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A FAVOR SO SMALL

by Sara Phillips

Nights were meant for sleeping, he'd heard, yet he spent most of his lying awake beneath the covers. Thinking, mostly, and the deeper his thoughts ran, the darker the circles beneath his eyes the next day. Either he disguised them well enough to avoid detection, though, or they appeared so frequently that people accepted their presence as part of his default appearance, for they seldom questioned his sleep schedule (or apparent lack thereof).

Or, he supposed, they noticed but did not care. A possibility, but an irrelevant one. Far more pressing was the subject that had not only been consuming his waking moments, but extending them to all hours of the night as well, encroaching on what some would consider well-deserved rest. The soft moonlight prodding at the edges of his drawn curtains should have blanketed his drowsy eyelids, but instead it served as the backdrop to the churning uncertainties of an overactive mind.

Cassian liked to imagine he took most things in stride. Diligent on his worst days and a miracle worker on his best, he scaled every hurdle and bridged every gap with near-tireless

efficiency. He saw his duties through to completion regardless of circumstance, no matter the scope or constraints of time. It was perhaps his best and worst quality at once, to be so unquestioning and compliant in his ongoing quest to not only meet but exceed any expectation laid before him.

At the same time, he carried out his tasks with the firm understanding that the one who decreed them stood on the other side of a line in the sand that he could not cross. It was not blurred nor hidden in any capacity—at least, not from his vigilant eyes. He knew its boundary as well as the veins through his arms. He never strayed too close, never toed its sharp edge.

That is to say, Cassian knew, at his core, that he could step no closer to his king. His Majesty would remain eternally out of reach on the other side, near enough to see but too far to touch.

Because, you see, it was more than a warning, that line in the sand. Once breached, Cassian feared there would be no way to cross back to his place of safety. It would split the ground in two, a gouge in the earth that would surely swallow him whole. Proximity was sweet poison, and he knew himself well enough to fear its pull. Even a single sip would ruin him. The well would run dry in mere moments, for it was not meant for him, and he would be left craving the buzz of it beneath his skin for the rest of his days.

So, Cassian trained himself to be content with what he had. He was closer than most could ever dream, after all, and merely needed to ignore the scattered complaints and persevering desires of a foolish, pining heart.

And yet.

King Ariston himself, oblivious or perhaps apathetic to the careful wall Cassian maintained between them, had been the one to extend a hand. He’d offered an invitation of

saccharine temptation, sealed with a quiet sincerity that left Cassian aching. He would have preferred a mocking or deceitful intent, almost, because the honesty in Ariston’s eyes had been worse, somehow. It pierced a stake of guilt through his chest, from having to look that candor in the face and deny its single request.

Its simple request, at that.

* * *

It happened out in the gardens, a small slice of tranquility set aside for Ariston to venture undisturbed. More often than not, however, its care was pawned off to Cassian—not out of negligence, but in fact the opposite. Cassian found a gentle respite in the flowering shrubbery and hanging lilies, and his lingering gaze had not gone unnoticed by Ariston all this time.

Thus, these days, Cassian took every garden outing as a chance to check in on his favorite blossoms. He waved off the gardeners and landscapers who attempted to play their part multiple times, more than content to tend to the greenery himself while Ariston took a private lunch or they discussed the court’s most pressing matters.

Those afternoons were, for lack of a more descriptive word, nice. He still felt useful, despite having pillaged the chores from their respective workers, and despite seeing his freedom to do so for what it really was: one of the numerous indulgences Ariston slid his way, though the only one he ever took.

That day, however, he had little time for such luxuries. He sat across from Ariston at a small, round table, scrolls of parchment unfurled before him with their corners haphazardly pinned by an inkwell and smooth garden stones. He swept a quill across its surface, pausing on occasion to sink its tip into the waiting ink or to glance up at Ariston—who, meanwhile, nursed a glass of wine, a lean finger tracing its rim as he swapped occasional words with Cassian.

They had a gala of sorts approaching—a pompous affair, really, stiff and not at all like the dazzling festivals they both much preferred to host. Still, an unfortunate necessity if they were to keep their wealthiest families pleased; everyone sought a ripe opportunity to flash their biggest jewels and finest silks.

So, the afternoon saw the king and his aide discussing the necessities of the upcoming event. Cassian’s brow furrowed in faint concentration as they ironed out the vital details, taking notes in elegant, swooping script.

