

~Nightlit Festival~

It was a cold, early morning for Kaedan Beservera in Erazim. He woke up early to a delightfully dull pain radiating throughout his back. At first, he did not want to get up. He was semi-comfortable in his bed, but he knew he had to get up. It was the first day of Mela Sule—the holiday festival celebrating the end of the year. The first six days were to celebrate the end of the year, and the last six days were to celebrate the beginning of the year.

It was Inarora's favorite festival, and Kaedan did not have the heart to tell her no to the yearly tradition, even *if* his back was hurting. He would deal with it, like he always did. After all, he could hardly find it in him to complain since he got to see and live another day to be with his baby girl.

After several moments of lying still in his bed, Kaedan pushed himself to a sitting position. A soft groan escaped his lips, and he rubbed the back of his neck. *I reckon I should go take a shower now that I'm awake. Bloody body.* With a slight wince, he transferred himself to his wheelchair and pushed himself to his dresser and then closet to select his clothing for the day.

Half an hour later, he exited the shower fully clothed, grabbed his water thermos from his nightstand, his Palm-Comm, and his chapstick. After setting his thermos in his cup holder and shoving his PalCo into his pocket, he propelled himself out of his room and down the hallway towards the kitchen. Waiting for him at the kitchen table was his beautiful daughter, Inarora.

She sat at the table, organizing her small plushies and humming quietly to herself. When she heard his wheels hit the kitchen floor, she looked up at him with her dazzling ice blue eyes and she squeaked with excitement.

"Daddy up!"

A bright beaming smile flickered across Kaedan's face as she hopped out of her chair and rushed to his side. He reached down and picked her up, pulling her into his lap.

"Hi, Little Moon," he said ever so gently, brushing her silver hair out of her face. "Did you sleep well, sweetheart?"

"Mhm."

"That's good." He kissed her cheek and she purred. "Where's Grandpa?"

"Grampa sick."

"Aw, poor Grandpa." Kaedan sighed. "I suppose he won't be able to come with us."

“No, I uh...I’m not having a good morning.”

Kaedan glanced up and saw his father stumbling into the kitchen, wrapped in a blanket. His ears were flattened against his head and his tail drooped as he walked. *Oh, poor Dad*, he thought.

“Go take Ina so she can have fun,” he said. “Don’t worry, I’m not contagious. This is just my body being mean to me again.”

“You sure?” Kaedan asked.

Byron nodded. “Yeah. Go get some chestnut rice and have an extra bit just for me.”

“We will, Dad,” Kaedan promised, then glanced at Inarora. “Are you all ready to go, sweetling?”

Inarora nodded.

“Did you brush your teeth?”

“Mhm, Grampa made sure I did.”

“Good,” he said.

Kaedan mussed Inarora’s hair. “Wanna go get my sneakers and my scarf for me, sweetie? Please?”

Inarora nodded and hopped off Kaedan’s lap to go grab what he needed.

“I hate having to ask for help,” he sighed.

“It’s okay,” Byron reassured him. “When’s your next physical therapy appointment?”

“After the new year...” Kaedan winced. “And hopefully this year I’ll at least be able to walk occasionally. I sometimes miss being able to stretch my legs, but gods it hurts too much.”

“I know,” Byron agreed.

Inarora rushed back with Kaedan’s sneakers and scarf.

“Thank you, Ina.” He gratefully accepted the shoes—nearly bigger than she was—and slipped them onto his feet. Then, he tied his scarf around his neck and was almost ready to go.

“Go have fun, children,” Byron said. “Love you both.”

“Love you too, Dad,” Kaedan said.

“Wuv you, Grampa.

Byron chuckled and flicked his ears at her. “Such a sweetie.”

After Kaedan threw on his favorite leather jacket, he had Inarora hop into his lap and the pair left the house together.

The sun peeked through the drawn curtains, life stirring in the dark bedroom. It would be a lie to say today was like any other, for today was the final day of Yule. The day of the Nightlit Festival... and the twins' birthday.

Da'vion groaned with life as he felt tiny hands pressing at his face, a tiny chorus of "Daddy" stirring him from his slumber. Peeking an eye open, he can see one of his young children kneeling next to him on the bed, cold hands resting on his face.

"Daddy, wake up. Mommy says it's time to wake up." Crystalline blue eyes stare down at him, combed white hair falling into her face as the older pirate wrapped an arm around his child. Stealing her in the bed for cuddles, he pretended to go back to sleep, biting back a chuckle when the little one tried to squirm away. "Daddy, wake up."

