



The AU With Talyn's Crew

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Contents

The AU With Talyn's Crew 3

 Chapter 1: Pulsars 3

 Chapter 2: Foodcubes And Friendships 11

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An AU where Stark, Chiana, Jool, Jothee, and Crais are all stuck on Talyn together.

No-one likes Crais. Crais likes no-one. Talyn likes all of them. They reluctantly have to try and be a crew until they can find Moya again.

AU notes:

- Talyn and Moya got a bit longer together before Crais kidnapped him.
- Chiana and D'Argo never dated, though they were close, and Jothee and Chiana are currently dating. No cheating storyline.
- Stark joined Moya's crew immediately after being rescued from the Gammak Base, so he and Zhaan some more time together before she died.

Chapter 1: Pulsars

Talyn's Crew watch a rare natural light show together.

Fun fact: I wrote, edited, and posted this chapter with my first ever concussion! After resting my mind like a safe and responsible person for a few days, of course, but still.

"Come on," Chiana laughed in her strange way that Stark could never quite be sure was a her thing or a Nebari thing, pulling him by the hand through Talyn's corridors. Talyn pulsed and beeped around them, urging them along faster as the young Leviathan's own eagerness grew.

Stark had spent a good deal of his life pretending (so much pretending he did, sometimes he forgot why, most of the time he didn't care, he just needed to pretend pretend pre-

tend) he didn't like to be touched, so he flinched when Chiana's hand enclosed his, stammering out a half-hearted protest as he was forcibly led to the command room.

In truth, though, he felt nearly as excited as she and Talyn did. The T'kari region was famous for the beautiful bursts of light that would fill it at certain times each cycle. The fact that they *happened* to be there just in time for one sent a thrill of wonder down his spine.

He remembered all of Zhaan's talks about fate and the guidance of the Goddess, and he wondered if maybe she was guiding them from beyond. His beloved Zhaan had given him many gifts in their short time together, it wasn't hard for him to imagine she would lead him to this beautiful sight if she could.

"Finally," Jool said when they entered the command room at last. "What the frell took you so long? It's starting any microt now."

"Where's Crais?" Stark asked nervously, looking around as they all settled on the floor, facing the main viewport. "Surely he wants to see?"

"Sleeping," Jothee answered, just as Chiana flashed him a mean grin that Stark was glad wasn't truly aimed at him.

"Talyn thought it would be best if we don't wake him up, you see," she added, head tilting and twitching, her grin growing all the sharper. "We, uh, we figured he's probably already seen a lot of things like this, you know, traveling around as a Peacekeeper and all that."

"He's probably sick of it by now," Jool added in her prim way, though she too was smirking.

Talyn beeped in that Sebacean code that Stark was still struggling to learn, but it didn't take Peacekeeper training to know that he was giving his enthusiastic agreement. *Let Captain Crais sleep, he deserves it*, Stark could imagine him saying.

Stark sniggered under his breath, knowing as well as the others (sans Talyn) did that Peacekeepers did not stop to sightsee. This was a nearly-unique, unlikely-to-ever-happen-to-him-again opportunity poor Crais was missing.

Too bad, so sad, Stark may be half-mad but he's also glad!

Any day they could get one over on Crais without consequence was a good day in Stark's books. Any day they could get Talyn to help them with it, knowingly or not, was a frelling phenomenal one.

Any further thoughts on the subject were interrupted when the show began. Stark gasped in wonder as light in a thousand different colors arced and curved and burst across space, more shining and magnificent than anything he'd ever seen before.

Zhaan would like this, he thought, and it was a bittersweet notion. It was one of his good days, which had been coming more and more often as of late, so he was able to push through the melancholy and focus on what Zhaan would've wanted: for him to enjoy himself and take comfort, not pain, from her memory.

He saw Chiana's shoulders tense and relax out of the corner of his eye, and wondered if something similar was running through her own head. She knew Zhaan too, loved her albeit in a different way than he did, missed her just as deeply.

Chiana sought comfort where she usually did those days, leaning heavily against Jothee's shoulder. A few microts later, Jool was pressed into Chiana's other side, all three holding each other as they continued to stare mesmerized at the pulsars.

Stark took a moment to look away from the bright lights outside and smile at the young ones, glad they had found such a lasting bond in each other.

He sat alone with his knees drawn up to his chest, his arms resting loosely on top of them. He felt no bitterness towards the others, but he surprised himself with a spike of loneliness. Once again, he felt the deep ache of Zhaan's loss.

Strangely enough, he found himself missing Crichton, too. He was one of the only real friends he'd ever had, after all. And the others on Moya, though he wasn't as close to any of them, still counted him as a friend.

