brother and a brother in law, and whatever the fucked up rock space aliens counted as. He was getting more friends by the day!

He wondered what Carl counted as. Were they friends?

"You're thinking too loud." Simon said, and it was more relaxed than anything he had said before, and Colt startled up, lost in thought, and Simon jerked away, clutching the phone like a weapon.

"Sorry-" Colt started.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. I forgot you weren't Ryland. I'm sorry." Simon said, and Colt furrowed his brow. Throw out the theory of the guy having served three tours, he looked like Colt was going to stab him for saying something completely normal.

"Hey it's-" He broke off, confused. Simon looked teary-eyed. "It's ok. I'm similar enough to Ryland. I know he's important to you." He comforted Simon, from a distance. God, he wondered how tired he must be. "Do you want to try laying down? I don't know if you're in pain, but I can get you some meds? I can't leave you here, but if you go to sleep I can go find Ryland and he can be here when you wake up."

The vulnerability in Simon was gone, as quickly as it had appeared.

"You're going to kill me in my sleep." He said. "You're C.O.I and you created some fucked up clone of Ryland as punishment for me to torment me and as soon as I fall asleep you're going to torture me. I'm not going back to the fucking ocean-" He began to scream, and Colt just stared.

Colt heard footsteps running down the hallway, and Ryland came in, clutching his midsection, staring, wide-eyed and afraid, looking back and forth between Colt and Simon. Simon was sobbing. Colt felt really bad. Was it because of the block blast?

“Simon- Hey, Si-” Ryland was by Simon’s side in an instant, and Colt eased closer too as Simon’s attention turned all the way to Ryland, clutching him like the world’s dying sun. “I’m ok. You’re ok. I’m sorry for being gone. This is Colt, he’s not C.O.I. He won’t hurt you. He hasn’t hurt me.”

Colt eased the phone out of Simon’s bed, and hit the button for morphine. It had worked to calm him down somewhat the only other time he had been awake, and a high Simon was much better than a screaming Simon.

“Why ‘re you hurt then?” Simon demanded. “Why am I hurt?” Simon held Ryland and Ryland held Simon. “It hurts, Angel.”

“We went through some bad things on our way here, and both of our bodies are adjusting to it. It’ll go away in a bit. The more sleep you get, the better it’ll feel. Colt didn’t hurt us. Everyone here is just like the Eridian doctors.”

Simon nodded, and the meds must have been kicking in, and Ryland held him until his sniffling stopped, his arm went limp and his breathing evened out. Ryland gave him a forehead kiss as he gently tucked him in again, as much as he could fix the rumpled bed sheets.

He turned to Colt, who was staring at Ryland with wide-eyes, even though he could barely feel them himself.

Ryland opened his arms, and smiled gently at Colt.

Colt was moving forward before he could process it.

He gripped Ryland tight. Ryland gripped him back.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know what to do-”

Ryland shushed him quietly, and swayed back and forth. Colt wondered how the pressure was feeling for him.

“None of that was your fault. He’s easily frightened. He’s been through a lot. You couldn’t have known.” Ryland explained. Colt nodded into his shoulder. “It’s ok. He’s ok. You’re ok. Nothing went wrong.”

Colt pulled away after a bit, gathering his composure. He watched Ryland yawn. He closed his eyes for a moment, and a young voice and blurry memories flashed through his mind.

“Did you know yawns are the most contagious thing in the world?” He asked Ryland. Ryland paused, and looked at him. They were having a moment.

“I taught you that.” Ryland said.

The moment lasted a long time.

Carl was sure to return soon, and Colt knew that soon enough they’d likely discharge all of them and send them to wherever home was now.

Ryland crawled into bed, the small thing. He left the blankets open and stared at Colt.

“You want me to cuddle with you?” He asked, confused.

Ryland glared.

“We shared a womb, I get cold easily, and you’ve seen the state my normal cuddle partner is in.” He said, and Colt giggled, the kind of laugh when you’re too tired to really comprehend much. He hugged Ryland, as the much softer bed greeted him. They had been giving Ryland all the good stuff the whole time.

It felt normal. They probably cuddled a lot as kids. Colt went to sleep hugging himself most nights. He upgraded to pillows when they were cold enough.

They felt like Ryland.

He had always wondered why he had that habit.

~~

Courtland Gentry held his daughter close to him. As close as he could get her. She was sleeping on his chest, and he was worried she was going to be too cold. He ran hot, he knew that, and the truck maintained heat well, it certainly wasn’t freezing, but his mind ran through what if scenarios.

He subconciously tightened his grip on her. He had never supposed to be this attached.

They had decided on a place of residency, semi-permanant, yesterday. Court would make his way out there as soon as Claire woke up.

She and Ryland would get along.

He closed his eyes, and he felt 11 again, with Colt on one side and Ry on the other, huddling close to him under threadbare sheets. It wasn’t true, and they weren’t there, and Claire wasn’t them, but it was just as pleasant.

He was so close to having everything he had ever wanted.

~~

Adrian woke up to a pressure on their chest. Abnormal. Rocky didn't fit on top of Adrian, due to the jagged peaks of their carapace. He would slot beside them, but never on top.

Opening eyes—they found that to be new. Adrian did not have eyes. They found dim lighting, very dim. Using observational skills and logic, they concluded very first off, they felt human. 4 limbs, they could feel. Two bottom, two top. Grace's anatomy.

They couldn't feel their gas bags, but moving to stretch their head, further proving their current train of thought, they could feel voice strings. Letting out a few chords, it was concluded they could make their regular speech, simply differently.

Opening their mouth, it was dry and gross and cracky, all very displeasant feelings. It was subsequentially filled with hair, or Adrian's best approxiamation of it, as their eyes drifted down to what was covering them.

Rocky.

Adrian took less than a minute to gather all of this evidence and realize it was Rocky. The slopes of their nose, their tattoos and inlays, Adrian's inlays, this was their mate.

Rocky let out a happy purr, and settled into Adrian further, their face laid across Adrian's chest as they dangled half off of the bed. Adrian could see a small earth-ish camera pointed at them.