"But what if I don't want to?" One eye fluttered open, watching the little girl in his arms wrinkle her nose at him. "What if I want to stay here with my little orca all day?" Brushing the hair from her face, he took note of the freckles beginning to appear across her nose. *She looks so much like her mother.*

"Mai will come help me if you don't get up—" She puffed out her cheeks with a threat before he leaned over to bury her youthful face in kisses.

"Contrary to popular belief, little lady, I'm not afraid of you or your sister. I can steal her for cuddles too. My arms are long enough to hold you both." He gave his daughter a cheeky grin who flicked her ears in annoyance, giving her father a glare.

It took everything in Da'vion to not burst out in laughter, his daughter's expression more adorable than terrifying. "Alright, I'm getting out of bed. But before I do," Brushing the hair from Estelle's face, he kisses her forehead with a hum. "Happy Birthday, Starlight."

"Thank you. Now get up! Mama's making pancakes and Mai's gonna steal mine if you don't hurry up!" She attempted to push him out of bed, though with her small arms it didn't budge him by much.

"Alright, alright, I'm getting up." Placing his young child on the floor, he stood up himself, hearing several of his joints crack. "I'm getting too old to pick you up for much longer, Starlight."

"Fibber. You can still pick up Luna and she's big. Now come on." She raced ahead, leaving him to chuckle to himself.

"They're getting so big so fast... where does the time go?"

Following her to the kitchen, he pressed a kiss to Amaia's head, admiring the other twin for a moment. "Happy birthday to you as well, Raindrop. Have you both been good for your mother this morning?" *Identical in looks, but couldn't be more different in personality.*

"Yes, Daddy." She nodded, stuffing another bite of pancake as Estelle climbed up on the chair next to hers.

Dav looked to his wife, the woman admiring him with the same icy blue stare as his daughters before kissing his cheek in good morning.

"I see it took Estelle some work to get you up this morning." She chuckled, glancing outside where the older two were sword fighting in the front yard.

He followed her gaze, watching Lunari block her brother's sporadic attacks with ease.

"Are you spending their birthday with them this year? Not that I'm not happy to go, but I know that you like your quality time with them."

"I will be, I'll meet you at the festival tonight?" He inquired in return, stealing a kiss from Kainé before she walked away.

"I'll be there."

It's not long before the girls are done with their breakfast, thanking their mom before scampering off to go get ready.

"I love you, call me if you need anything."

"A phone works both ways, dear. I love you too, be safe, have fun."

Getting ready himself, he met his excited twins by the door, ushering them out after they said their goodbyes to their mother.

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Kaedan sat holding Inarora in his lap while waiting for the bus to take the pair to the north end of Erazim, where the Mela Sule festival was to be held. The pair watched as homes and businesses passed by them, all decorated for the end of the year festivals. Cylindrical and spherical lanterns hung from every house and business, each decorated with the Dh'oriân word for 'New Year' and with a tree branch of snow flowers painted onto it. Since it was daylight, the lanterns were not lit. Yet, he knew that when evening came, they would all be lit with rainbow flames.

The local trees comprising the medians for the road were also decorated with weather-proof dragon lights—tiny baubles that hold magic fire inside rather than using a light

bulb—and other weatherproof hanging ornaments made with fabric. Inarora shoved her thumb in her mouth and started rubbing her satin doll on her face, staring out the window in awe.

“We’ll light our dragon lights and lantern tonight with Grandpa and Sutari,” Kaedan told her, stroking her hair lightly. “I know you’re excited.”

“Mhm.” Inarora pressed herself against his chest and he chuckled, planting a kiss on her head.

He glanced back out the window and flicked his tail. “Look, we’re almost there, Little Moon.”

Inarora’s little stub of a tail wiggled with excitement.

When the bus drew to a stop, Inarora hopped out of her father’s lap and he pushed himself out from the wheelchair space. The pair of them exited the bus together, Inarora holding Kaedan’s sleeve.

“First stop is…” He lashed his tail. “Daddy’s favorite vendor, Ilmserin Sulian Coffee.”

Inarora squealed with excitement. “Choccy!”

Hot chocolate. The special one Ilmserin Sulian Coffee makes every winter. Their blend of hot cocoa involved a pump of chestnut syrup, a bit of cinnamon, a topping of whipped cream, and for the little ones, *extra* sprinkles. Kaedan? He was going for his winter favorite: a chestnut latte with peppermint and whipped cream.

As soon as they arrived in line, they were both surprised to see it was a short line. Huh. Must be there early, then. Works for Kaedan.

