

The sun isn't even up yet when Draymis has to awaken for the day.

He keeps his eyes stubbornly closed for another minute before a cacophony of loud whistling blares from outside the abandoned hut he's staked out at. Thin fabric that just barely passes as a blanket slips down from his shoulders as he sits up just enough to reach for a chunk of wall from the dilapidated building.

A light toss is made; experimental, purely to test the heft of the slab before he takes aim outside the window and *throws*. The whistling of the chiffhares comes to an abrupt halt as they scatter at the impact of debris on ice. Bleary eyes move past the scurrying animals to see the beginnings of daylight kissing away the shadows of the night and he thinks, *fuck my miserable life*.

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It's unfortunate, that is, that he cannot fully appreciate the serene calm that the morning usually brings with it.

As one of the few members of his band who didn't complain when Jerahli made them sync their sleeping schedules, mornings are usually a favored time for him. However, running on pure fumes from a near week of sleepless nights, he would much rather not be made aware of the world around him in any capacity until he can rest his eyes for a full day straight.

Despite the biting cold, the market is full and booming and almost warm with how alive it is. Despite the bone deep tiredness he feels and the desire to go home, he can't help but linger around for a bit longer than he has too.

An added benefit, being all the recent hearsay and gossip floating around:

"—wouldn't go to business over by Ms.Kaleh's today...Or for the rest of the week really. Heard that man she had staying there ran out on her. Ain't nobody seen him in a week an' she must've realized he's not coming back because *whew*. Let me tell you— "

"I already told you, no! I know what I said before but thing's changed. Look, a wild Leobou escaped from a ranch. It's a pretty feral one too. I'm sorry sweetheart, but I'd rather if you weren't running around or nothing till it gets caught or killed."

"...The Rangers has been gettin' *realll* antsy...Any day now Afron's gonna get it if they keep playing those games with 'em. You reckon they'll finally bring Crimson Flashes back out now if they 'on't cooperate? Teach 'em a lesson. Make a real example out of 'em?...Wouldn't put it past 'ose scale-backs."

Nothing particularly concerning. The Leobou, if anything, may warrant a bit of extra caution when out, and a scorned Ms.Kaleh could probably blacken the mood around anyone she came in contact with for the next few months or so. As for the last bit...he scoffs; nothing worth worrying about in his opinion.

He lingers for a while longer, and when nothing else of note sticks out to him, he leaves.

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The air is heady with spices, when he steps back inside their base. Just in time for breakfast it seemed, Dreyms mused idly, making his way further in.

Almost immediately he can see Jerahli's smaller form, hovering about in the kitchen. Everything around him seems to fade away just a bit as he mindlessly trudges his way over to the man.

*Bang!*

Draymis catches himself, startled to notice he had lost enough awareness of his surroundings to bump into the dreaded chore chart. A scowl forms on his face as he notices the dreaded chore tracker. Considering they had five, now six people who stayed here regularly, a chore tracker was a nice, clean, and fair way to make sure everybody had a somewhat even amount of work to do in the upkeep of their base.

Well, in theory.

Draymis huffs as he switches around a few magnets. Just enough to not make himself suspicious, but just enough to pawn some work off on his brats, while also keeping his load free. He can't even feel slightly bad about it after the week he's had.

His movements are careful, but even so Jerahli doesn't even flinch in his direction.

Unnerved by the lack of greeting, Draymis inspects Jerahli just a bit more closely. The shorter man appears to be lost in thought, listlessly tending to the food in the pan to keep it from burning, but with something else obviously at the forefront of his mind.

Rolling his steps to avoid making too much noise on the floor, he walks up to the man, frowning briefly as Jerahli barely even twitches in acknowledgement.

Perhaps had he not already been exhausted he would've gently –as gently as he could manage anyway – bring the other man out of his reprieve to see what was ailing his mind so.

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Who was he kidding?

Even on a good day Draymis could not even be fucked to deal with his own problems, much less any one else's. While any of Jerahli's troubles took great precedence over his own, Draymis was wary of making things even worse should he try to pry and would much rather wait for the man to come to him; even if waiting for the entirety of their island to melt might take less time than the prospect of Jerahli even *thinking* about opening up. Hopefully the issue was of a less personal nature and more related to business.

Either way, it was a problem for another time. For now–

"You gonna plate those anytime today?"

Jerahli whips around, damn near breaking his neck. His eye is that of stone, before recognition flashes across his face. A small sigh escapes him and he gives Draymis a look between surprised, fond, and exasperated; very familiar expressions that were worn often for their crew here.

"Welcome back," Jerahli greets softly, before setting up the food into a nice spread.