Zhaan aside, none of them had ever held him, though. No-one really had. Stykera rarely were allowed to remain with their families and Stark had been no exception, growing up barely taken care of and never cared for.

He rested his chin on his arms, forgetting about the pulsars and their beauty as he wondered whether he'd maybe been held like the others held each other when he was too young to remember it. He thought of Zhaan's touch and her warm arms around him, and tried to pretend that the memory was enough.

He was knocked back to the present by a DRD hitting into his foot. Startled, he blinked at it for a moment. The DRD rammed him again, and he chuckled, moving a gentle hand along its carapace. *Alright, young one*, he thought at Talyn, despite knowing the Leviathan could only read the mind of his captain, Crais. *No sadness or madness today, I promise.*

The DRD chirruped happily, and Stark decided to pretend that meant Talyn understood. He smiled gently, feeling himself calm as he pet it.

Looking down as he was, he didn't see the look the other three shared. He didn't see as one after the other grinned. He certainly didn't see as they slowly, quietly broke apart and moved towards him.

Stark would never be entirely sure what happened. From his perspective, he heard a snigger behind him, his world devolved into a tangle of limbs and panic, and then he somehow ended up with a giggling Nebari in his lap.

"Chiana, what are you— *move*," he demanded, pushing ineffectually at her. His arms went from mostly useless to entirely useless as Jool and Jothee pinned him from either side, both laughing along with Chiana. He snarled at them, still confused and more than a little frightened by the sudden assault. "Let me go, get back to your side!"

"No-pe, metal man," Chiana chirped, lightly whacking his mask. She wiggled a bit, settling herself, before resting her head in Jothee's lap and her feet in Jool's. "I'm, uh, *comfy*."

"But—"

"Shhh," Jool scolded, rather ironically given her habit of ultrasonic yelling, putting a finger to her lips. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion and I am not going to miss it because of you two bickering. Shut up and watch the pulsars."

This isn't mere bickering, Stark almost protested, but he stayed silent instead, turning back to the viewport with a pout that soon melted away under the beauty of the cosmic show. She did have a point, arguing about his unexplained and unjust confinement could come later, the pulsars couldn't.

After his heart slowed back down and the jumble of voices in his head quieted (as much as they ever did) once more, Stark found he didn't mind this new arrangement much, actually. Jool's head was resting comfortably on his shoulder, and Jothee's arm was wrapped tightly around him, and Chiana...

Okay, Chiana was still mostly unwelcome in his frelling lap, but she was warm and pressed against him and he thought he might understand the sentiment now that he wasn't panicking about it. Jothee, Jool, and Chiana were not Zhaan. They weren't even Crichton. He didn't feel very comfortable with them quite yet. But they were *there*, and they were holding him, and he couldn't find it in himself to want them gone.

The pulsars didn't begin to slow down and fade until several arns later, and he rediscovered the desire to push the others away around the same time he discovered a crick in his back from being in the center of an impromptu cuddle pile for so long.

He had thought that maybe they'd release him once the show was over, but no-one gave any sign of intending to move. He began to consider methods of escape, from jumping up as fast as he could and taking them by surprise to outright begging, when he heard it; a soft, repetitive in-and-out of breath.

Chiana was snoring. She'd fallen fast asleep, still in his lap. To his horror, Stark realized that Jool was not far behind her, her own whistling snore (not a snore, according to her later on, but natural sleep sounds her kind made — he wasn't sure he believed her) joining Chiana's.

Stark turned to his last beacon of hope, praying to the Goddess (he didn't entirely believe in her, but whatever Gods the Baniks once worshipped were wiped from history and Zhaan believed in her, so it was to her he prayed) that his fellow ex-slave would take pity on him and help him regain his mobility in this trying time.

But Jothee just shrugged and sent him an amused look that said 'what can you do?', and he too fell asleep soon after, his fingers trailing softly in Chiana's hair. Stark huffed out a betrayed breath; what did he expect from a Luxan, though, if not loyalty to his mate above else? If Chiana didn't want to move, Jothee wasn't about to move her.

"Help me," Stark hissed desperately at the ceiling. Several of Talyn's inner guns popped out of it, aiming at the pile of bodies holding Stark in place. "Not like *that*!"

Much wiggling and the assistance of several DRDs later, Stark managed to pull one of his arms free. His annoyance level high, he was about to enact a plan he called 'push them all off and laugh in their betrayed, half-awake faces' when he felt a surge of something.