When they arrived at the counter, Kaedan repeated what both of them wanted and passed over the coins for them. Once ordered, they pulled off to the side and waited patiently for their drinks to be whipped up. First, Inarora’s hot cocoa was called out. He accepted the drink and passed it to his daughter.

“Here you go, my little ray of moonlight.”

The sparkles in Inarora’s eyes brought Kaedan joy as she accepted her treat and began drinking it. Her tiny little tail wiggled with excitement again. Her ears also wiggled as she took a couple of big sips of her favorite treat. He lashed his tail with a satisfied purr, happy to see his little angel happy.

Once he had his drink, he took a sip of it and placed it in his cup holder attachment. Then, the pair was off to explore this year’s vendors. He let Inarora lead the way. Inarora

suddenly stopped in her tracks and he stopped beside her. She looked at him and pointed through the window of the pop-up shop.

“Daddy, bakey?”

He knew what she meant. Bakery. He tilted his head in curiosity.

“Sure, why not?”

He reached for the doorknob and opened the door. The moment they headed inside, Kaedan sensed something wrong. It didn't look like any End'orian bakery he knew. The architecture was different, and the people inside looked nothing like the Enarians he knew. Inarora tilted her head and grabbed her father's jeans again.

“Cool!” she said with a twitch of her ears.

Kaedan glanced around. “Um...where are we?”

What he assumed to be the owner perked up, looking at him with golden eyes filled with curiosity. “Oh, here? Welcome to the Midnight Bakery, hidden in a neat little corner of the snow elven kingdom. You must be here for the Nightlit Festival, no?”

Kaedan blinked in disbelief. “The snow elven kingdom? Nightlit Festival?”

“You're... not here for the festival?” He tilted his head in the slightest, watching Kaeden with a perplexed expression.

“We're here for the Mela Sule festival,” Kaedan answered, putting a gentle hand on Inarora's back. He lashed his tail thoughtfully. “We don't have a Nightlit Festival...or a snow elven kingdom. We're from Erazim.” He glanced around, studying everything with his emerald eyes. “This...doesn't seem like Erazim, let alone Enaros.”

“Enaros?” A raspier, confused voice spoke up, watching Kaeden in confusion. Hazel eyes meet his own. A tall, elven man with wavy brown hair down to his shoulders and a pirate's uniform watched him in curiosity. “This is Fera.” His face was a dustier olive in color, a rough five o' clock shadow brushed along his jawline.

With him were two little elven girls, identical in appearance. With silky white hair, paler skin and icy blue eyes that remind him of his Inarora. The more adventurous of the two approached in curiosity, offering her a bite of a pastry.

Inarora timidly looked at Kaedan and he paused thoughtfully. He rarely let strangers offer food, but given the strangers were *children*, he was hard pressed to deny Inarora a chance to make new friends. He flicked his ears and nodded, watching as Inarora accepted the bite of pastry.

“Fera...” Kaedan repeated, shifting his gaze to meet the hazel-eyed man again. He lashed his tail. “We don’t have such a land in our world. I’d know, having studied Enarian geography.”

“You know, my wife often tells our children tales about how our transportation portals lead to other worlds... I’d always chalked them off as tall tales, but the girls believe every word of it.” He gestured to the twins now sharing the trinkets they kept in their various pockets with looks of youthful excitement. “Maybe they weren’t as tall of a tale as I previously had believed.”

Kaedan canted his head to the side in thought. “I believed the same. Granted, we’re taught in school that magic and science together could one day create a portal to another world, but when I grew up I thought of it as an inconceivable idea.” A ghost of a smile flickered across his face. “We believed in other universes, but we haven’t been able to prove it, until now, I suppose.”

He watched his daughter look in excitement at the rocks, then she tucked her satin baby doll into the crook of her arm as she dug into her jeans’ pocket and pulled out a couple of shiny crystal-like rocks. *Ah, that little goober...how did she manage to sneak rocks into her pockets when I wasn’t looking?* He bit back a chuckle, wondering when she had done that today.

Inarora offered a bashful smile. “Rocks!”

“A wonderful birthday surprise. The girls always enjoy sharing their rocks with their friends.” The older pirate placed some sort of currency on the counter, chuckling beneath his breath. “For both our order and theirs as well.”

Kaedan hesitated. “You don’t have t—” He remembered he has End’orian dhiahs. No chance in the eight hells it would have value here. “Right, my change is End’orian.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m sure my wife would have done the same thing if she was in my position.” He glanced back at the two little girls, ears flicking in adoration.