Not bothering to hide the sound now, he lets his boots make great *thumps* with each step as he grabs his plate and seats himself across from Jerahli's usual spot with a muttered greeting back.

With the fragrant aroma of food in the air, it doesn't take long for the other occupants to gather at the table for breakfast.

Unsurprisingly, Nati is the first to come running in. Thundering footfalls are accompanied by rushed greetings that can barely be made out as he piles up his plate high with the spread Jerahli left out. Raz and Jodani arrive next at a much more sedate pace, Raz giving a nod to Jerahli and Draymis when she meets their eyes. Jodani, face blank and expression neutral as ever, stops to give each of them a proper greeting before continuing. Ansa ambles in last, morning greetings getting lost in her wide mouth yawn while she scratches at her side.

Draymis acknowledges each of them with little more than a grunt, turning back to Draymis and dutifully recounting hearsay he's heard from the morning market: Ms.Kaleh's scorn, a wild leobou, threats of The Crimson Flashes.

A glint lights up Ansa's dark eyes, and Draymis is already preparing himself for the headache he'll have at whatever odd debate topic the girl has thought up.

A quiet voice beats him to any conversation starter.

"The Crimson Flashes?" Jodani asks, ever so slightly fiddling with her utensils before catching herself and readjusting herself back to her rigid seating posture.

He can see Jerahli raise an eyebrow in surprise, and Draymis internally matches him. As a relatively new member to their group, Jodani is quiet. Almost never speaking up unless spoken to first. Hanging back at the edge until prompted to do otherwise. Jerahli finds it odd, often watches her with a note of concern. Draymis thinks her ominous, a form just on the edge of his vision that may bring harm should he slack in observing her.

Either ignoring or simply uncaring of any of this, Ansa turns to her curiously. "You don't know?"

"I don't believe I've heard of such a group."

"Nah. They're not a group. Just some guy," Ansa corrects while popping another piece of food carelessly in her mouth.

Jodani tilts her head. "But then why...?"

SLAM!

"BSSH." Nati ignores the hissed *calm down* Draymis snarls out after steadying his drink glass, in favor of grinning deviously. The tone of his voice drops to a low tenor, the quality matching that of those telling ghost stories around a campfire. "The loud bang is the only warning you'll get. The red shadow you thought you imagined in the darkness of the night, stands over you."

"FWOOSH. With a sudden burst, scarlet heat is the only thing that lights up the darkness surrounding you. Only just enough though! You can barely see your own feet in front of you, but from what you can see, the rows of teeth as huge as your head are the only thing you'll notice. And then, your blood will PAINT the land crimson as they— PLAUK FUUGLAH KWERR!" The faux deep voice Nati had been used to tell his tale, devolves into a series of cartoonish eating noises, as the boy attacks his plate like a rabid, starving animal descending on its prey.

*If I avoid a headache from Ansa, trust in every power above I'll get one from Nati instead*, Draymis thinks dryly as pieces of Nati's breakfast splatter on his face and body.

Ansa laughs loud and freely, uncaring of bits of meal landing on her clothes while Jerahli stares a bit forlornly at the previously clean floor. Raz hides an amused grin as she maneuvers her plate to catch any stray bits that she can.

Jodani blinks, unperturbed by the food flying past her, miraculously somehow not hitting her Draymis notes with a spark of annoyance. "So the name refers not to a group, but more of...a warning?"

Ansa snorts. "As much of a warning as telling someone you're gonna shoot them a minute before you plan to." She plays around with the food on her plate for a bit before pouting. "Man, I really wish I could've gotten to talk to them."

*That* gets everyone's attention. Even Nati finally stops his ferocious attack on his breakfast to turn to Ansa with an incredulous stare that matches the rest of the table.

Ansa doesn't even fluster at the attention, instead perking up slightly, and Draymis feels his headache threatening to turn into a migraine before the kid even opens her mouth. "Okay, so like, everybody who ever caught sight of this dude said they could turn into a monster right? And they were definitely turning so they could kill people with their teeth and claws. But like. We know they have fire powers or something so they didn't really have to, right?"

Raz catches onto Ansa's train of thought before she can fully voice it and rolls her eyes, despite maintaining her amused smile. "I seriously doubt they were eating people for fun..." A strange look crosses her wrinkled face. "Or at all."

"Maybe not eating them *entirely*, but we know for sure they must've at least got to know what exactly people taste like!"

Nati lets out an inhumane screech as he frantically shakes his head and waves his arms around without direction. "No way, dude! They probably couldn't even taste the meat under all the blood!"