He paused, turning his head slowly this way and that, spreading his senses as far as he could get them while wearing his mask. He could just barely feel it, and he couldn't quite tell who it was coming from, but he was certain now that one of those pressing into him was having a nightmare. Pain and fear not his own just barely grazed his men-

tal landscape, igniting the curiosity of those souls that hadn't yet passed on within him.

Comfort them, some of the voices urged, mostly Baniks themselves. Some souls could linger in a Stykera's being for years, and Stark recognized some of the oldest within him among the ones speaking.

Waking them up would end their suffering, Stark reasoned, ready to go through with the pushing plan.

Oh, don't give us that, now, Yorlash, one of the first Stark had ever helped pass, admonished him. *You're kinder than that, boy.*

Occasionally, a soul stayed with a Stykera their entire life, only passing when the Banik himself did. Secretly, Stark hoped that Yorlash would be one that stuck with him. His voice, as rare as was that it became clear above the din of the others (*more often now, everything's calmer and quieter now, he almost feels okay again*), was familiar. Comforting.

Stark sighed as his face and body stilled instinctively in preparation, and rather than push the trio off of him, he raised his hand to the buckles on his mask. Energy flowed out of him as he carefully selected the memories he wanted to share and gently pushed them into the minds of those around him.

"Shush, young ones," he said quietly, rubbing his hand first through Jool's hair when she whined softly in her sleep, then over Jothee's cheek when he followed her with a growl. "It will be alright. Let me soothe you and rest peacefully."

They settled under his care, their minds reflecting peace and joy back at him. The last time he had attended someone who wasn't dying had been Crichton, and he had been suffering greatly at the time. Stark had forgotten, almost, what bliss connecting to a healthy mind could bring to him.

He should put his mask back on, he knew, now that his duty was over. But with his energy freed, he could feel the wonderful things that crossed their minds as if he was dreaming them himself. He brought them that peace, he thought, it wouldn't hurt if he took part in it.

He only meant to indulge himself for a few microns, of course intended to shut himself back into his mask. But with three minds (four, he could just feel the Leviathan they inhabited on the very edge of his awareness) anchoring him and little risk of need-

ing his mask anytime soon, and with the gentle emotions of his slumbering crewmates washing over him, Stark couldn't help but drift off himself...

When he next woke up, Stark felt a concentrated presence of rage and pain nearby. Automatically, still half asleep, he went to soothe it – it was only when he was quite forcefully shoved out of the other's mind that he realized his mistake and awoke more fully.

He opened his eye, blinking the crust out of it, to gaze sheepishly at Captain Bialar Crais.

"I thought I told you to stay out of my head, Banik," Crais said snippily, barely glancing away from the monitor he was at to glare at him.

"Sorry," Stark muttered, half-hearted but honest. As much as he didn't like Crais, it wasn't right to use his power on someone who'd made it so clear that they didn't want it; this was one of the only things in which Banik culture (such as it still was), his masters' training, and his own experience agreed completely.

Crais looked up as Talyn beeped and flashed, his face pinching in the way it did whenever he was arguing with the Leviathan using their bond. Talyn flashed and beeped harder, and Crais sighed in something quite close to defeat.

Stark tensed when the supposedly former Peacekeeper turned towards him, his eyes running over the four beings lying in the middle of the floor. His face held a crisp, cool expression that Stark thought hid the suppressed disdain he could sense from him fairly well.

"I trust you slept well?" Crais said stiffly, uncomfortably. Ah, so that was what Talyn was on him about this time.

"Yes, sir," Stark replied warily. He didn't like answering to Crais, but Talyn saw him as his captain, so they all had to go along with it if they wanted to stay on board.

Someday, he thought, that would change. Talyn would break from Crais's influence, and return to Moya's side to heal his mind and soul. It was an overly-hopeful thought, Stark admitted to himself, but he was at his core a hopeful being.

Impossible hope had kept him going throughout his life, through slavery and the Chair and other terrible things, so he would hold onto it. He would hope and pray for Talyn's freedom as fiercely as he had once done for his own.

"Good, good," Crais muttered, most likely to appease Talyn rather than as a sincere sentiment, and turned back to whatever he had been doing before. Stark knew better by now than to ask about it.

Knowing (*hoping*) that no further conversation was coming, Stark began the struggle to put his mask back on one-handed, his other hand still pinned by Jothee. He would have rathered to wait a bit longer before sealing his energies back in, but Crais's general presence and the terrible feelings Stark wasn't allowed to soothe made that idea unpleasant.

He cursed under his breath as the buckle slipped from his grasp. He was quite good at removing his mask one-handed, it made it easier to soothe the dying with his other hand while they waited, but putting it back on was a different matter.