Kaedan offered a sad smile and flicked his ears with gratitude. “Come on, Ina. Think our new friends can help us pick out pastries? Since I don’t know a single one of these?”

Inarora turned to her father, her tiny tail wiggling in excitement. Then, she shifted her icy blue gaze to the twins and the older man with hope sparkling in her eyes.

“Girls, have you introduced yourselves yet?” The older gentleman raised a brow at them as they snicker between themselves, shaking their heads. “If not, you should introduce yourselves to your new friend. I’m sure she’d love to know your names.” Holding a hand out to Kaeden, he offered a sympathetic smile. “Da’vion.”

Kaedan accepted with a bashful smile and a flick of his tail. “Kaedan.” Briefly, he had contemplated mentioning his title as a brand new senator, but he hated sounding arrogant, so he left the title unsaid. “That little bundle of moonlight is my daughter, Inarora.”

“Those two scoundrels called daughters are my girls, Estelle and Amaia. They may be identical but the one with the wooden sword is Estelle... Amaia’s not keen on combat like her sister is.”

“I fight. I fight big brother Sterling.” The little girl stated, voice stern but the smile that shows through her flickering ears gives all else away.

Kaedan chuckled. “I see, little one.”

Inarora’s eyes grew big at the sight of the wooden sword. “Cool! Grampa has sword.”

Kaedan chuckled. “Yes, and so does your sutari. But their swords are their wedding ones. I don’t think either owns a non-wedding blade.”

“That sounds very similar to a custom we have. In elven culture a ‘wedding’ blade is a set of dual blades each partner holds. My wife, Kainé has the other half of the set that I have on me—” Before he can continue, the little one known as Estelle spoke up.

“Daddy used to be a pirate, Mama says he has *lots* of swords from his adventures. Mama does too. They say when we’re big we’ll have lots of swords as well. But I have to be this many,” Holding up six fingers, she wrinkled her nose, glaring at her father. “In order to have my own.”

“Another thing from our culture is marking our blades with important moments of our lives. Some markings may be smaller, others larger. Depending on the importance depends on the size of the marking.” Drawing his own sword, the blade is marked on both sides with all kinds of runes, both large and small. “The average elf has quite a few by the time they reach my old age.”

Kaedan beamed in thought. “Sounds like our custom as well. Granted, we can’t forge our own blades because most of us don’t have the skills to, but there are wedding smiths out there who specialize in it. My grandfathers both had the other’s name engraved on their sword in their respective languages, and both picked what we call a katana to forge. We choose the type of sword based on what our partners like, and there’s *a lot* of blades to choose from. There are also other things that get engraved as well, just depending on the partners.”

He tilted his head. “My dad and my mom also have—er...had...wedding blades. I don’t have one myself. I remain without a partner, and perhaps it’s not entirely a bad thing.”

Da'vion glanced back to Estelle and Amaia who had taken Inarora to the counter, questioning her about her favorite treats. He bit back a smile, watching the three of them giggle amongst themselves as they took in Ina without question.

Kaedan glanced as well and a smile twitched upon his lips. "Got any recommendations for a visitor to this delightful realm?"

"Depends on your preferences."

"I like sweet things, although not *super* sweet," he said, thinking about the Naa'rani pastries he had while visiting the country a few years ago. "Anything that tastes like it's pure sugar is a no-go." He swished his tail. "Floral treats I like more than fruity. Nutty as well."

"Then you might like the lavender cinnamon rolls... Kainé's been making them since before the girls were born. It's not something on the menu, but he does have the recipe for it." He chuckled to himself, watching Estelle lift her sister higher to look beyond the display case at the baker working.

Kaedan rapped his fingers against his wheel grips in thought. "I'd be delighted to try it."

"Ina, what do you want?" Estelle chirped, putting her sister down to watch her new friend with curiosity. "We can share what we're getting if you wanna try those too."

"If you can't talk you can just point and we'll order for you." Amaia added, nodding in agreement. "Sometimes sissy or I can't talk so we use ESL. But it's okay if you don't know it!"

"Elven sign language, that's what Daddy calls it."

Inarora hugged her baby doll, who squeaked softly. Nervous, she looked over the options and then pointed at what she wanted to try.

"Inarora knows DSL," Kaedan said. "Dh'oriân sign language, I mean. Silly thing doesn't quite speak well yet, but she will on her own time. For now, she says very short sentences and utilizes DSL to supplement it. When...she remembers to."

Estelle reached up on her tiptoes to see over the counter, ordering what the three of them may want before looking back at her father. "Daddy, what do you and your friend want?"

