Out of Time

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Summary

Vegeta and his eight year old son Trunks go back in time to warn the past of the Androids' arrival. When the machine needs repairing the two of them are stuck. At least the past has good food! There's just one problem... Bulma begins to fall in love with Future Vegeta, instead of his younger self. Can Vegeta ensure his son's birth, defeat the Androids, and save the world?

Notes

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.
The Time Machine

Chapter Summary

Vegeta and Trunks attempt to finish a time machine to escape their world.

"Pass me the spanner," Vegeta mumbled from behind the screwdriver in his mouth. He glared up at the troublesome bolt, tempted to force it into place, but held back for fear of stripping the thread. The last thing they needed was a loose bolt on the journey knocking them off course.

"Twelve or fourteen?" Trunks asked.

"Fourteen."

A small hand appeared, holding the spanner, and Vegeta took it, then tightened the last bolt, using the screwdriver as a lever to keep it straight. He handed the tools back to his son's waiting hand, before sliding out from under the machine, taking a deep breath. Working underneath the time machine was claustrophobic, reminding him of all his years spent hurtling around space in a cramped space pod. Not an experience he cared to repeat.

Vegeta stood up, brushing the dirt off his jeans. Not that it did much good since he'd worn the same pair of pants for three months, and no amount of washing would ever clean them, even if he'd wanted to waste precious water and soap on the task.

Giving up, Vegeta looked at the machine in front of him. After two and a half years of trying to transform Bulma's designs on paper to a physical machine, he was nearly done. The sleek egg-shaped machine was large enough to fit two people - something he'd adjusted the designs for since Bulma had originally only planned on sending one of them back. The sides were a mix of different coloured metals. Not particularly aesthetically pleasing, but if it didn't assist in getting them the hell out of here, Vegeta didn't care. He had let Trunks spray paint the side, and the boy had scrawled 'Hope' across the side, then proceeded to paint stick figures of himself, Vegeta and Bulma on the side in a garish red.

He glanced at his son. He might not be a talented artist, but at only eight years old, Trunks had been surprisingly helpful in building the machine. He grasped the schematic concepts better than Vegeta, and in the two and a half years since Bulma died, every time Vegeta felt like blasting the machine and destroying it because it wouldn't come together like it should, Trunks would make a quiet suggestion on how to proceed, and they would try again.

"We are missing one more part," Trunks said, dropping to his knees to pour over the designs spread out on the concrete floor. "If we can get that, we can give it a trial run."

"Lunch first," Vegeta said firmly, noting the boy's dark circles around his eyes and wondering when the last time either of them had a full night's sleep was. "Then let's figure out how to get the last part."

His son glanced up from the designs and gave him a solemn nod before following Vegeta to the basin in the corner of the sparse bunker they'd called home for the last two years. Vegeta scrubbed the grease out of the scars and nicks on his skin. Trunks did the same, carefully soaping his hands.
and copying his father almost exactly.

Vegeta dried his hands, then opened the small bar fridge he'd manage to scavenge a year back, pulling out the last of their food. Since the table meant for dining was currently covered in tools, Vegeta made Trunks a sandwich on top of the fridge, carefully cutting off the edge of mold growing on the crust, then slathering it in the last of the butter. He pushed the plate into the boy's hands.

"What about you?" Trunks asked.

Vegeta shrugged, attempting to appear casual even though his stomach had been screaming for food for the last two days. "I'll get more food when I go out for the last part." It wasn't a lie exactly. If he found the opportunity to pick up supplies, he would. Otherwise they'd be leaving soon anyway, and Vegeta knew the past had plenty of food.

Trunks frowned at his father, but sat cross legged on the edge of the makeshift bed Vegeta had made for him out of a pile of blankets, then began to eat, hurriedly pecking at the food like a bird.

Vegeta had plenty of experience in starvation from when he was a child. It had been an easy way for Frieza to get him to do his bidding. The thought of his own son experiencing a fraction of what he did made him feel more like a failure than his inability to defeat the androids ever had. He turned away from Trunks and closed his eyes, leaning on the work bench. The chances of them starving to death were just as likely as being killed by the androids. Every time he went out, he was at risk of being caught, and he grew more and more concerned that eventually he wouldn't come back at all, and Trunks would be left to fend for himself.

He opened his eyes again. No. They were not going to die. Not from the Androids or from a lack of nutrition. He would see Bulma's plan through and get Trunks out of this time, just like he'd promised her.

"We need a supercapacitor," Trunks set aside his empty plate and picked up Bulma's old smartphone. He tapped away on it then turned the screen around and showed Vegeta. "A laptop should have one."