"Okay, but if they got to kill someone who was like– anemic and had less blood in their body than most people. Then they'd definitely taste the meat then, right?"

"That's not what that fucking—" "I don't believe that means—"

Both Draymis and Jodani cut themselves off and turn to stare at each other for a beat. Jodani drops her gaze first and remains quiet so Draymis turns back to Ansa with a scowl.

"That's not what that means, dumbass. Why the fuck do you even care?"

"Have you *seriously* never wondered what people taste like?"

"No? Have you?"

"Uh, yeah? What if we run out of food one day and have to turn on other people. I at least want to know what I'm gonna have to expect, y'know?" No. Draymis really, really did not know.

Jerahli huffs out a small laugh. "Well, all things considered, it's very likely the taste of people would align very closely with whatever was the majority of their regular diet."

"See that's what I thought," Ansa says, reclining against her chair with a lazy ease. She brings a hand up to rub thoughtfully at her chin. "But I just had to ask them to really make sure."

Jodani's eyebrows furrow and Draymis realizes, with a small spark of irritation, that she has also noted the same flaw with Ansa's line of logic that Draymis has. Before either of them can think to call her out on it, Ansa suddenly shrugs, letting the chair fall back to the floor on all four legs. "Not that it matters anyway."

Jodani tilts her head at him. "How come?"

"Well...they're dead."

"Well, you can't really say that. Not like there was ever any official news of them dying," Raz protests, though it doesn't sound like she particularly cares either way. Next to her, Jerahli hums lightly in agreement.

"Duh. Of course the Rangers wouldn't just say that." Ansa remarks.

Nati drapes himself over his friend, nodding eagerly as he backs her up. "Yea, I wouldn't want anybody to know if I lost my super ultra mega weapon. But if I had still had my super ultra mega weapon I wouldn't just stop using it for no reason all of a sudden."

Raz makes another comment, but Draymis pays it no mind as he finds himself looking at Jerahli. The man tilts his head, and to anybody else it would seem as if he's acquiescing, but Draymis knows better. He can see the glint in Jerahli's eye that speaks to the way his brain is firing off, absorbing the information and

dissecting it for any and all possibilities and implications they could hold about the things that people seem to quickly disregard.

Jerahli's mind burns brilliantly, and it does all the more to make his beauty shine just as bright. It's hard for Draymis to look away in moments like these, so he doesn't. He can only vaguely register that Jerahli is opening his mouth to make a contribution of his own, but Draymis' muddled brain refuses to see focus on anything besides Jerahli's angelic visage.

Blood soaks the trails Draymis leaves on his endless journey in the disaster that is his life. Despair beckons to him; Death nips at his heels. And him? He can do nothing but try to carve anything useful out of the jagged edges life has worn him down to. Even still, Draymis thinks that if he could have Jerahli in his arms, everything else but the warmth of their crew would fade to dust around them and maybe – just *maybe* – Draymis could manage to get past everything that pulls him down–

A piece of food hits Draymis smack in the middle of his forehead.

It bounces off of him and towards Nati, and Draymis would be impressed at the speed the boy devours the morsel if he was still not caught up with thoughts of Jerahli.

Jerahli, who is now looking at him with drawn eyebrows that suggests annoyance – reasonable considering he caught Draymis blatantly not listening to him – but there is a pleased flush on his cheeks that imply something else perhaps?

Although Draymis isn't entirely sure he's not just choosing to read the flush as pleased and not borne of something else more fitting of the current situation.

"I am *trying* to have a conversation with you," Jerahli informs him, voice damningly even and giving away nothing.

Draymis stares at his leader for a beat, before going back to picking at his food listlessly. He grunts in acknowledgement; he can think of nothing to say that isn't an apology and he refuses to believe in a world where he should be made to apologize for admiring someone as radiant as Jerahli.

The man plaguing his thoughts lets out a sigh that just borders on being fond before he speaks again. "I apologize for the choice of breakfast cuisine today," he starts, choosing not to engage Draymis in the previous topic, and zeroing in on how slow he's eating. "I know you hate this food, but I honestly wasn't expecting you until much later."

Draymis looks down at his breakfast. Indeed, it is not a favorite of his, but he brings another bite to mouth anyway. Chews. Considers.

"I normally can't stand this stuff...But you make it good enough to where I can tolerate it." And it's true enough. His main gripe with the dish is it tends to have a cloying, sickly sweetness to it, but that is almost entirely played down in Jerahli's cooking. The rest of the dish was nearly as intolerable without the sweet overload. He honestly thinks this is better than how it's supposed to be made, and hopefully Jerahli takes the compliment for what it is.