Stark flinched when a hand that was not his own grasped his mask, terror flooding through his body in a cold wave. It never meant anything good when someone else touched his mask.

A microt later he realized that it was just Jool, having woken up unnoticed at some point, and she was merely trying to help him buckle his mask back on. When the familiar weight was again settled around his neck and head, Stark sent a grateful smile and a stammer of thanks at her, relieved to have his energies contained safely once more.

"There," Jool yawned, patting his mask and ignoring Crais's presence. She settled her head against Stark's chest, eyes fluttering shut. "All good now."

"Yes, child," Stark agreed quietly, resting his head on top of hers. "All is good now."

Chapter 2: Foodcubes And Friendships

Two ex-slaves argue about food for a while.

Another chapter that was made during the concussion.

This chapter technically vaguely takes place before the first one, but I thought the first one worked better as an opening chapter ☐☐

Rationing wasn't that hard for an ex-slave.

Jothee looked down at the plate of foodcubes in front of him. Resources were limited on-board Talyn, but Crais's Peacekeeper training included proper rationing, and so far they'd been able to stay relatively well-fed between commerce planets.

While Jool complained endlessly about how little she was allowed to have each meal and Chiana stole snacks in between, Jothee had no problem with the amount he was given; it was still more than he'd ever been fed in his life.

Well. Maybe he'd eaten better once, when he was young and his parents were in charge of how much he got. But he couldn't remember those times well, so they didn't really count.

They had two flavors of foodcubes this time around: green and red. Jothee bit into a green one, humming appreciatively. The others called the flavor bland, but he thought it was pretty good. Better than the gruel he used to get in the mines, anyway.

Jothee heard the clink of a dish being set on the tabletop. He looked up to see Stark, awkwardly sitting across from him with his own plate of foodcubes. The Banik glanced at him and away, focusing on his food, which he ate slowly and in small pieces.

Jothee smirked. Baniks, man. No matter where he went, they were always the same with their food. It didn't take much to keep their 'shells' going, even slave rations were usually too much for them. He liked Baniks, they were always nice to other slaves — even freely sharing their leftover food, which they hoarded to keep the slavers from realizing they were overfeeding them.

Jothee frowned, remembering the Baniks he'd grown up around. Making friends was hard when you were a slave, the least reason for which was how often you were sold or transferred away from each other. But there were a few he'd grown close with, ending up with the same masters often enough to form a bond.

Br'ki, Tamil, Kyron. All dead now, killed with thousands of others. Just to get to him.

He sighed, pushing the feelings away. It wasn't the first time he had to deal with the death of a fellow slave, though maybe now it would be the last. At least Emira, his oldest friend, had been transferred to housecare before they were sold. She was still out there somewhere, alive and hopefully with a better life than she had in the mines; Tamil always used to joke that she was too dainty for the likes of them, maybe now she was in a place that fit her better.

Lost as he was in his thoughts, it took a moment for Jothee to realize that his plate was empty. He looked down at it mournfully. He must be getting used to more food, he thought wryly, if he was still hungry after finishing his lunch ration. *Three meals a day — would the wonders of being free never cease?*

Jothee got up to clear his plate, stealing another glance at Stark. It was just the two of them today, the others were down on a commerce planet that offered a wide range of valuables for cheap — including slaves.

Jothee was just getting used to being free, he wasn't about to risk getting captured again. Besides, he was on Stark-sitting duty, making sure the half-mad man didn't put them all in danger by running off on some ridiculous plan to free any Baniks that might be down there. He could understand the sentiment, of course, but their own survival needed to come first.

For lack of anything better to do, Jothee sat back down at the table, trying not to look enviously at Stark's still mostly full plate.

He must have failed, because a moment later the plate was being pushed in front of him.

"Here," Stark said, gesturing at the plate. "I'm, I'm not going to finish it."

Jothee shook his head a bit more fondly than he maybe should have, considering they barely knew each other, reminded of many other times some Banik or other had pushed their food at him. His face crinkled and his fond mood dropped when he saw just how many foodcubes were left.

"I know you people don't need much, metal-face," Jothee said, pushing the plate back towards him, "but you definitely need to eat more than that."

"I'm not hungry," Stark explained, a bit too quickly. Jothee frowned deeper, opening his mouth to argue that there was no way he wasn't still hungry, but Stark cut him off, "Please. I hate waste. Just eat it, eat it, just eat it. Please. No waste."

Jothee's heart twisted. Stark reminded him painfully of Kyron in that moment, frantic and caring and insistent that nothing ever be left over.