Grace was watching them sleep.

Using the little power they had, Adrian shift to hold Rocky, remembering and mimicking the way Grace did it. Tucked up next to them, Their mate finally safe and happy, Adrian went back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos and Comments Appreciated!

Join my server if you feel so inclined!

Chapter 6: Kamera

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Simon woke up with a raging headache. The lights burned. He barely thought he had ever known pain quite like it. He wouldn't be surprised if he didn't.

The bed was different. Not like Mary's beds, or the bed he shared with Ryland. Where was he?

Shifting himself back and forth he wiggled up the mattress, gradually remembering small things. Blank room, whiteboard with Ryland's handwriting. A man that looked like him. Another human. He had a portable bomb. It played weird tetris.

He remembered pain. He remebered Ryland not being there. The C.O.I must have finally come back to get him. He needed to suffer for what he had done anyway. His eyes adjusted slowly. He looked around. There was a bed next to his. There was an I.V. in his arm. He didn't feel great.

Squinting at the bed, he could make out Ryland. Twice. Not Ryland and Ryland. He remembered the other man, C- something had introduced himself. They were cuddling. Simon felt jealous. Angry.

He forced himself out of bed, taking into note the third member of whatever the hell was happening sleeping on a mattress on the ground. He didn't look anything like Ryland. Who the hell was this?

Was he hallucinating again?

Every step he took hurt like hell. He moved the few feet from bed to bed, looming over Ryland and the other one. The other one woke up first, jumping at Simon's presence, and then shaking Ryland awake.

Ryland blinked blearily, recognizing Simon and smiling fondly, and Simon melted. His angel. His Grace. Ryland reached out, cupping Simon's cheek until he seemingly processed his thoughts, blinked again, and sat up.

"You're out of bed." He said, and the other one looked uncomfortable, trying to sink into the sheets. He looked exhausted. Ryland slipped out of the bed, and Simon felt a small victory.

"Yes." Simon replied.

The other one groaned, and Ryland glanced at him, frowning.

"Go to sleep, Colt. It's ok."

"Coldddd…" The other one groaned. Simon scowled. It took Ryland a second to process that Simon was still in the hospital gown from before, and Simon did realize that his ass was simply open. It was disgusting. Who had designed this?

Ryland went bright red.

"Good morning starlight." He said, smiling. "Let's get you some clothes, yeah?" He said, and pushed open a door in the back of the room, leading to somewhere dark. Simon didn't like that. Ryland bent down and shuffled through a box near the glass door, leading out to a hallway that looked like something out of a movie.

Grey sweater, green cargo pants… Simon listed off as Ryland picked stuff out. Boxers. Ryland paused to sniff himself and take a step back before grabbing a plain black shirt and sweatpants. Which was not that different from what he was currently wearing, but Simon wasn't going to complain.

He slipped into the dark room before Simon did, who was still paused outside it’s entrance wearily.

“It’s just a bathroom, Si. It’s ok.” He said, and Simon followed.

It was completely tiled, and weird in the bathroom. Nothing like any of the bathrooms on Erid. Simon didn’t like it.

“Do you want to shower? You don’t have any open wounds, so as long as you feel comfortable-” Ryland said, but Simon was already ripping the IV out of his arm. Ryland hissed, muttering a quiet careful, grabbing a tissue from the sink and applying it. He took the needle and dropped it in a bright red tub with death signs on it. Ominous.

The bleeding stopped after a moment, and when Simon didn’t immediately pass out, Ryland relaxed.

“Ok. Cool. Sorry. You’re not in great shape.”

“Have you looked in a mirror?” Simon teased, letting the corners of his eyes crinkle. His Ryland. Same as ever. His lover. Ryland raised an eyebrow.

“Ok, nevermind. You lose shower privledges. I’m going to shower and you will get to wear the new clothes and watch me-” Ryland teased, and it was docile. Domestic. A word Ryland had taught him. He liked it.

They weren’t on Erid, clearly. But wherever they were, Ryland felt at home. Safe. Simon did too, somewhat.

Ryland tossed the flimsy sheet covering Simon into a different can, presumably for trash. Simon stared at the array of handles and the seat and all the liquids. He yanked on the handle, and it did nothing except cause him to fall backwards.

Normally it wasn’t a big deal, but Simon felt light and he didn’t know what was happening and it was so close and he would die-

Ryland grabbed him by the shoulders, letting out a breath and putting the seat down. He turned the knob.

A giant splash of cold water hit Simon in the face.

“That’s what you get for almost dying not even 10 minutes out of bed.” Simon stared at him, soaking, cold, and wet. Ryland went red, before proceeding to strip the rest of his clothes off and making sure he took his glasses off.

“It’s cold.” Simon said, and his tongue felt dead heavy in his mouth. Ryland hummed.

“You can turn the handle, see. Different. Not like Erid’s, but I prefer this type.” The water warmed up. Ryland poured out one of the liquids on the wall onto his hands, scrubbing it under his armpits and pecs, anywhere else maybe necessary. Simon stared at it. It was a dark blue colour. “Shampoo.”

Simon frowned. He had never seen shampoo like that.

On Eden, Shampoo was a small brick reserved for the rich, and whatever was left trickled down. Hardly anything. On Erid, Shampoo was a clear liquid that smelled faintly of something Ryland called lemongrass.

It was not blue, and it did not smell as pleasant as whatever that was.

“I’m using it as bodywash. It’s safe.” Ryland said, and Simon could see that. He gave him a blank stare and let his eyes roam Ryland’s body slowly as if taking it in.

He looked good. Ryland always looked good.

Simon poured out some of the shampoo onto his hand. It pooled there, bubbling only slightly. He looked at it, and then at Ryland, who didn't seem to know what Simon was doing before Simon dropped it on the top of his head.

Some of it fell into his eyes and Ryland closed them immediately, letting out noises of pain. Simon freaked out a completely normal amount.

"Burns…" Ryland squealed, scrubbing his face and opening his eyes under the stream of water.