Vegeta studied the image, frustrated at how difficult everything was. Most of Bulma's electronics had been destroyed when she died. Two years ago and she would have probably had the part lying around. "There was an electronics store not too far away," he said, mapping out the directions in his head. "Your mother dragged me along to it a few times."

Trunks opened a panel on the side of the machine. "It goes here. We have a standard capacitor, but it will overload."

"Pack our bags and get them in the machine," Vegeta instructed as he headed for the door. "When I get back, we are installing the part then leaving immediately."

Trunks nodded sharply. "Yes, sir."

Vegeta opened the door and glanced back at Trunks. "You know the rules. Wait twenty-four hours before declaring me dead. Don't leave the bunker until then, if you do, do not look for me. Stick to the plan. Get the supercapa-thing and leave."

Trunks gave him a wavering smile. "See you soon, Papa."
The electronics store was easy enough to find, even amongst the rubble of the devastated city. It was next to one of Vegeta's favourite all you can eat restaurants. Bulma had bribed Vegeta into coming with her multiple times by promising to stop at the restaurant next door. Vegeta picked up a slab of concrete blocking the door and moved it to the side before entering the shop.

Bar ceiling lights dangled from the roof, their florescent bulbs flickering on and off. He started walking around the ransacked shop, searching for any remaining computers. The front of the shop had been looted, probably years ago. Vegeta made his way into the store room and started pulling down boxes. Finally, he found a laptop. He ripped off the back of it, and studied the circuit board for a supercapacitor. Deciding not to risk dismantling it without proper tools, Vegeta pulled out the board and tucked it into his pocket.

Grinning with relief, he made his way back out of the shop, but froze when he heard two sets of feet land behind him.

"Well, well, who do we have here, sis?" 17 drawled.

"Looks like the monkey has finally decided to show his face."

The two androids chuckled as Vegeta turned slowly around.

"Don't you two think you've done enough damage to this city?" Vegeta asked. "There isn't anyone left here to torment."

18 cocked her head, her blonde hair swishing to the side. "You're here."

"And we do love to torment you, Vegeta," 17 said, a wild grin spreading onto his face.

Realising there was no way out without a fight, Vegeta clenched his fists and powered up, transforming to Super Saiyan. "Let's get this over with then."

Trunks put the packed bags into the time machine. The coordinates were set, and the control panel open with tools on standby to put in the new capacitor. It would take Trunks less than a minute to get it in, then the two of them could finally leave.

The sooner the better. Trunks knew they'd run out of food in the area. The amount of food Vegeta had brought in had been depleting over the last month, and Trunks was all too aware that most days his father went without. The quicker they escaped this time, the sooner they could get food. And clean clothes. And a shower. Trunks grinned at the thought. He only vaguely remembered what it felt like to be clean and well fed. Like memories of his mother, they were hazy recollections that he couldn't quite grasp.

Trunks checked his watch. It had been two hours. His father should be back by now. Either Vegeta hadn't found what he was looking for at the shop, and went to another city to hunt for the part, or…

With a frown of concentration, Trunks reached out and felt for his father's ki. Nothing. That meant he was suppressing it. Trunks refused to think of the alternative.

A bang at the door made Trunks jump. He ran to heave open the heavy metal door, letting out a yelp as Vegeta fell through the doorway, landing at his feet. The man's clothes were torn, and his stomach was stained with dark red blood that had smeared all over Vegeta's hands.
"Papa!" Trunks dropped to his knees beside his father.

Vegeta's trembling hand pressed something into Trunks' palm. "Finish… it…" he gasped out.

Trunks looked at the circuit board in his hand, then back at his father. "But… Papa, let me help you."

"Finish it!" Vegeta commanded.

Trunks blinked back the hot tears threatening to fall, then ran to the time machine. He removed the supercapacitor from the circuit board, put it in place in the machine, then shut the control panel and screwed it shut.

"Looks like I found the monkey's base," a cruel voice echoed down the tunnel leading to the bunker.

Trunks gasped and ran back to his father. "Papa, we need to go!"

"Leave," Vegeta choked out, his breath rattling in his chest. "Go now."

"No!" Trunks hauled his father to his feet and dragged him towards the machine.

"I found the monkey and his son! Wait until I tell my sister." Android 17's head poked around the door and he grinned at Trunks. "Sorry about your dad, kid. But don't worry, you can see each other again in the next dimension." His palm rose, ki forming into a small ball in front of it.

Trunks dropped his father and powered up into a Super Saiyan, then threw the biggest ki blast he could summon at the android.