Though far from the most thrilling of conversations, time passed and decisions were made. The frightening efficiency of Cassian had an outline for the event carved and polished within the better part of an hour. He paused only long enough to roll his head from shoulder to shoulder and relax the stiffness they’d accumulated before sparing Ariston a glance.

“Your time is appreciated as always, my liege,” he said, dipping his head with a polite smile, “though I wouldn’t wish to encumber your afternoon any longer than necessary. Please entrust the remaining details to me and expect a report for your final approval by week’s end.”

It wasn’t a dismissal—he lacked that manner of authority—but rather an offer of freedom from such dull tedium. For a moment, Cassian received nothing in response, then a noncommittal noise made its way out of Ariston’s throat. He made no move to depart, however, and the two lapsed into unremarkable silence, save for the timid rustle of a distant breeze against leaves.

Then, unprompted, Ariston gave a slight tilt of his head. Though the motion was subtle, it was still enough to catch Cassian’s gaze. He looked up again, and his hand immediately stilled over the parchment at the rapt scrutiny flickering to life in the crimson eyes across from him.

“You know,” Ariston started, the slow words dripping with a sudden, reckless sort of consideration, “you needn’t cling to such formalities here.”

Cassian’s owlish look dipped into a slight frown. “...Sire?”

Ariston hummed as he lifted his glass to his lips. “Yes, like that.”

Cassian blinked, waiting for him to elaborate, but he only took a sip of his wine and lowered it back to its place on the table. For a moment, he seemed almost as expectant as Cassian, but at the latter’s continued silence, Ariston sighed—a soft thing, not irritated or disappointed but enough to have Cassian shifting his weight with a narrowed gaze and displeased press of his own lips.

“My apologies,” he offered, “but I fear I don’t follow, my liege.”

“Ariston.”

A pause.

Then, “I’m sorry?”

“To *you*,” he murmured with all the quiet, terrifying veneration of an oath, “it ought to be Ariston.”

Cassian’s heart lurched, as if it could dodge the spear that lanced his spine at the words—whether it was more of a thrill or a chill, he couldn’t quite pinpoint. Confusion and disbelief, perhaps, paired with a sudden surge of hope that lasted mere moments before being quashed beneath stern reality.

All in all, a convoluted storm of emotions that he could only hope had not played across his face in plain display. Surely, *surely*, Ariston was not proposing what it sounded like.

“I—” Cassian cleared his throat, though it did nothing to stop tense caution from bleeding into his tone. “I believe I must have misunderstood. Could you—”

“Call me Ariston. I don’t mind.”

Mouth snapping shut, Cassian forced a long, slow breath into his lungs. There wasn’t much to misconstrue about such a direct statement, the frankness of which felt like a bucket of cold water compared to the usual furtive duplicity of most royal types. His head spun with the implications of it, and as he could hardly pen a smooth stroke in such a state, he slowly returned his quill to its waiting inkwell in a stall for time.

“...Given the difference in our titles,” Cassian said eventually, voice wavering between uncertain and firm as he withdrew his hand to his lap, “I believe most would consider that rather improper.”

Ariston’s lips twitched, as if this was all little more than a slight amusement to him, despite the way it had the ground at Cassian’s feet splintering into fragile pieces. “Well, I suppose we should count ourselves lucky that I am not ‘most,’ then.”

No, Cassian thought. Something within him threatened to crack. *You’re certainly not.*

“You’ve served me for years,” Ariston continued, patient and pointed, as though explaining to a child. “I can think of few others who know me as well. Surely we’re beyond the point of all this—” his fingers fluttered in a vague gesture—“*decorum*. You don’t believe we’ve earned that much?”

We. Cassian wanted to smile, bitterly, but he kept his expression cooled to neutrality. There was no ‘we’, not really. He had seen Ariston unmasked and not—he had seen him on his best days and at the lowest of lows, known by no other. But Ariston? What did Ariston know of *him*? He only saw an advisor sculpted of smooth clay, imperfections brushed away by a thumb and vulnerabilities concealed behind the finest glaze.

Balance was a delicate concept between the two of them, inherently weighed in Ariston’s favor. He knew so little of Cassian, and yet he inherited the right to call him by name; Cassian, meanwhile, kept some of Ariston’s deepest secrets firmly behind lock and key, right next to his name, which he could never dare utter aloud, no matter how many of their days were spent together.