"Are you ok? I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's ok, don't worry. Happens to me even without you." Ryland said, and the high notes in his voice still weren't gone, but he didn't seem to be in as much pain. Simon rested his head on the top of Ryland's shoulder. "Earth shampoo burns your eyes. Not sure what they did on Erid to make it not do that. I keep forgetting."

"Earth Shampoo?" Simon mutters from where his mouth is pressed against Ryland's shoulder. Ryland hauls him up, and puts shampoo in his hair. It smells good.

"That's a conversation for after this. I'll get you some food and we can talk. Everything is ok." Ryland reassured, knowing that Simon would be freaking out by now about the fact that more than likely something had the potential to be wrong.

"Ok." Simon said.

Ryland smiled at him, and gently kissed him on the mouth. Simon had no reason to be with someone as wonderful as Ryland.

Simon let Ryland put conditioner in his hair, and Simon scrubbed himself down while Ryland double checked he didn't smell like body odor anymore.

He grazed over a spot with the shampoo-body wash that made him hiss in pain on his hip.

"You ok?" Ryland asked from where he was stood, out of the shower, drying his hair.

"I'm fine. Just a graze or something."

Ryland smiled, looking back to the mirror.

"Pity. Would have thought I needed to kiss it better." He teased as Simon repeated Ryland's motions to turn the shower off. He paused.

"No, wait."

"Hmm?"

"It hurts very badly. I was confused." Simon deadpanned, staring dead at Ryland who was grinning to himself in the mirror. He smiled back, all teeth in a terrifying way. He was glad he couldn't see himself in the mirror. What a freak he was-

Ryland was on his knees, pressing gentle kisses to the side of Simon's hip, kissing his way up to his mouth when Simon realized. Oh.

Ryland loved him. Simon grabbed Ryland and kissed him. Ryland melted into it.

"I'm glad you're awake. I missed you." He said when they pulled apart, and Simon didn't know he ever stood more than 10 feet away.

They got dressed slowly, and Ryland helped Simon even though Simon was sure he could do it himself. Ryland was more likely to manage to get himself injured by working himself up so much.

Ryland tied Simon's hair up into a small bun after drying it somewhat, and Simon took in his appearance in the clothes. He looked good. His ass wasn't out, for one.

They were soft. Warm. Simon liked the green. Colour of nature. The grey matched him. It smelled good too. It was bright outside, when Ryland opened the door again. Colder.

The warm water of the shower had probably done that.

The other two men in the room remained asleep, Colt snoring. Ryland smiled fondly at them, before holding the glass door open for Simon. It was loud.

That was Simon's first thought, stepping out.

It reminded him of Eden, but if Eden was far more clean, and as it was in the early days after the quiet rapture. Calm. Cold. Alive.

Some people paused to stop and stare at Ryland, and Simon noticed several men with guns. Not good. Not good at all. Ryland paid them no mind.

"I'm going to take you to the cafeteria, and so the food is probably going to suck. Don't develop an opinion on it just yet, I'm sure we can get better stuff soon. You're probably starving."

It was an accurate thought. Simon was hungry beyond belief. The look on Ryland's face told Simon that he already knew. Simon tilted his lips upward slightly.

It was almost as freezing as his birthplace, Simon realized. He really hoped that somehow, Ryland hadn't gotten them to Eden. It wasn't necessarily that. He knew Ryland wouldn't be this calm on Eden, let alone Rocky or Adrian, but maybe if the father got to him while he was asleep-

Ryland grabbed his hand, and held it tight. It was warm, and Simon was reminded that Ryland trusted him. That Ryland knew him, better than anyone else ever had. He wouldn't be stupid enough to fall for some bullshit, Ryland was smarter than anyone in Eden, smarter than even the C.O.I.

Ryland paused outside a set of stairs that seemed too daunting for Simon to even manage the energy to climb, before shaking his head like that was a crazy idea. He pulled his hand out of Simon's squeezing it twice in gentle confirmation, before leaving to grab the attention of the nearest person.

It was a girl. Presumably. Simon admittedly had never really grasped the concept of people in general. Long time disassociation and depersonalization, Ryland had called it. Out of everyone he knew, they weren't allowed to be human long enough to be see as anything special or important.

People on earth were strict about it. Some people were. Some people didn't care. Eridians weren't that different, Ryland had said. Simon blinked slowly and he could hear Ryland talking to the girl, and Simon wondered if they would be mad at him for calling them a girl. He frowned.

So many people.

What had Ryland and the Eridians done now? He was trying his best to keep it together, but every new thing he saw freaked him out. Ryland. Ryland. He was ok. The world revolved around Ryland. Ryland and Adrian and Rocky and occasionally Simon. As long as he was by one of them he was fine.

Simon stumbled backwards, realizing he wasn't hearing right and he couldn't be sure if Ryland was talking or not, and he didn't even know that woman, and Ryland was smart but what if Simon had let the eel get him, and this was all a hallucination? What if Ryland needed to be saved?

Simon had to save him.

His foot hit the back of the wall, and the force of it sent Simon’s head back, making a cracking sound. It hurt. Simon reached up to touch his head, checking for blood. If there was blood he was alive. If there was blood he was alive.

His hands shook, and distant thumps. Someone gripping his shoulders. He pulled his hand back. No blood. He blinked, his vision going in and out of colour, but seeing Ryland in front of him.

“Rylan..” He said, before curling over, and someone else was next to him holding a blue bag as he retched into it, serving mostly spit and fluid, nothing solid. He paused, and Ryland was on his knees next to Simon as he sank down, rubbing his back. Simon threw up one more time and his vision cleared, and he could feel how his stomach burned and his body ached and was shaking all over.

“Hey, I’m right here. You’re ok.”

“Where are we, Ryland?” Simon asked, sniffling. Ryland thumbed the tears off his cheeks, staring at him.

The person holding the bag seemed to walk away, and someone else handed Ryland a small bottle of.. what was supposed to be water he supposed.

“I wanted to talk about this with you somewhere not in the hallway…” Ryland said gently, unscrewing the cap as it made a snapping noise. Simon flinched. Ryland reached out on instinct, making eye contact, offering the bottle to Simon. “Slowly. If you chug it you’ll throw up again.”