17 blocked the blast, then scowled and looked down at his ripped shirt. "Hey! That was new you little punk." He strode into the room and grabbed Trunks by his arm. "Any last words?"

Trunks threw the android a glare. "Eat dirt, you metal freak," he spat.

17's lip curled in a sneer, his grip on Trunks' arm tightening until there was a sharp crack. Trunks whimpered, his legs buckling under him.

The room erupted with a bright purple glow and Android 17 dropped Trunks' arm as he flew backwards. Vegeta stood beside the time machine, one arm raised still from the blast he'd let lose. His other hand clutched his stomach, blood seeping between his fingers. His chest rose and fell sharply with each ragged breath. He coughed, then his eyes rolled back into his head and collapsed to the ground in a crumpled heap.

"I told… you… to go," he said weakly as Trunks tried to pick him back up again.

"Not without you," Trunks said, gritting his teeth against the pain in his arm as he took his father's full weight to haul him up into the time machine. Trunks climbed in after his father and shut the door, then pushed the button to start it up, letting the air out of his lungs as the machine whirred to life.

Android 17 stirred in the rubble. His eyes widened, then narrowed and he lifted his hand, forming a ki blast aimed at them. Just before the ki blast reached its peak, ready to be released, Trunks hit the launch button and closed his eyes, praying that his mother's design would work.
Bulma looked up from the mechanical insides of a robot she was repairing and grinned to herself at Vegeta's furious yell. The force of it echoed through the house and all the way to the basement lab. True, she had left all the doors open so that if he did yell out she'd be sure to hear him, but the man still had an impressive set of lungs on him.

After returning from space smelling worse than a garbage dump, she'd ushered him to the bathroom, then left him with the most atrocious colour combination of clothing - a bright pink shirt and yellow pants - knowing exactly what kind of reaction she'd get from the Saiyan prince.

Bulma started tightening a bolt, chuckling as Vegeta's extensive curses in different alien languages floated downstairs. She really shouldn't rile him up. The man was volatile on his best day, and she knew his past involved exterminating planets, but she couldn't reconcile the monster everyone thought he was - hell, who he openly claimed he was - with the surprisingly clever man she'd come to know.

Yes, he was arrogant, rude, and demanding, but admittedly so was she at times. Her curiosity of the man had been piqued when he stopped looking shell-shocked from the events on Namek, and started firing back insults to match hers like they were playing a pro tennis game. Despite their daily verbal battles, he never once did anything more physical than clench his fists. During his time on Earth, he'd never lifted a threatening finger against her, or the Namekians residing at Capsule Corp. But it was when Vegeta walked into her lab and proceeded to explain all the improvements she could make to the spaceship, using complex physics that took up her floor to ceiling whiteboard to illustrate his point, she'd realised that she'd gone from being intrigued by him, to being in actual danger of liking the man.

Then Vegeta had left, taking the newly improved spaceship with him, and she'd found, oddly enough, that she'd missed his presence. Or at least missed being able to banter with someone even remotely at her intellectual level.

Bulma put the spanner down on her work bench, giving up on the robot for now. Seeing Vegeta's fury up close would be a much more amusing way to spend the afternoon. She stepped towards the lab's doorway, already mentally preparing herself for the argument to come, but spun around abruptly at a loud whirring noise behind her. She couldn't see the cause of the sound, but the papers in the lab lifted into the air, and even her hair blew backwards as a wind gust entered the lab. After a what resembled a clap of thunder, a machine appeared out of nowhere, right in the middle of the
Bulma's hand flew to her chest in shock, and she froze, staring at the odd machine. Whatever it was, even from this distance she could tell it had been well designed, although the finishing touches of paint looked like they'd been done by a child.

The wind died down, then the top of the machine opened. A young purple-haired boy, his dirty face streaked with tears, lifted his head up out of the machine and looked directly at her.

"Help!" He let out a sob. "My papa… please help him." He hoisted a dark-haired man, his face obscured by what looked like grease and blood, out of the machine. They landed on the lab floor with a thud, and the boy started shaking the man. "Papa, wake up."

Of all the strange things to happen in her life, having a machine appear out of nowhere in her lab was really the least of them, so Bulma sprang into action and ran to the boy's side. "Let me see. Where's he injured?"

"His stomach," the boy said. "There's so much… so much blood."

Bulma pulled off her lab coat, turned it inside out, then held it against the wound. "Hold this here," she instructed the child.

He did as she said, his face pale and hands shaking. Bulma made a mental note to check him over after she'd helped the man.

She felt for a pulse on the man's wrist. It was there, but weak. He didn't have long. "He's going to need a senzu. I've got one left."

The boy looked up, his eyes narrowing in a manner that was oddly familiar. "You need to stay and help him," he commanded.