"A lavender cinnamon roll and a croissant will be fine. I'm feeling rather peckish." He chuckled, talking to the baker instead of his daughter.

"Yeah, he wants that. Please and thank you." She put a couple coins on the counter, though she struggled to reach it. "You can keep the change."

The baker nodded, biting back his own chuckle as he disappeared to warm up the pastries in question.

Da'vion chuckled beneath his breath, avoiding looking at his daughter so she didn't catch him laughing at her antics. Kaedan fought back a snicker but his ears twitched with amusement.

"Oh, children," he remarked. "Silly little creatures. Gotta love them."

"Even though they grow up far too fast for my liking. I'm going to blink and Estelle will be able to defeat me in a sparring match. I'd say the same for Amaia but she's never shown interest in it."

"I'm going to blink and Inarora will be in university." He twitched his tail. "And hopefully, there's no war for her to join. Granted...I don't see her being much of a fighter." He chuckled.

"Are you both going to be staying for the festival tonight? Or is this an emergency 'have to get home as soon as possible' type situation?"

Kaedan sighed. "I suppose we can join the festival. I think my father will be fine."

Couldn't hurt, at least.

"We've still got a few hours before it's set up..." He paused, taking a breath before glancing to the baker handing his daughter a small box of pastries as she headed over to him. Kaedan twitched his ears with excitement, ready to try something new.

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As Kaedan propelled himself in his wheelchair, exhaustion had settled into his narrow facial features and his tail was drooping. Yet, the man kept pushing himself in his wheelchair despite the clear exhaustion.

"Would you like me to help?" Dav inquired, brows furrowing in concern for his newfound acquaintance. "You shouldn't push yourself farther than you should go."

Kaedan winced and paused for a moment, glancing to the side as though debating something. After a few seconds of pondering, he nodded, his curly hair bouncing slightly with the way he moved his head.

"I suppose so. Thank you for asking before touching my wheelchair," he said with a flick of his ears. "You'd be surprised how often people get handsy with my chair, specifically in other countries."

Inarora looked at her father. "Daddy, sit lap?"

Kaedan chuckled. "Oh... dear..." He patted his lap. "Only because someone is going to take over for me. You're lucky you're adorable."

Da'vion glanced over at his twins, taking a breath of relief as they played amongst themselves once Inarora climbed on her father's lap. "I can believe it. People are... *interesting*." Pushing Kaeden along, he watched his twins follow like little ducklings, admiring the lights strung up around town.

Kaedan wrapped his arms around Inarora and he held her as though she was a stuffie bear. Her ears twitched with happiness. Da'vion noticed her looking around in excitement, taking in all of the new sights with wide-eyed curiosity.

It wasn't long before they made it to the edge of the village where the shores lie. Lights hush into darkness, the waves lapping against the shore as merchants set up on solid ground. The setting was almost calming, few people gathered around before the festival's beginning.

"It shouldn't be too long now- and- *girls*?" He called out, watching them race into their mother's arms with delighted giggles.

Kaedan watched with amusement, exhaustion heavy in his emerald eyes. "Hm, their mother, I presume?"

"They look like miniature versions of her, don't they?" He admired his wife with adoration, watching her kiss each girl on their head with a loving smile.

"Indeed." He kissed Inarora on the top of her head. "Thankfully, my baby looks more like her grandfather than her mother." He chuckled.

Kainé approached soon after, giving Kaeden a small, but polite curtsy with a fanged smile. The kind of smile that brought out the shine of delight in her icy blue eyes. "Hello, you must be Kaeden. My girls told me about you."

Kaedan nodded, flicking his ears. "Yes, I am. Pleasure to meet you..." He canted his head to the side. "Not sure I know your name."

"Kainé. I'd introduce my eldest two... but it seems they've run off to go find their aunt." Kneeling down, she gave a brighter smile, waving to his daughter. "This beautiful girl must be Inarora. Is that your friend Sally? Amaia said you've been a wonderful friend to her today."

Inarora nodded timidly. "Mhm. I Inarora, dis Sally." She rubbed Sally on her face for what Da'vion could only assume was for the stimulation of the fabric much like his own daughters did.

"It's very nice to meet you." Reaching for her pocket, she retrieved a small crystal, holding out her hand to Inarora. "The girls are a little too small to be giving throwing knives,

but I do have a couple for you, Kaeden. Since my husband seems to have forgotten the rules of our culture.”

Inarora flicked her ears in surprise and accepted the crystal with excitement. Immediately, she started examining it, curious about the crystal.