Simon did as he was told. It tasted like chemicals. It tasted stale somehow. He made a face, and Ryland smiled.

“Welcome to earth, Stardust. We’re pretty far from my home, but we’re home.”

Simon processed the words slowly as the water slid down his throat. It didn’t make sense. None of this made any sense. Ryland’s eyes were bright blue. So blue. He hadn’t looked like that in years.

Oh. Simon had died.

For real this time. He remembered. How stupid. It was Ryland that had memory issues, not him. Yet here he was, somewhere on EARTH, of all places, remembering a lifetime of being loved. He remembered so many things. Was this death? He looked up at Ryland, brown eyes wide and curious. Ryland’s smile twitched, and he sighed dramatically.

“No, you’re not dead right now. Very alive.” Ryland reassured him, and Simon believed him. If nothing else, Ryland would never lie to him. Not Simon. “You feeling ok to stand up? I’ve got a keycard for the elevator, so we don’t have to hike the stairs.”

“Yeah.” Simon said, and Ryland held onto him firmly even as Simon stood up with minimal to no shaking.

“There’s plenty of treats waiting for you if you can make it with me.” Ryland said, as if Simon needed a bribe to follow Ryland ever. It wasn’t like he would necessarily turn down treats that Ryland gave him anyway.

He wondered if they had fresh fruit, if they really were on Earth. The Eridians had synthesized fruit, sure, but Ryland told him it was nothing like Earth fruit. Different, new genes and strands. Simon wanted to have a mango. They were Ryland’s favourite. He had seen images. They had apples, or something like them on Eden, but for the rich, and they were not red or green like the images.

Simon’s one true love had the potential to be any number of real fruits from Earth.

The elevator stopped and Ryland paused to read a sign, in a language Simon didn't know, before pointing to the left and heading that way, Simon in tow.

He opened double doors to what Simon could only describe as the most beautiful view he had ever seen. The sun filtered through floor to ceiling to windows, and something white drifted from the sky- snow, his mind supplied- and a tree- evergreen, Simon knew that, tons of them outside a park.

"Want to pick where to sit?" Ryland offered, and Simon was already walking towards a table with soft seats surrounding it in a circular shape. It looked soft. "I'll be right back. I'm just going to get food." Ryland said, and Simon wasn't paying attention.

A tree.

A real earth tree. Right outside the window. He was baffled. How…

Whatever miracle had brought him here; he wasn't giving it back. Erid was great, but a tree. And snow. Simon had never seen snow before. It was so white. It looked soft. It was cold. Simon knew snow was cold.

How cold? Did it taste good?

Snowflakes hit the glass of the window and pattered down, turning into water. Simon knew how it worked. Of course he did. He wasn't stupid. But it was so amazing. One second it was a bright white dot and the next it was a little raindrop falling down.

Simon watched them race. He wondered if people put bets on raindrops. Earth humans gambled a lot. Simon saw images of Las Vegas. Las Dystopia, as Ryland called it. It didn't look very appealing.

They probably did.

Simon had favourites. Maybe it was unfair to the other snowflakes, but he was very particular. Some of them were unfair cheaters. Nobody liked cheaters.

There was a loud sound as Ryland slid a tray onto the table and paused, his sweatpants caught underneath the bottom of a metal chair foot, and he was shaking it to get free, progressively turning more red.

Simon raised an eyebrow. Yanking himself free, Ryland tumbled into the cushion across from Simon. Taking a deep breath and patting himself on the lap, he settled down, grinning like he had been born anew.

“So it turns out Carl has probably been purposefully getting me the shitty food so I don’t startle my body too much with the drastic diet changes. The good thing is that you are probably going to be in for the long haul regardless, so I gathered what I could.” Ryland explains, sorting all his foods and plates off into specific sections, worrying his bottom lip like he did when he was concentrating.

He took pancakes that were the size of Simon’s hand, stacked them, and put what Simon assumed were Gosberries on the top; they looked like gosberries but they didn’t, and Simon knew they were called something else but he couldn’t remember no matter how hard he tried. There was a small plastic packet of something Simon most definitely had never seen before, and he didn’t like the way it dribbled over the berries and the pancakes.

But Ryland was grinning from ear to ear like a madman, and he slid the plate over to Simon slowly.

“Blueberries! We didn’t have them on Erid. I don’t like them personally, but they taste good in pancakes!”

Simon stared skeptically at them, gently reaching for the fork and knife on the tray.

“The yellow liquid?”

“Maple syrup!”

“Like. From the tree.” Simon clarified. He liked maple trees. They made a lot of sap.

“Yuppers! It tastes really sweet.”

Ryland was staring at him with eyes so big and desperate he looked like he would die if Simon didn’t try eating soon.

He cut a thin slice off the top pancake, putting a blueberry on it.

“Don’t gorge yourself or you’ll get sick.” Ryland warned.

“Fat chance.” Simon muttered under his breath as he stabbed it and moved it towards his mouth.

It took him 3 seconds to process the taste.

“Fat chance-” He repeated, with amazement in his voice. Holy fucking shit. This was the best thing he had ever had in any of his many lifetimes. “Holy fucking shit.” He said outloud, it was the only thing inside his head. He couldn’t move to cut the next bit faster.

“Simon.” Ryland reprimanded, and Simon looked up like a kicked puppy. “Slowly. You still have more food. Don’t ruin your appetite.”

Simon had never been more grateful for whatever the eel had done to him. He had spent a long time upset over how much food he had to eat to feel full, Ryland might have been rich

but it was still so much, Simon was sure he was just greedy.

He tried to hide the fact that Ryland-sized portions weren't enough. It lasted about 2 days before the stupid fucking arm bot had turned him in. Ryland cooked 10 burgers and watched Simon eat 4 before he got too full.

He wasn't even mad. He didn't even seem remotely upset, pushed aside the fact that Simon had tried to hide it.

Ryland had a small appetite, he said. Learned over time from the journey to Erid, but it had never been very big. Simon's metabolism was high.