"I will," Bulma said gently. "I'm going to get a senzu bean. It will help him."

The boy nodded slowly, then turned back to his father. "We made it, Papa," he said. "Don't die. We made it."

Bulma backed out of the room, then ran upstairs to the kitchen. She hunted through the medicine bag, strewing contents all over the kitchen bench.

"Woman, what is the meaning of these garments," Vegeta demanded, stomping into the kitchen. "These are not a warriors clo-" His cut off abruptly, surveying the mess. "What are you doing?"

Bulma found it and held up the bean triumphantly.

"Whose blood is that?" Vegeta came right up to her and pinched the end of her sleeve, lifting her arm and inspecting her person, an oddly concerned expression on his face. "Are you injured?"

Bulma glanced down and realised she had the man's blood on her top. "It's not mine. Come with me. I might need your help." She pulled her sleeve out of Vegeta's grip, then grabbed his hand and dragged him down to the basement with her.

"Tell me what is going on!" Vegeta said as they stepped into the basement. He yanked his hand out of hers and took in a sharp breath as they both surveyed the bloody scene.

The young boy leaned over his father, murmuring under his breath. Tears rolled down his cheeks,
and when Bulma came over he threw her an accusatory glare. "Fix my papa."

"That's what I'm here to do," Bulma said. She knelt beside the dying man, and touched his face.

"Bulma?" The man before her stirred, his eyes flickering.

Bulma gasped, recognising that husky voice, laced with an accent not heard on Earth. "Vegeta?" she asked hesitantly, but underneath the blood and grime, it was his dark eyes staring up at her. She glanced back at the other Vegeta, who stood in the doorway with his mouth slightly agape.

Bulma turned back to the man on the floor. It didn't matter who he was right now. He was dying and needed her help. "Here." She tried to feed him the senzu bean. He turned his head away with a growl.

"Trunks," he muttered. "Trunks first."

"Papa, no! I'm fine, take the medicine."

Vegeta stared up at Bulma, his black eyes haunting. "The boy… first," he gasped out.

"I only have one bean," Bulma said. She looked at the boy next to her and realised he was cradling his arm. Judging from the angle it was broken. Bulma broke off a fraction of the bean and handed it to Trunks, hoping it would be enough to at least kick-start the kid's healing process.

The kid snatched it and popped it in his mouth. He gave a sigh and stretched his arm out.

Bulma gave the rest to Vegeta. He chewed on it weakly, grimacing as he swallowed it. As his body began to heal, he let out a gasp, then struggled to sit up with a groan.

"Papa!" Trunks threw his arms around his father, and Vegeta awkwardly patted the boy's back.

"I'm fine, brat. Stop your fussing." He glanced around the lab, his gaze pausing on Bulma, then on his other self. "It worked." He looked back at his son, a grin spreading on his face. He started laughing, almost hysterically. "The machine worked."

"Of course it worked!" Trunks said, grinning back at his father.

Vegeta shook his head. "To be honest, I figured we had a seventy percent chance of the machine blowing us up instead of taking us here."

"And uh… where exactly did you come from?" Bulma asked, climbing to her feet and trying to wrap her head around the fact that there were two Vegeta's in the room. And one of them had a son!

"The future," Trunks said, getting to his feet. He helped his father up too. "We are from the future."

Vegeta - the younger version not covered in blood - stepped forward, his brows knitted together. His gaze flicked from his doppelganger to the boy, and back again. "How is this possible?"

Future Vegeta rubbed his face, smearing the blood and grime over it even more. "What is the date today?"

Bulma told him, and he frowned at her in an exact replica of the younger Vegeta's expression.

"And what time?"
"It's just before midday," she said.

Future Vegeta looked at his son, then to his own blood-soaked hands. "I need a shower. And food. Then I'm going to kill Frieza. Then I'll explain why we are here."

"Wait… Frieza?" Younger Vegeta asked, his eyes boggling. "Frieza is dead."

"Is he?" Future Vegeta tilted his head, his hard gaze appraising his younger self. "Come on, Trunks," he said, glancing at his son. "Let's get cleaned up then I can yell at you for not obeying orders."

"I saved your life," Trunks said, pouting as they headed to the door.

"Yes," his father replied. "But you disobeyed a direct order. Don't think saving my life gets you off the hook that easy." He glanced at Bulma. "We will get cleaned up in the third-floor guest bathroom. Clean clothes would be good if you have any suitable. And I have more fashion sense than my younger counterpart so don't even think about supplying me with garments like his."