The Baniks were slaves from birth to death, for generations. Strangely, this had made them *more* stubborn in Jothee's experience, at least when they could get away with it. Stark had that familiar look in his eye that meant he'd rather starve than eat the foodcubes he'd just given over.

Jothee still pushed the plate closer. He decided not to ask what kind of *dren* a Banik had to go through to get eating issues, and tried a different approach instead.

"I'm not hungry either, really," he lied. More truthfully, he added, "I'm used to getting a lot less. Keep it."

"I won't eat it, I—" Stark protested, trying to push the plate back towards him.

"If not for now then for later," Jothee insisted, successfully winning the impromptu plate-pushing contest they'd found themselves in. His Luxan side's strength didn't count for nothing, after all. "You can put it in your hoard."

Stark's one visible eye widened. "I, I don't know what you're talking about," he told him, panicked. "I wouldn't, I'd never hoard food. We're rationing, there's nothing even to hoard, I—"

"Calm down, metal-face." Jothee chuckled. "I grew up around Baniks, remember? I know about the food thing, man. It's fine."

"Oh." Stark visibly relaxed at that, staring at Jothee with a blank face, rather a panicked one. Looking away, he muttered. "Well, I still don't, well. I don't have a hoard. There wasn't— Never enough to— Scorpy never fed me enough for me to have anything left over," he said thickly, the words coming out as though forced. "I got out of practice, I suppose."

Jothee was surprised at the admission. Beyond repeating a few things about the 'Chair' (over and over and over again), Stark rarely talked about his time in Scorpius's capture. Between Crichton's fear, his own brief meeting, and the fact that the man had somehow managed to *starve* a Banik, Jothee decided he should probably do his best to avoid the *trasnik* for the rest of his *frelling* life.

"If you don't eat the food and you don't hoard the food," Jothee began, scowling, "then what the hezmana do you do with it?"

Jothee almost felt bad when Stark cringed back at his tone, but hey, he didn't like waste either. Old habits, he supposed.

"Zhaan used to make me eat more," Stark admitted quietly. "And, and then she'd eat whatever I didn't." He smiled softly, his eye glazing in memory. "She would always joke that she'd lose her figure and grow fat if I didn't learn to eat more."

Something sad came over his face then, and Jothee knew he needed to act quickly if he wanted to stop the man from falling into one of his 'I miss Zhaan so I'm going to act like a useless, whining lunatic now' moods.

"Listen, that's great and all," Jothee told him, standing up and taking the plate of foodcubes with him, "but it don't excuse nothing. What kind of Banik doesn't have a proper hoard? Do you want Crais to figure out that you don't need to eat as much as he thinks you do?"

Stark paled, years of trying to keep the Peacekeepers from figuring out exactly that catching up to the poor Banik. He stood, matching Jothee. "Of course not!"

Jothee grinned and spun on his heel, heading towards the door. "Come on, then."

Stark followed obediently, giving him a curious look. "Where are we going?"

"To find a spot for our new hoard, of course," Jothee informed him. He whacked the top of the doorframe as he exited through it, watching the ceiling light up in response. "Hey, Tal, got a place we can hide this?"

The lights along the corridor flashed in sequence, and a sleek, red DRD appeared to lead them. Someone had stuck a row of spikes along the top of the drone, which Jothee was fairly certain was probably on Talyn's request.

"Thanks, buddy," Jothee told Talyn, patting a wall as he followed the DRD. "You're the best."

Talyn beeped happily at the praise, making Jothee smile.

"The others won't like it if they find out we're hoarding food," Stark said after a while, still scurrying after Jothee as they kept pace with the hyperactive DRD. "They

never used to like it when Rygel did that, no, and we have so little, even less than Moya did, they won't like it at all.."

"So we'll share it with the girls." Jothee shrugged. "I don't see what the problem is, Stark. This way Jool will stop whining, Chi *might* stop stealing, and Crais will stop getting on all our backs about rationing. Everyone's happy, everyone wins."

"Share?" Stark asked, blinking (or was it winking? Jothee was never sure what to call it with Baniks, considering the eye thing). He tilted his head down, muttering to himself. "Everyone wins, everyone wins, everyone's happy..."

Stark turned his face back to Jothee just as the DRD pulled off the grate of a vent, grinning brightly. "I like that."

Jothee kneeled down to place the plate of foodcubes in the vent. He looked up at Stark, returning his smile. "I thought you might, metal-face."

Baniks, man. They really were some of his favorite people.

— end of "The AU With Talyn's Crew" —