Simon was so grateful.

He only got scolded 3 times by Ryland over the course of the pancakes, burping grossly at the end. Ryland threw a fit like he smelled. Simon scowled. He was so dramatic.

He noticed that Ryland himself was poking at some eggs (way whiter than Eridian eggs) and what was likely not sausag-mes but looked like them. He was too focused on Simon.

Simon noticed the banana, and used it to point at Ryland's food.

"Your turn. Eat. You'll get sick with no food." Simon flipped the tables.

Ryland grinned as he noticed Simon hold the banana, shoving some eggs in his mouth, talking with his mouth full like a freak.

"Oh, are you trying a banan…uh?" Ryland trailed off as Simon used his teeth to rip the skin off the banana and get to what he assumed was the good part. Ryland was staring at him like he was insane.

Simon blinked.

Ryland gently picked up the banana from Simon’s hands, grabbed the weird thing on the bottom and pulled it, watching as several of the sides fell down.

That was real?

“I thought they did that for movies? To make it look cooler.” Simon said as Ryland offered the peeled banana back.

“I don’t think the skin is even edible, Simon. What the fudge.”

“It didn’t taste good.”

“Tickle my toes and colour me surprised.” Ryland said.

It was Simon’s turn to stare at him like he was crazy.

“What?” Simon sounded affronted.

“Colt says it a lot.” No apology included. Ok.

If there was any anxiety left in Simon’s food pleased mind this was a hallucination or created by the eel or the father, it was not.

None of those people would be remotely deranged enough to form the sentence ‘tickle my toes and colour me surprised.’

He took a bite of the banana.

It was soft. So soft. Squishy too. He thought it might be slimy, they looked slimy in photos, but it was sweet and so… flavoured. Simon had no words for it. He didn't have to force his teeth through it, either.

It was a shock when he didn't have to tear any food with his teeth and mash it to try and swallow on Erid, ration bars were a bitch, but this was nothing compared to it. It just melted. It stayed solid and melted in his mouth and his tastebuds sang.

"You like it?" Ryland asked, and Simon nodded viciously. He did, in fact, like it. Were all fruits this good? No wonder Ryland raved about them. Simon noticed Ryland staring and the lack of another banana on the tray. Glancing over Ryland's shoulder he could see an empty basket some hundred feet away.

He used his finger to twist the skin further down, and offered it up to Ryland. He grinned and bit it out of Simon's hand.

Then he started crying.

He knew Ryland had missed Earth. He knew Ryland would never say that he wanted to go home or that he missed home or that Simon wasn't enough, the biodome and Rocky weren't enough, but Simon knew it was true.

He'd bring it up if it had ever been viable. But it wasn't. So Simon did what he could and made himself available. He'd cry in the mornings and lash out at night. That was ok.

He was just as scared and lonely as Simon.

Simon had never known more to miss.

Ryland had.

Simon understood anyway.

“Don’t cry, Ry.” Simon soothed. “You’re home.” Ryland sniffled and scooted his way around the arch of the booth to sit next to Simon.

“I’m so glad you’re here. This is my dream. I’m so happy.” Ryland sobbed. He cried when he got too happy. He cried a lot. Simon didn’t mind. It was cute, in his opinion.

“I know, angel. You’re having so much fun, aren’t you?” He asked, wishing he had his prosthetic so he could run it through Ryland’s hair.

“Yeah. Got us a house next to a forest. I can’t wait for you to see it.”

A forest.

A real forest.

Those were real. Simon was real and so was Ryland and the trees were finally right there.

“Do you want to try this bweeuh-nooh with me?” Simon asked, Ryland closing his eyes on Simon’s shoulder as Simon finished his banana and reached for an orange and white box.

“Yes.” Ryland giggled, wet tears still staining his face. “It’s pronounced bueno. bweh-no.”

The fuck was up with that, Simon wondered. Weird ass name.

“These are the ones without the wafer, so they’re infinitely better than the other kind.” He reached out and opened the box, pulling one out. It read Kinder in big letters, and Ryland unwrapped that too, handing it to Simon.

Simon took it, letting the cold sweet touch his tongue.

Everything was better than the last. He wasn’t even sure how that was possible. He whimpered embarassingly loudly until he realized there were still more in the box and he was allowed to have them.

“What is this made out of?” Simon asked, relishing as the flavour soaked into his mouth.

“Chocolate! Milk Chocolate on the outside and White Chocolate on the inside.”

“This is chocolate?” Simon asked, emphasis on the this. He had never had it before, obviously, but old people would rave about it constantly on Eden. Ryland did too, sometimes.

As with most things, Simon had to admit, he never really assumed it was that good. Nostalgia did a lot of things to people. Ryland liked to talk about things from earth a lot, and he missed them tons, Simon assumed he had been overexaggerating.

He was so wrong.

It was so good.

What else had he misassumed?

Ryland kept crying as he had some of the bueno too.

Simon felt ecstatic eating this for the first time, he never wanted to stop. Logically he knew eating the same thing everyday made him sick, Ryland spent a long time devolving into the fact that Eden's population probably wasn't stable because of this, it would only make you more and more sick with horrible side affects-

He still wanted it every day.

How had Ryland even survived without this for decades of his life?

Simon stared out the window as he crunched the chocolate between his molars, watching the snow fall faster and come down harshly.

"We're in the middle of winter right now. End of December, or nearing it. I don't think it makes much of a difference considering how far north on the equator we are, but it's normal for this time of year anyay."

"Are we in America?" Simon asked.

Ryland had taught him a lot of stuff about Earth, but it was hard to remember. It never made much sense, and it wasn't like Ryland was a geographics teacher, nor could Simon simply go outside and experience it.

They had seasons on Erid, but Ryland would never call them the same as Earth seasons. It really just wasn't comparable. They used a different calendar year from EID or IMC, or even the standard Ceasarean year.

"No, Switzerland."

The name didn't immediately ring any bells in Simon's mind.

“Part of Europe. Cool Country, infamous for not taking any political sides in either of the world wars.” Ryland rambled.