Younger Vegeta stepped to the side to let the father and son leave the room, then looked at Bulma. "What… what just happened?" he asked, his lost expression reminding Bulma of how he'd looked when he'd first come to stay.

Bulma's gaze fell to the bloody lab coat on the floor beside the mysterious machine. "I have no idea."
Against all odds, they'd made it to the past.

Vegeta and Trunks sat opposite the younger Vegeta and Bulma at the Briefs' round oak dining table, the sun streaming in from the bay windows and the combined smells of multiple cooking pots in the adjoining kitchen permeating the air. It was oddly familiar, seeing this room again, the table once more laden with so much food it nearly buckled with the weight of it. Back in their time, this room didn't exist anymore. Capsule Corp was nothing but a pile of rubble and memories.

Mr Briefs was away at a conference, but Mrs Briefs laid out all the food, grinning at Trunks as he consumed everything within arm's reach, then kept bustling around in the kitchen to continue cooking.

Vegeta hesitated, overwhelmed by all the choices and unable to decide where to start. In the end, he plucked a simple green grape from a bunch, then turned it over in his fingers, trying to recall what it tasted like. He bit into it, the juices bursting in his mouth, and as the sweetness settled on his tongue, it finally sunk in... They were here. Just over a decade in the past.

He could hardly believe the damn machine had actually worked, especially given it had been him, not Bulma who'd built it in the end. He'd used her designs, true, but there were so many things he could have got wrong. One loose bolt could have stuck them in between times. An overloaded engine could have blown them up. Wrong co-ordinates would have put them in the wrong time and place. He had a good understanding of physics, and basic mechanical skills thanks to his years flying space pods, but even he could admit that his primary skillset lay in knocking people out with one punch, not in advanced mechanical engineering and time manipulation.

Luckily, Bulma had made her plans detailed enough for him to follow, writing her notes without her usual abbreviations and technical terminology. Once he realised how she'd written them, he'd felt nauseated, knowing that she'd planned for her own possible death so carefully. So, Vegeta, with help from Trunks in the later stages of the project, had cobbled the machine together as best he could and, the science of probability be damned, it had worked. Although… things hadn't gone exactly to plan. They weren't supposed to arrive inside Capsule Corp. He certainly wasn't supposed to turn up half dead and reveal to his dumbfounded younger self that he had a son. Regardless, if this was the situation they were in, Vegeta knew he would find a way to make do.

Now that he was clean and had fresh clothes (Bulma had provided him with a new pair of jeans and a shirt, both thankfully in an aesthetically pleasing blue) he couldn't help but feel more upbeat. He had food, a place to sleep that wasn't buried underground, and an old enemy to exact revenge on. What more could he want?

Trunks seemed happier too. Somehow Bulma had wrangled up blue pants and a green t-shirt that fit the boy, and seeing his son clean, warm, and now fed made Vegeta feel lighter than he had in years.
Vegeta kept his eye on Trunks, who shovelled food into his mouth so fast it was surprising he hadn't choked yet. The chances of the boy being born in this time had been significantly reduced. It wouldn't take the young Vegeta and Bulma long to work out exactly who Trunks' mother was, and if he knew his younger self - which he did - he would avoid that outcome at all costs.

Vegeta had never wanted children, thinking they'd be a burden to hold him back. A tool for someone to use against him. Maybe that thinking was correct, but he didn't know back then what having someone to care for meant. He hadn't understood how fighting for someone other than himself could push him past his limits, further than he could have imagined. Before the androids arrived, forcing him to reassess his priorities, he hadn't been much of a father to the kid. It had taken Trunks and Bulma becoming a hairsbreadth from death not long after the androids turned up and started their path of destruction for him to realise that deep down, he cared for them a lot more than he'd ever been willing to admit aloud.

Vegeta avoided looking at Bulma. His chest ached every time he glanced her way. He'd spent the last two and a half years trying to survive, keep his son alive, and build the machine, and he'd never really had time to grieve her loss. Now here she was in front of him, with that ridiculously puffy hair and ever watchful gaze.

"I've never seen so much food," Trunks said, baring his teeth into a grin and breaking Vegeta's train of thought. He tore into a chicken leg, ripping off the meat like a feral animal.

At Bulma's horrified look, Vegeta contemplated telling his son off for his lack of manners, but he wasn't bothered by Trunks' enthusiasm, and was just happy that for once he didn't have to worry about there being enough food to feed them both. The table before then held a mouth-watering spread of food he hadn't seen since the destruction of Capsule Corp seven years prior - a day that had claimed the lives of Bulma's parents, broken Bulma's leg in two places, and provided the catalyst for Vegeta to finally ascend to Super Saiyan. Not that it had done him any good.