“Of course, it is my greatest honor to have spent so much time in your presence.” Cassian rubbed one thumb over the other, the nervous motion hidden beneath the table. “However, I wouldn’t wish to forget myself. I must insist against such familiarity.”

Ariston raised his wine once more, swirling it slightly and watching its ruby contents spin within. After a moment, his matching gaze cut to Cassian. “And if I said I *wanted* you to?” he pressed. “Would you then?”

Something dark and confusing burned in the depths of his eyes—eyes like red wine, eyes that Cassian could get drunk on half as easily. Even now, he struggled to look away, pinned beneath the weight of an unspoken wish he failed to understand, of some possessive want or need that evaded his fullest comprehension.

Posed as a question, it carried the illusion of choice. Cassian found himself reminded of age-old adages, of friends throwing themselves off cliffs and only the witless following—but this was not a friend. This was his king, and if asked, Cassian would do far worse than leap from the precipice. To do as much was his sole duty and purpose; there was no choice in the matter, not to him.

And five minutes prior, he couldn’t have imagined ever hoping for otherwise. He would have readily vowed against the existence of any limit to his deference, but now he ran face-first into a rampart that stood miles high and just as wide, imminent and unavoidable.

In front of it, he hesitated.

He could not outright refuse. Cassian raked his mind for an adequate response, and in his search settled for a weak deflection: “Might I ask what brought on this request?”

The odd look in Ariston’s eyes vanished with his next blink. He leaned back in his seat, slow and languid next to Cassian’s rigid posture. “You know I care little for maintaining perfect etiquette at every hour. Perhaps I’d like to see that reciprocated on occasion.” He raised and lowered one shoulder in the hint of a shrug. “That aside, is it truly so inconceivable that I may simply enjoy your company?”

Ah—so that was it.

At once, Cassian thought of peaceful nights shattered by panicked screams of the haunted, of candlelit tomes read aloud to a crumbling king until his chest ceased its heaving. He thought of lonely balconies and creased brows, empty hands grasping for something long gone and a single silhouette never joined by another.

The king was a lonely man.

He’d known this for some time, having seen all that he had, yet never once had he imagined it would be *his* company sought to fill the void. Perhaps he should have. To overlook the possibility as someone who strived to prepare for every outcome felt irresponsible, especially now that it confronted him as reality.

They were close in age and had indeed lived as a light and its shadow for several years. It was not unheard of, per se, for a king and their advisor to forge something of a friendship, but...

But Cassian also thought of his own selfishness, of the way he would seek a mile if given an inch. He thought of how he could never go any further, and how the delusion of equal standing would likely vanish the moment another caught them in sight—and even if he did go

further, how it would only build more and more to be left in the dust and locked behind closed doors. He could keep a secret like a dead man, but if he *were* the secret, he would surely degrade into a corpse himself, hollow and constantly wanting for more.

Unable to maintain eye contact any longer, his gaze slipped past Ariston’s shoulder, tracing the curl of a distant vine. He could almost feel it from there, as though it coiled up his legs and wove through his ribs to cage his heart beneath thorns.

Only the most imprudent of fools could find themselves in such a position as this, he mused. After all, most would rejoice at the revelation that their king cherished their presence.

“I’m glad to hear that you do,” Cassian spoke, soft and genuine. “I assure you the feeling is mutual.” He paused, a yet-to-be-spoken *‘but’* hanging in the air between them.

He could still let them have this. They could play at friendship, at closeness, and then one day he would simply have to stand aside and watch—*support*—Ariston’s planned attempts to court the great emperor. Whether he failed to do so or not, it would never be Cassian. He was too far below, his blood too tainted. He had all the devotion but none of the pull. He would never be more than an afterthought, a steady statue at the corner of the room.

So, though he would break one day, it would not be today.

“...but I believe there are far more suitable companions for you than I. Forgive me.”

Cassian hesitated, then added, “Your Majesty.”

Even worse than mere denial, it was a step backward, added distance—the closest to a warning he could dare to give, and one that tasted like poison on his tongue. Yet better, surely, than the intoxicating allure of those wine-red eyes.

It was difficult to say for certain, though, for he refused to meet them again. Nor was he required to, as Ariston did not press him further, quietly finishing his drink and, eventually, taking a solitary leave.