Kaedan blinked in surprise. “Oh, my. But I don’t have one to give you, if I’m correct in assuming you exchange throwing knives?”

“Traditionally, yes. But it’s okay if you don’t have one.” Pressing a couple of the blades with caution into the palm of Kaeden’s hand, her ears flick in attentiveness. “A gift from us. Blessed Yule.”

Kaedan gingerly accepted the blades and reached behind him into his backpack to set them in a safe place. Inarora flicked her ears and quickly shoved her new treasure into her pocket.

“Would you like a hug, miss Inarora?” Her voice was soothing, arms open wide and gaze gentle as she watched the young girl for a reaction.

Joy flashed in Inarora’s eyes as she clutched her doll—Sally—and hopped out of Kaedan’s lap for a big hug from Kainé. She threw herself into her arms and Kaedan chuckled.

The snow elf is quick to catch her, wrapping her arms around Ina and pressing a kiss to her temple. “What a sweetheart you are.”

“Isn’t she an absolute darling?” Kaedan’s eyes sparkled with adoration.

“She’s a gem.” Letting go of her, she brushed the hair from Ina’s face and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Enjoy tonight for me, okay?” Holding a pinky out, she hummed in contentment, looking at Da’vion for a moment. Inarora held her pinky out in confusion, as if she’s never done a pinky promise before.

Linking their pinkies together, she presses a kiss to the top of Ina’s hand. “This is a pinky promise. You wrap your pinkies together to seal a promise. You can break a promise, but you can’t break a pinky promise.”

“Oh.” Inarora twitched her ears in curiosity. “I will.”

Kaedan smiled, crossing one arm over the other elbow as he lifted his hand to hold his head up. A wince crossed his face again but he tried to play it off as a twitch.

She gestures to Inarora, as if silently asking Kaeden if he’s okay or if she needs to go with the twins. Her brows knit together in worry, watching him with a confused expression. Kaedan flicked his ears and rubbed his face roughly. Da’vion noticed the torn expression on his face: he didn’t know whether to lie and say he was fine, or agree. It was clear he wanted to spend more

time with his daughter in the unknown world, but whatever was hurting him was not letting up.

“Sorry...” Kaedan said apologetically. “I, uh, sustained back injuries during my time in the war and...I thought I would be okay today, you know...pain meds and all.” He sighed, his ears drooping.

“If I may? I know a couple healing spells from my mother that may be able to stop the pain for a bit. Just long enough for you to spend the day with Ina and get you home safely.”

Kaedan lifted his head, a grateful expression crossing his face. “Truly?”

“Of course, as long as you trust me with this. I can only do as much as you’ll let me. Estelle’s best friend Lumina is very little but she still struggles with joint pain and things dislocating.”

Kaedan loosened a breath. “I’d appreciate it. I don’t know what happened.”

Resting her cold, nimble hands on his face, the feeling of magic seeped beneath his skin, easing his pain like a knot coming loose. It took a few minutes before the pain subsided, but soon enough, it was gone.

The visible tension in Kaedan’s body eased as Kainé finished her spell, Da’vion paused, a smile crossing his features. His wife had always been such a gentle soul, helping anyone in need in any way she can.

“Let me get you both a couple lanterns to set off for tonight so you can enjoy the festivities with us.” She soon vanished into the crowd, snapping Dav out of his thoughts as he looked over at Kaeden.

“Doing better?”

Kaedan nodded. “Yes. That...felt *amazing*.” He rolled his shoulders and breathed with relief. “I feel like I got a second wind. I wonder why my body decided to do that. I guess it’s just a bad pain day and it bled through...or the meds stopped working...” He shook his head. “Sorry, I’m rambling. Admittedly, we’re *still* trying to figure out the right doses and everything.”

Dav nodded, gesturing to his wheelchair. “Do you need me to push you still?”

Kaedan hesitated. “Well, not right now...but I’m sure by the end of the night I might need the help. Thank you, Da’vion. I appreciate it.”

“Let me know if you do, I’m going to go find my sister-in-law, I know she has my kids.”

Inarora walked alongside Kaedan, examining their surroundings in pure child-like curiosity. Admittedly, for Kaedan, he was feeling the same way as he glanced around. The cobblestone path of the town leads the way through different vendors and merchants, the lights strung about revealing where the path stops, leading to the beach where a few families were.

The cobblestone path was surprisingly smooth on his wheels. Usually, cobblestone was hard to navigate because of the constant vibrations, but these were strangely smooth to his wheels. It felt like a smooth bus ride.