"It's lovely to have a few more people in the house who appreciate my cooking," Bulma's mother said with a broad smile as she added extra plates to the table. She hadn't seemed fazed when Bulma told her that a Vegeta from the future had come and needed feeding. She'd just started preparing plates of food as if it were an everyday occurrence.

Young Vegeta sat beside Bulma with his arms crossed. He didn't eat a bite, even though Vegeta remembered being starving when he'd got back from looking for Kakarot in space. He still wore that ridiculous outfit, and it looked like he hadn't figured out how to button the pink shirt up straight either. He kept glancing from the boy to his older self, a frown on his face. "You sired a half breed," he said suddenly.

Vegeta finished the grape and picked up a sandwich to buy himself time. He'd wondered how long it would take his younger self to start peppering him with questions, and was frankly surprised he'd lasted long enough to let him get to the table. He narrowed his eyes at the other Vegeta. "It's not like there were any Saiyan women to procreate with."

Young Vegeta peered at the boy, his gaze pausing on Trunks' hair. "He doesn't look Saiyan at all."

Trunks looked up from his food with a furious stare. "I could kick your butt and show you just how Saiyan I am."

"Trunks..." Vegeta warned, feeling a headache coming on. Three quarters of a senzu bean had healed his injuries, but he still felt drained. Even a magic bean couldn't heal the toll that years of not enough sleep and food had on him. "No trash talk at the dinner table."
Young Vegeta uncrossed his arms and leaned towards the future pair. "You had a child. How did that even happen?"

Vegeta took a slow bite of his sandwich, sinking his teeth into the soft bread and cheese, through the tangy of the chutney and into the meaty centre. Nothing had tasted so delicious in his life. With a deep sigh of contentment, he chewed then swallowed before settling his gaze on his younger self to answer. "Well… when a man and a woman have certain feelings for one another-

Young Vegeta made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. "You know what I mean. Who is she?" He demanded. "Why didn't she come with you?"

"She's dead." Vegeta's gaze rested on Bulma without him meaning to, as he recalled the last time he'd seen her alive.

"Purple hair," young Vegeta muttered. "A Saiyan with freaking purple hair."

"Hey!" Trunks snapped. "I'm right here. Papa told me he could be a jerk when he was younger, but you're just being mean!"

The last time Vegeta had seen her, Bulma had been fizzing with excitement, having just completed the plans for the time machine. She'd thrown her arms around him and kissed him in front of Gohan and Trunks and he hadn't cared because for the first time in years they had hope.

"Your father has purple hair," young Vegeta said, ignoring Trunks and turning to Bulma. "I haven't seen any other humans with that colouring. Is it common?"

"No…" Bulma replied.

When Vegeta had finally extracted himself from Bulma's embrace, he left to hunt for parts for the time machine, eager to help her start on it straight away. But when he returned, the house was caved in, still smoking from the heat of ki blasts…

Vegeta blinked slowly, taking in the Bulma in front of him. She had her blue eyes fixed on him. The ache in his chest throbbed and he desperately wanted nothing more than to leap across the table, pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless.

"Purple hair is quite rare," Bulma said, her eyes widening. She glanced at the other Vegeta next to her, who looked back at her in horror.

"Her?" He edged away from the woman, and fixed a furious stare on Vegeta. "You slept with that foul-mouthed wench?"

Trunks looked from Bulma to his father and back again. "Mama?" he said, making Bulma gasp. He frowned and squinted at the woman, then looked at his father. "Is that really her?"

"You don't recognise her?" Vegeta asked, surprised even though in hindsight Trunks' lack of interest in the woman up until now should have made that apparent.

Trunks gaped at Bulma. "I knew I'd get to see her in this time, but… but…" He threw Bulma an accusatory glare. "You don't look like the pictures." He dug into his pocket and pulled out Bulma's smartphone. When he pulled up a picture of Bulma and Trunks from when he was about five, and stared at the screen, then looked up at the woman in front of him. "Your hair is different." He cocked his head and studied her. "And you have… stuff on your face."

Bulma flushed under Trunks' sharp stare, and Vegeta laughed. "I always said that makeup crap
made you unrecognisable."

Bulma reached over and took the phone from Trunks. She started swiping through the images. "This is… I can't believe… you're really…" She looked at Trunks, her face pale. "You're really my son?"

Trunks shrugged, then continued eating, using his hands instead of the cutlery provided, but he kept his gaze on Bulma.

"He'd just turned six, when you…" Vegeta trailed off, not wanting to recall how he'd broken the news to Trunks when the boy had come round from his own injuries. Not wanting to remember how Trunks had sobbed and screamed, and Vegeta had let him, but held back his own grief knowing that he couldn't let that distract him from keeping his son safe.