“Can we go outside?” Simon asked, terrified.

Ryland frowned.

“I want to say yes, but I worry about your health.” He started, worrying his bottom lip between his lips. “You just woke up and you’ve never been in snow before or this climate, and I’m already kind of breaking doctors orders by feeding you all this-”

He started nervously laughing and Simon’s eyes locked on to two moving blobs a few levels down and in the outdoor clearing, naked and tripping in the snow.

“Uhm..” Simon started and Ryland was still talking about possible negative side effects but Simon knew those people, somehow. “Ryland.” He said once. Ryland didn’t look up. “Ryland look outside.” Simon raised his voice, and Ryland’s head snapped up, following Simon’s line of sight.

His vision was way worse than Simon’s, and he affixed his glasses to his face before squinting and losing it.

Definitely Rocky and Adrian then.

“Gosh freaking darn it, I leave them alone for 12 hours and they escape? Good golly-” He started, picking up the glass of orange juice, easy enough to identify after Ryland had opened up the carton and dumped it inside the cup.

He downed it, started choking as Simon hit him on the back to make sure he didn’t die, and shoved everything else he could in his pockets, mostly composed of packets with bright colours and unnatural shapes.

Simon put the rest of the bueno in his pocket. Rocky and Adrian would probably be fine if he took a bit of extra time.

Ryland squeezed past Simon, going to run before making a squeaking sound and grabbing his calves.

He was also out of breath. Simon was so in love with this man.

“Let’s- let’s power walk to them.” Ryland declared, voice still concerningly high pitched.

“Running not in the picture for you, Angel?” Simon smirked.

“Shut up-” Ryland told him as Simon squeezed his hand, feeling out his muscles.

It was a bad idea. Simon was the king of bad ideas.

He’d spent a lifetime doing it as Ryland got older and his bones got weaker than Simon’s did, grabbing Ryland by the waist, twisting him over his shoulders until he was bent over his left shoulder stomach down.

Unsurprisingly, he squirmed.

“Stay still or you’ll fall. I don’t have a prosthetic at the moment.” Simon reprimanded him this time as Ryland whined in his ear.

Everyone in the cafeteria was staring at them now.

Ryland sighed, going limp. Simon, powered by his several week long nap and the fuel of European chocolate jogged out of the cafeteria, and called the elevator the same way he saw Ryland do it.

It took a few seconds for the doors to open, and Simon jumped in surprise as it pinged, seemingly paying more attention to all of the details, at least more so than he had been before, if any of it was to explain his jumpy behavior.

Ryland laid there limp as Simon pushed the button twice, and once more with more aggression before choosing to speak up. With some difficulty he grabbed the pass from his pocket, tapping it against the sensor on the wall.

“You need a ID or it won’t let you move floors.”

“Stupid bullshit.” Simon muttered, his leg twitching as the elevator doors shut and they slowly descended.

“People like to raid hospitals a lot.”

“I thought Earth had plenty of medicine and shit?” Simon asked, confused.

“Yeah, people just like to steal it so they can get high and whatever. Addictions are a pain.”

Simon hadn’t even been on Earth a singular day and he was learning so many stupid things about Earth he hadn’t learned in decades.

“That’s fucking unsafe.” He cursed.

“Which is why there’s keycards.”

Simon grunted in response as the doors slowly opened, revealing a horde of people, all dressed in various forms of scrubs or hospital equipment, it reminded him of House MD. Ryland had banned it after a few months because Rocky would take his cane and start roleplaying and beating the shit out of Simon and Ryland's shins, but Simon would pull it up when Ryland was at the lab for them to watch.

He knew that Ryland knew, when he had come home early or Simon could see him out the window far down on the beach, but he never got in any trouble for it.

It was a learned process to unlearn the fear of doing things wrong.

'Not really such thing as doing anything wrong' Ryland had said. 'We're human. It's all we can do to make mistakes.'

Ryland forgave everything. Simon cried about that more than he would admit. The intial murder attempts, the shows, teaching Rocky to curse, what he had done on Filament, how he had condemned Ava, everything.

He didn't even pause to process it.

Simon would share something new.

Malcolm had died next to him when he was 8. Simon was cursed. All Ryland did was nod and asked to learn about Malcolm. He bruised easily. Bloody noses. Headaches. Fevers. Bled so much. People would say he was blessed with his excess of blood.

It didn't take long for Ryland to put together the fact that Malcolm likely had a rare form of cancer. Leukemia. It wasn't anything to do with Simon. Even if it had something to do with him, he wasn't cursed.

He was just a kid.

Simon wasn’t cursed. Ryland didn’t believe in a god. That was ok. Nobody was mad at Ryland for that. Ryland wasn’t mad at Simon for necessarily believing in one either. Simon wasn’t sure he did, or he wasn’t sure he didn’t. That was ok too.

Simon wasn’t cursed.

He wasn’t blessed either. Nobody was. But he was safe. And he was loved. And Ryland smiled at him like all the stars in the sky, and the quiet rapture never did really happen and everything was ok.

Simon was reminded of all of these things, all of them all at once as the doctors started to notice, moving aside for Simon (and Ryland subsequentially) to get through to the door.

It took more effort than he would like to admit to get the door open, and holy fucking shit.

Ryland was right.

It was so cold.

The snow burned. That was the first sensation that Simon picked up. It touched his neck and his hands and anywhere he had open skin and it was somehow wonderful and torture at the same time. There was yelling far off, and the sounds of musical screaming.

It was Eridian. The language. Rocky kept face planting in the snow and shivering and Adrian chased them. Ryland teased them a lot about Human’s being persistance predators a lot. They had thought it was stupid. Being an ambush predator was objectively much easier and better to hunt.

Simon would take their statements later.

He wanted to know how they weren’t dying of the cold. Normally when people got too cold on Eden, when everything broke and they didn’t have enough clothes or blankets, they died. It was colder than this, the vast expanse of space was so much colder than the snow, but still.

Simon frowned, and Ryland shifted his weight to the left, and Simon noticed right before he fell off his shoulder and onto the snow.