Whether or not he does, is and will forever be unknown to Draymis as little bastards who love sticking their noses where they don't belong just *have* to pipe up.

"*Tolerate*," Ansa mocks with a raised eyebrow and a derisive look.

"I guess it's *good enough*," Nati mimics with a horribly devious grin and fingers raised in air quotes.

"Not great, well made or fantastic?" Jodani asks with what is perhaps genuine confusion and no ill-will, but it snaps the last dregs of Draymis' patience all the same.

"That Leobou's late getting here and mauling all of you, isn't it?" He growls, baring his teeth and smacking a hand down on the table.

The giggling fit that Ansa and Nati burst into, does little to deter them as they snatch their plates and scamper off somewhere else. Jodani abandons her meal altogether with a vague look of alarm before running off after the other two.

When he turns away from their retreating forms, he is greeted by Raz as she glowers at him over her own plate. "Why do ya always gotta start with yer damn simmerin' and seethin' and simmerin' when ya get back?"

"Hard not too when we have annoying rascals always running underfoot."

"You make yourself kind of an easy target, you know that right?"

"By doing *what* exactly?"

"Being you."

He scowls at her, ready to give back a biting retort when Jerahli smoothly cuts in.

"You are a very easy person to take fascination with," Jerahli says easily, which Draymis knows is a nice way of agreeing with Raz about him being an easy target for Ansa's and Nati's antics, but he can feel his cheeks heat up slightly all the same. There is a fond gleam in Jerahli's eye that fades quickly as he abruptly takes on a more serious demeanor. "Did anything turn up in your search this week?"

"Some stuff. Anything that I doubt will be useful. I wasn't very sure about this lead going out and I'm still not sure now." It the most polite way Draymis can think to say *what the fuck were you thinking with having me investigate that shit?*

A frown mars Jerahli's face. "Are you sure? Akala was quite adamant about this. Her intuition usually isn't wrong."

Biting back a curse, Draymis answers through gritted teeth. "Well there's a first time for everything," he sneers, not bothering to hide his disdain for Akala. Why Jerahli trusts so much in a woman who has probably drunk her few brain cells to death years ago remains a mystery to him.

Jerahli hums. "Perhaps." His airy tone suggests he doesn't quite agree and is eager to get to work roving over anything Draymis has discovered on his short expedition.

Raz raises a judgemental eyebrow in Draymis' direction. "You act like that lady has ever done you wrong."

*She has*, Draymis barely keeps himself growling.

"Regardless," Jerahli cuts in smoothly, "I look forward to going over your findings. Part of me was hesitant to carry out a certain hit before I had all the facts."

Draymis waves a flippant hand. "You've never killed anybody before who didn't deserve it."

Jerahli laughs lightly. "You say that as if I am some divine judge, as if I have the right."

*If not you then who*, he wants to say. Exhaustion may creep into his very bones and slow down his thoughts, but he still has just enough presence of mind not to say something so embarrassingly reverent out loud, no matter how much he believes in that truth. Instead he lets a heavy sigh leave his body as he forces his body to get up. "Whatever you say. We can talk after I get some sleep."

"Of course...and oh, Draymis?"

Pausing his trudge to his bedroom, he turns around, just barely able to catch sight of a sly smirk before—

"?!"

Browns of different hues are the only thing he sees, accompanied by light but incessant thumps. What the—?

In the middle of trying to defend himself against the sudden onslaught he manages to grab hold of...firepop sticks? With his name written on them?

The treats were fairly common around their house; that did nothing to explain why the hell so many of them with his name on them piled up on his shoulders, head and the floor.

Nati and Ansa fall over each other laughing from their places on the floor in the common room. Even Jodani, seated just a bit further from them, is fighting back a small smile on her usually blank face.

"Did you really think we wouldn't notice that you switch around the chores on the chart to get out of them?" Jerahli asks with a laugh.

Raz leans an arm over the chair, looking over Draymis with a sardonic leer. "As soon as we caught wind of it, Nati and Ansa started saving all their firepop sticks just for this. You just hit like three hundred today actually."

"You have a lot to make up for, my dear Draymis," Jerahli sing-songs.

The other man looks so pleased with himself that despite the circumstances, Draymis can't help but be charmed; the mocking snickering of his brats doesn't do anything to diminish the small warmth that blooms, unbidden, in his chest.

He throws himself on the nearest couch with a groan of a man who has lost a thousand battles and his traitorous heart even warms further at their continued light-hearted jeering.

Like a fool, Draymis looks upon Jerahli's grin, full of teasing and mirth, and still wants to kiss his smile; so he lays his head back, looks skyward once more and thinks again:

*Fuck my miserable life.*