Bulma swallowed hard, then looked back at the phone and continued swiping. She stopped on one and held it up for young Vegeta to see. "Wow. Are you smiling?" She let out a small laugh. "We look… kind of happy."

Vegeta knew exactly which photo she was talking about. Gohan had taken the photo. Trunks had successfully landed a hit on Vegeta and he'd been so proud of his son that he'd genuinely smiled, even knowing Gohan had the phone in his hand with the camera on. Bulma had been just as thrilled at the outcome of their spar and had cheered them both on, grinning ear to ear.

Young Vegeta frowned at the photo, then edged on his seat to the opposite side of Bulma. "That is not me," he declared. "And it never will be."

Vegeta sighed to himself. Yes, they'd well and truly changed this timeline.

He started eating his sandwich again, savouring the taste even though it was tempting to go down Trunks' route and devour everything in sight.

Just as he finished it, he felt the twinge of a powerful ki growing in the far off distance. Vegeta grinned, his excitement rising. Finally! He would get his chance to finish what that third class clown had stolen from him years ago.

Frieza was coming.
Frieza's Return

Chapter Summary

Frieza's back. Back again.

Chapter Notes

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

Bulma couldn't stop swiping through the photographs on the phone. There were several her and Trunks, and it looked like an older Gohan was in a number as well. Photos of Vegeta were few and far between, and she wondered if he just wasn't around much, or if he was the photographer.

She glanced at him through her eyelashes, taking in his angular jaw, and his dark eyes, currently focussed on his son. The slight turn of his mouth could have been a smile or a frown – the version of him she knew had odd expressions as well, and she hadn't worked out how to translate them into human emotions. Before this version of Vegeta had arrived, she would have assumed he wasn't in photos because he wasn't there, but he seemed… different somehow.

Future Vegeta met her stare and the corner of his mouth quirked a little more upwards. Definitely a smile then, even if it was laced with an odd defiance, as if he was daring her to say something.

Bulma dropped her eyes back to the phone to avoid his burning gaze. In the photos Vegeta appeared in, his expression was usually stern, and she could make out traces of worry in the way his eyebrows knitted together. After the rare photo after the whole family smiling, there was another snap of Vegeta watching Bulma as she bent to give Trunks a hug. There was no hint of a smile of his face, only this odd wistfulness. Like he wanted to join them, but his pride wouldn't let him.

What had happened between this future version of her and Vegeta to make them turn from constantly bickering to, if the photos were any indication, falling for each other and raising a child together? Sure, she could admit that Vegeta was attractive, but what could have possessed her to sleep with a man like that, let alone form a long-term attachment? In the time Bulma had known him, Vegeta had never shown any indication of caring about anyone but himself.

And yet, this older, ever-so-slightly less acerbic version of the man clearly cared for his son. He watched the boy out of the corner of his eye constantly, and despite looking weary, had a glimmer of pride in the look he gave Trunks when the boy stood up for himself against the younger Vegeta's comments. Maybe the Saiyan wasn't as emotionally stunted as she'd thought.

And what about Yamcha? she thought, realising her on and off boyfriend of ten years hadn't crossed her mind once since Future Vegeta had arrived.

Bulma put the phone down, feeling ill. There weren't any photos of Yamcha at all. Or any of the Z
fighters other than Gohan. She could only guess, but for Vegeta and Trunks to have risked coming back to the past, something terrible must be supposed to happen in the future.

Vegeta - the one from this time, currently dressed in a pink shirt - rose from the table suddenly, his tan skin paling. "You were right," he said to his future self. "Frieza is alive and heading to Earth. And there is another similar power level… is that…?"

"King Cold," Future Vegeta finished. "Frieza's father," he added for Bulma's benefit.

Bulma let out a squeak of alarm, and stood up herself. She'd only just stopped having nightmares about Namek, and now that monster was on his way to Earth, with his father? "How long do we have?" she asked the older Vegeta.

"An hour or so. No need for concern." He waived a hand airily, then took a long sip of a glass of orange juice. "You can leave Frieza to me."

"Can I fight him too?" Trunks asked through a mouthful of cheese and crackers.

"Not if you keep talking with your mouth full," Future Vegeta replied.

Bulma would have burst out laughing if they hadn't been talking about Frieza. It was something her father would have said to her when she was a child.

At Trunks' pouting face, Vegeta frowned. "We shall see. I might let you get a punch or two in, but I am taking the kill shot."

"Yes!" Trunks fist pumped the air.