Inarora looked up at him with her curious eyes. “Daddy, what this stuff?” She gestured around, not knowing a lot of what she was looking at and seeing.

“I dunno, sweetling, perhaps you ought to ask your new friends,” he said with a warm voice, offering an amused flick of his ears.

Off ahead, Kainé held two lanterns over her head, small twins racing around her ankles in excitement. After navigating past the two of them, she made it over to the father-daughter duo, handing him both lanterns.

Kaedan gratefully accepted them and showed one to Ina. “These are like our lanterns back home. Isn’t it interesting how lanterns retain a similar shape despite us being literally a world apart?”

Inarora took one in her hands, as carefully as she could after handing Sally off to Kaedan. She examined it with curiosity, her little tail wiggling with excitement.

“It really is a wonder, isn’t it? The twins set off a lantern together every year, even though we offer them two. Something about a birthday tradition.” She ruffles Estelle’s hair, picking up Amaia and kissing her nose. “Will you be joining us to set them off?”

“Mommy’s the queen so she has us set ours off first.” Estelle blurts, an embarrassed blush burning at Kainé’s cheeks.

Kaedan glanced at Inarora. “That sounds like fun, doesn’t it, Little Moon?”

Inarora nodded and smiled. Kaedan purred quietly, happy to see her smile. His child had the most contagious smile he had ever known. If she smiled, he was smiling and so were the people around them when they caught sight of her beautiful smile. He scratched between her ears and purred even more.

“Yeah!” Inarora agreed. “Can do, M—Mommy?”

“I appreciate you, darling.” Kneeling down, she handed one to Ina, placing it carefully in the palms of her hands.

Kaedan took a moment and realized Inarora called Kainé her mother. Pink blooms of embarrassment cropped up on his cheeks.

“Oh, Inarora. She’s not your mom, you can’t call her ‘mommy’,” he said. “Silly baby.” He glanced up at Kainé. “My apologies. She doesn’t have a mom, but she must have thought you could be her mother.”

“It isn’t a problem at all. If it would be alright with you, I’d be honored to be her honorary mother... seeing as her mother isn’t in the picture. This wouldn’t be my first time adopting a little one.” She gave Inarora a bright smile, leaning over to press a soft kiss to the tip of her nose.

Kaedan’s lips twitched in a smile as Inarora purred with delight. “Yes...thank you.”

“She’s a sweetheart.”

Kaedan flicked his ears and nodded. “Yes. She certainly is.”

“Come along now, let’s go with your daddy towards the beach.” Offering Inarora a hand, she looks ahead towards her husband off in the distance with the older kids. Estelle and Amaia giggle among themselves, Estelle leading her sister off to join the rest of the family.

Inarora accepted her hand and Kainé led her forward. Kaedan followed closely, intrigued by how easily she took to the family of strangers. Just hours ago, they were all strangers. Now, Inarora had an honorary mother whom she may not see again after they get home. Yet, it warmed his heart that Kainé was willing to adopt a strange child who had no mother.

A smile flickered across his face. Perhaps it was fate that this mishap of universe crossing happened. Kizmat, as they said in Dh’oriân.

“Ina, do you mind doing something *really* big for me?” Looking down at the young girl, she squeezed her hand in attentiveness.

Inarora nodded. “Mhm.”

“My lantern feels very heavy, can a big strong girl like yourself help me set it off?”

Inarora’s eyes brightened and her tiny tail wiggled. “Uh-huh!” She reached her hands out to accept the lantern.

Kaedan smiled softly. He had such a sweet baby. How did he get so lucky?

As they reached the edge of the shore, Kainé kneeled down to hold half the lantern, watching Inarora hold the other side. “You have to make a wish before we set it off, but don’t tell anyone what it is.”

“Kay,” Inarora said.

Kaedan let out a soft chuckle at the single syllable she managed. She closed her eyes and thought about her wish. What would a four-year-old wish for? Shoot, what would he have wished for at her age?

By the end of the long evening, Kaedan found himself holding Inarora in his arms and letting Da'vion push his chair while his daughter dozed off with Sally tucked into her arms and her thumb in her mouth. Typically by now, she would be tucked into bed at home, probably asleep.

"Thank you for pushing my wheelchair," Kaedan whispered as they walked., careful so as to not wake Inarora. "It's quite past her bedtime."

"It's not a problem in the slightest, I'm glad the girls made a friend to celebrate their birthday with." Pushing Kaeden along, he chuckled under his breath, leading the pair towards the bakery not too far off.