Simon bent down faster than he could have recognized he had the ability to, checking that Ryland was ok, the snow from his impact splashing around him as he laid there. He didn’t move for a few seconds, and then Simon began to hear him giggling, and he waved his arms and legs back and forth.

“Snow angel?” Simon asked, registering the motion as ones that were repeated in books a lot. There was a muffled noise from Ryland and some violent head jerks, followed by more giggling, and Simon gently conceded himself to laying down next to Ryland, spreading himself out in the snow.

It was so wet.

It got into his sweater and pants so fast and he shivered and it was great.

People ate snow, right?

Simon opened his mouth, and took a bite.

He sat up quickly, tasting dirt, something else and weird ass water. Who the fuck ate snow?

His mouth was still open and tongue out as he began to try and spit it out when he glanced up just in time to see the ball of snow hurtling towards his face at a speed too large to be normal.

It hit him square in the mouth. There was happy cheers from Adrian, who had thrown it from some 30 feet away as Simon felt the dirt go to the back of his throat, choking on the snow for a solid minute or two.

Ryland pulled himself up, smothered in snow that hadn't melted, looking like a child covered in flour as he saw Simon grasp at his tongue and cough, not enjoying anything it at all.

Ryland's eyes trailed down to the ground, where he noticed a small but sizeable chunk of grass and earth taken out of the ground and back up to Simon.

"Did you just try eating the dirt?"

Simon flipped him off.

When he finished coughing, he was glaring at Adrian dead straight, who seemed to realize that with eyes they could see exactly how pissed Simon was.

Ryland grinned, picking up something at the very least.

"They're probably new to being persistance predators."

"I know." Simon's voice was a low timber. Ryland grinned like he was having the time of his life. Neither he nor Simon could really feel the cold.

"I'll hold off Rocky. And also watch." Ryland joked, and Simon greatly resembled a cat as he crouched down, settling his legs into the optimal position for running (Simon was fascinated with the Olympics. He wished they had that on Eden.) and ran.

Ryland made the crude noises for Rocky's name as his husband chased down Adrian, who was screaming in fear, making the worlds worst attempts to get away. Rocky sauntered over, much more unbalanced on his feet, but still smiling.

Ryland backed up further, towards the gathering of pine trees and the fences that kept the area separate from the rest of the city and the street as Rocky approached.

“Grace call, question?” Rocky asked. Ryland nodded affirmatively.

“I’ve got something to show you.” Ryland said, and Rocky grinned like the sun, and as soon as Rocky was close enough, Ryland tapped his chest. He didn’t even get to start speaking before Rocky was looking down. “Something on your shirt, bud.” Ryland said, and Rocky looked up, confused, and Ryland pushed him into the snow.

He went down with a loud thump, and Ryland laughed. He was still bare ass out, and more and more government guards rushed outside in confusion, unsure of what to do.

They could likely apprehend all four of them with ease, but the concern of what that would do for their jobs was large. Assaulting the astronaut of all time and his companions wasn’t really a great look for the resume.

Simon knew they were there. He was hyper attentive to every detail all the time, but he was bigger. Scarier. He knew how the people of Earth would treat Ryland. He knew that by default, he was already in their good graces. It was like a marriage of castes.

By loving Ryland and having that reciprocated, Simon was on the same level as him. Which meant that as he lunged at his best friend, there would be no reprecussions. Probably.

Adrian giggled and screamed as Simon pressed a knee to their chest, not too harsh or heavy, enough to keep them from wriggling, but not enough to cause any hurt.

“You want a snow fight, huh?” Simon asked, grinning, sharp canines flipping over his bottom lip as he grinned. Simon grabbed a fistfull of snow, and tried his best to make a small ball out of it. “You’ll get a snow fight!” He shouted, and Adrian screamed a tone of hilarity.

“Nooooo, Noooo, Adrian sorry, Adrian sorry, Simon friend stop now, statement-” They said, being cut off by a mouthful of snow, and while Simon turned his head they used their hand to grab another fistful of snow and throw it at him.

They escaped in that moment, darting away from Simon as quickly as they could, and he started up past them again, ignoring the freezing cold or his side cramps or the way his hands burned.

More people came outside, and Simon paused to look, registering Colt and the other guy from Ryland’s room, an unfortunate lapse in time control for Rocky, long since unsubdued by Ryland to tackle Simon.

“Are you kidding me? I got off a plane 4 hours ago and this happens?” The man that Simon didn’t know yelled, and Simon could see Ryland stick his tongue out before throwing a snowball at him too, and grabbing Adrian.

“Let go of Simon, Rocky, or Adrian gets it!” Ryland yelled, his voice hearse. He had a handful of snow up against Adrian’s neck, who was playing along even though they could probably easily overpower Ryland.

“NO!” Rocky screamed, but didn’t let go of Ryland. “My love!” Rocky repeated, before turning his attention to Colt. “Grace friend duplicate! Help me take down Grace statement!” He yelled, and Simon laughed.

Ryland Grace duplicate.

Yeah he was getting called that from now on. He’d apologize, but he wasn’t sorry.

“He can’t understand you bud! You’re on your own! You’ve got until 10 or else…” Ryland threatened again, and Ryland’s duplicate looked back and forth before silently trekking out to Ryland, soft footsteps crunching in the snow.

“Ok! Ok Rocky concede!” Rocky stood up, long since completely nude, hands in the air in the traditional ‘put your hands where I can see them’ pose.

Simon didn’t even hesitate for a second as Ryland laughed and dumped the snow on Adrian anyway, sidesweeping Rocky and pinning him down.

Ryland’s duplicate, who walked over with Ryland started counting down from 10 like a wrestling match, one of the scripted ones that Ryland hated.

“And the win goes to Simonnnnnn!” Colt yelled, and Ryland put out a hand to help Simon up. Simon took it, and let part of his body weight rest on Ryland. He was really tired.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had had that much fun.

He felt something hit his shin.

He looked down, seeing Rocky waving his knuckles around and yelping.