Kaedan tilted his head in thought. "We're going back to the bakery? Do we know if the portal is still there?"

Inarora twitched her ears and Kaedan gave her a little scratch behind them.

"There's a *high* possibility that it will be, magic that manifests somewhere has a tendency to linger for a while... a couple days at most."

"Interesting," Kaedan commented. "Hm...I don't want to wake up Inarora but at the same time, I'd hate for her to miss the opportunity to say goodbye to her new friends..." He glanced up at Da'vion and Kainé. "...and her new family." He twitched his ears and smiled.

Kainé chuckled to herself, kneeling down in front of Kaeden to place a cool hand on Inarora's cheek. "Sweetheart? I'm sorry to wake you up from your sleep... I can only imagine how tuckered out you are."

Inarora glanced up at Kainé, blinking sleep from her eyes. She pulled her thumb out of her mouth and wiped it on her hoodie.

"Hi, Mommy." She purred softly.

"Hi, baby. Do you wanna say goodbye to your other daddy and I before you go home? I'm sure you're so tuckered out. But don't worry, this won't be the last time we'll see each other. I promise you that much." Letting go, she held a pinky out to Inarora, ears flicking in sorrow. "I would never break a pinky promise with my little girl."

Inarora nodded and intertwined her pinky with Kainé's. "Mmkay, Mommy."

Kainé smiled. "How about a goodbye hug, Ina?"

Hopping out of Kaedan's lap, Inarora straightened and held out her arms for a hug. Kainé knelt to her height and wrapped her arms around the little one. Kaedan could *hear* Inarora's purr almost clearly. Then, Da'vion also knelt to give Inarora a hug. A purr of his own rose in his throat, happy to see that his child earned themselves a mother and a bonus father.

"We'll always be with you, little one," Da'vion said.

"You and Kaedan both," Kainé continued. "We may be in alternate dimensions, but we'll always be right—" she poked Inarora gently near her heart. "—there. Alright?"

"Okay, Mommy."

Kainé reached to give Inarora a goodbye kiss at the same moment Da'vion did. Kaedan chuckled, watching the couple stare each other down, briefly argue as to who would plant the kiss first, and then finally Da'vion relented and allowed Kainé to go first. After Kainé released Inarora, Da'vion took the little one into his arms again and planted his final kiss.

At least, final *for now*. Kaedan knew the couple would try to work out a way to connect their worlds again. Admittedly, Kaedan knew he would also look to figure out how. After all, his baby had two other parents she would want to see again.

He smiled as Da'vion released Inarora and then held out a hand to him. There was a faint smile across his lips.

"Til we meet again, Kaedan."

Kaedan grabbed his hand and shook it. "Til we meet again, Da'vion."

Kainé opened the door to the bakery and looking through this time, Kaedan could see Erazim's streets on the other side. He nodded at Inarora to hold his sleeve, and the pair went through the portal. But not before offering one final look to Kainé and Da'vion.

Kainé was waving at them, with Da'vion putting his forehead atop of her head. Behind that five o'clock shadow, Kaedan could see a ghost of a smile flickering upon his face. Bittersweet, both of them. Kaedan returned the bittersweet smile as he and Inarora crossed the portal.

Then, they were gone.

It was nighttime in Erazim, yet it was still lively as ever. Good, that meant they likely were not going to be waiting too terribly long for a bus back to their house. He glanced at Inarora and put a gentle hand on her head.

"We gotta get to the bus, so it'll be about half an hour before we get home. Think you can make it?"

Inarora gave a sleepy nod and they headed to the bus stop.

When they got home, they saw Byron was passed out on the couch, wrapped in blankets and his tea being warmed by the magic tea warmer. Careful not to wake his ill father, he gently pushed Inarora towards the hall with her room. She yawned and as much as he wanted her to brush her teeth, he wasn't going to push it tonight: it had been a long day. As much fun as they had, they were both simply exhausted.

He got Inarora dressed in her pajamas—a red flannel shirt with yuletide kittens on it and matching bottoms. Then, he gestured for her to climb into her bed and he transferred himself to her bed to lay with her until she fell asleep. He scratched behind her ears and she purred quietly.

“Daddy, will I see Mommy and Other Daddy again?”

He swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes. I very much believe you will, little one.” He planted a kiss on her head. “One day.”

Inarora smiled. “Okay, Daddy.”

They fell quiet again and within ten minutes, Inarora completely crashed. Sensing she was out cold, he transferred himself back into his wheelchair and left her room. He peeked over his shoulder again and whispered, “Good night, Little Moon.”