“Not like movie! Not like movie! What feed Simon question! Hurt hurt! Ow!” Rocky complained after he voluntarily chose to try and attack Simon.

“Shut up Rock, you’re fine.” Ryland teased, and he helped Rocky stand up too, and the man that Simon didn’t recognize came out and took off his jacket, averting his eyes away as he tied it around Rocky’s midsection. Ryland bent down and crudely made the attempt to whisper the eridian chords for ‘freak nudist’ into Rocky’s ear as Adrian laughed and Rocky freaked out.

They leaned on each other as they made their way back to the door, and Colt seemed to take most of Ryland’s weight, while Simon both tried to take Ryland’s and have Ryland take his.

After being dumped off in the room where Simon awoke, they brought Rocky and Adrian some clothes, not much different from what Simon was wearing, other than the fact that their sweaters were blue and purple respectively, and they had black sweatpants.

People came by to check on their temperatures every once in awhile, to make sure none of them had “developed a fever” which made no sense because they were outside in the cold. They wouldn’t get hot if they were outside in the cold. Simon wondered if Ryland hadn’t told him that Earth doctors were stupid.

Colt had asked for ‘hot chocolate’ to which they took with a nod, and the other man introduced himself as Carl.

“My best friend from Earth!” Ryland commented, grinning, and Simon was sure that Ryland added the ‘from Earth’ bit so that Rocky didn’t try and kill Carl.

He didn’t seem to be making any attempts to try so far, so Simon seemed to be happy. Carl was nice. He liked Carl. He had similar energy to Adrian. Not loud like Rocky or Ryland.

Colt was a lot like Ryland.

There were many differences. That much wasn’t hard to spot, but he had weird sayings and his hair went all weird in different directions and he moved his hands a lot when talking and he loved giving thumbs ups to people.

Ryland seemed happier than Simon had ever seen him.

He was at home.

Finally.

Simon had found his home a long time ago. So had Rocky and Adrian. It was only Ryland left.

He had it now.

Simon was so happy. He had never been allowed to be this happy before.

The hot chocolate burnt his tongue. He didn't like it that much, until Ryland pulled a bueno out of Simon's pocket and put it in there, letting it melt. It tasted much better.

Colt had to go get more Bueno after that for Rocky and Adrian, who enjoyed it greatly. Chocolate.

They had advanced past the concept of eating alone very fast. Simon pointed it out.

"You're eating in public." He deadpanned. To Colt and Carl it sounded like a threat in some ways, with the verocity that he said it, but to everyone else they knew this to simply be Simon.

Ryland had been promised a translator, but it was nowhere to be seen, so he translated manually for Carl and Colt. He'd fashion one up in Seattle, he said. Simon had no idea what the fuck a Seattle was.

"Eating is a very private thing to Eridians. They have to rip themselves open to do it. It's like if we had to open our flesh and pour stuff in every few days." Ryland whispered as Rocky replied.

"Human now, statement. Rocky spend long long long time with freak Grace. Simon less freak. Matter not. no no no statement. Rocky freak now too." Rocky said, and Adrian nodded.

"Adrian trust, statement. No fuck given, statement." They said.

Ryland looked up to scold them for language, and Adrian made an attempt to replicate a middle finger by using the pointer, so solid points there.

He translated what they said, and both Colt and Carl seemed fascinated.

After several hours and an old rerun of Bewitched, the four of them were cleared for pneumonia, or any chances of it.

Ryland was handed papers for them, and he grinned. Simon peered over his shoulders as Ryland filled one out.

“Discharge papers!” He said, voice happy. “We get to leave~ Carl you said you went and checked out the cabin?” Ryland said, before pulling the paper back, and filling some more information in, writing in ‘Simon Grace’ where it had said Ryland Grace before. “Sign.” He whispered and handed the pen to Simon, pointing at the bottom line.

Simon wasn’t great with words. Dyslexia, Ryland called it. Ryland used good fonts. This did not have good fonts. Simon also didn’t have a signature. He tried his best.

“Yeah. Brought over all your shit, in boxes or whatever. I had no idea you owned that much. You’re never making me carry that much stuff again.”

Ryland laughed and made a comment that made absolutely no sense to anyone except Carl and Ryland he supposed.

“What are you talking about? I had to send home like 20 boxes of your sexy screws after we bought them because we couldn’t take them on the vat. That’s your fault!”

“You kept my sexy screws?” Carl asked, and his voice broke as he stared at Ryland. Ryland tilted his head.

“Well, yeah. We paid so much money for those, I wasn’t going to throw them away or something.” Ryland answered.

Carl looked like he was genuinely tearing up.

Colt and Simon made uncomfortable eye contact. Colt broke silence first.

“What the fuck is a sexy screw?”

It lead to a long story from Carl (Ryland was helping Adrian and Rocky choose their last name, which just ended up being Erid) about how they originally brought the Astrophage to their mini venus ‘sex box’ as Carl put it, and how they had to go shopping for supplies.

Ryland found the screws they wanted, but Carl was a ‘grown ass man who wanted his sexy screws’ and so he got a ton of sexy screws that they had no use for.

Ryland kept them.

Carl did end up crying.

“Grown man crying like a child over sexy screws.” He mumbled, and Ryland gave him a hug, to which Rocky got jealous, and joined in.

“Human hug time. Very important! Rocky join.”

“He says its important for all of us to hug.” Ryland translated.

Rocky was built like Simon’s favourite actor, the guy named after a rock from the fast and the furious, and Ryland and Carl made a jolting sound as Rocky collided with them, and Adrian grabbed Simon as they went over to join.

Colt joined too.

It was warm.

Simon felt safe. Carl and Colt brought the mattresses down from the medical beds, and brought down the cushions from the couch to create one giant mattress that was uneven and somewhat uncomfortable.

“Sleepover with my homies.” Ryland said, exhausted out of his mind. Simon felt like he was 9 again and his brothers of Eden were next to him as they prepared for soldier training. Safe, happy.

Ryland held his hand.

Simon fell asleep comfortable with the promise of somewhere nicer in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and Kudos appreciated!

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