"What?" Bulma slammed her hands down on the wooden tabletop. "You can't let him fight Frieza!"

Trunks scowled at that and both Vegetas gave her identical smirks.

The younger Vegeta seated next to her rolled his eyes skyward and let out a huff of air. "If the spawn is genuinely a Saiyan, age is irrelevant to whether he should fight or not."

"And Gohan is younger than Trunks in this time, I believe," Future Vegeta pointed out. "He'll be there as well."

"Gohan?" Trunks' eye lit up. "I remember him. We used to train together right? Before…" His face fell, a shadow casting over it and dulling the fire in him.

"You could probably beat the snot out of him now," his father said. "You far outclass him in this time."

Trunks grinned again, jiggling in his seat.

Bulma took in the excitement in the boy's eyes. Trunks clearly worshipped his 'Papa', and it was obvious that Vegeta would do anything for his child. Surely he wouldn't let Trunks fight Frieza if there was any real danger?

They all gathered in a desert region where based on the direction of the incoming power levels, Frieza would land. Vegeta ignored the other Z fighters as they arrived, focussing his attention on his future self and the brat.
Much to his disgust, at the mere mention of Frieza that familiar fear he'd lived with his whole life had crept into the pit of his stomach. Sensing the monster's ki had only made it worse, and as he watched the small black dot in the sky grow as the spaceship approached, he had to fight the urge to throw up.

He'd just got used to the idea that his life was finally his own, only to discover that man who'd been the cause of every physical and emotional pain Vegeta had been through, the man who'd seen fit to take a small boy and torture him to gain compliance and twist him to his own violent needs, was still alive. Yet, his future self seemed unconcerned. Excited even… He'd done it, Vegeta realised. There was no other reason for him to be unconcerned by Frieza's arrival. He was a Super Saiyan.

Suddenly, all the fear Vegeta felt melted away. As the queasiness dispelled, he unclenched his fists and allowed himself a small smirk. He was disappointed at the knowledge that he still would not be the one to defeat Frieza, but a future version of him was better than Kakarot. And he would claim his birthright and ascend eventually. His destiny demanded it.

Future Vegeta and Trunks ignored the Z fighters as well, although Trunks glanced at Kakarot's brat a few times. Bulma explained the situation to everyone, and Vegeta had to smother a laugh at how she carefully avoided mentioning that the boy was also her son, and how his future self had noticed, but not reacted beyond a slight tightening of the mouth.

"That's crazy," the scar-faced weakling said, wrapping an arm around Bulma's waist. "And this future Vegeta thinks he's strong enough to take out Frieza now?"

Vegeta noticed his older self stiffen and throw a deadly look at the man, lingering on the arm around Bulma. So, the relationship between him and the woman was more than a fling then. How pathetic. He couldn't imagine caring about that blue-haired banshee. Sleeping with her, okay, admittedly that wasn't outside the realm of possibilities. She was gorgeous, with those curves and unusual colouring, and he wasn't completely immune to a pretty female. But gods she was annoying with her constant blabbering. How she could be any more than a quick fuck was beyond him.

"He seems to think so," Bulma said, stiffening slightly in the weakling's arms. Her gaze fell on Future Vegeta and he gave her a glare, watching her squirm.

Vegeta grinned at her discomfort. She was worried one of them would tell the weakling who the purple-haired brat was. He could smell the fear coming off her. "If future me says he can kill Frieza, then he can kill Frieza," he said, addressing Bulma. She broke her gaze with his older self and met his stare instead. "And we know for certain that both you and I are destined to survive this encounter with the lizard, otherwise how would the other events unfold?"

"What's he talking about?" The three-eyed man asked.

"N…nothing," Bulma said quickly.

Vegeta grinned at her discomfort. She was worried one of them would tell the weakling who the purple-haired brat was. He could smell the fear coming off her. "If future me says he can kill Frieza, then he can kill Frieza," he said, addressing Bulma. She broke her gaze with his older self and met his stare instead. "And we know for certain that both you and I are destined to survive this encounter with the lizard, otherwise how would the other events unfold?"

"What's he talking about?" The three-eyed man asked.

"N…nothing," Bulma said quickly.

Vegeta just laughed and turned back to watch his other self interact with the boy.

The brat bounced on his toes with endless energy, watching the approaching spaceship eagerly.

"Alright, Trunks," Future Vegeta addressed his son, crossing his arms and glaring down at him. "Recite the rules of engagement. Number one…"
arms locked at his sides. He looked up at his father, matching his stern expression with one of his own. "Show no fear."

"Two?"

"Strategy over strength."

"Three?"

"No hesitation, no mercy."

Vegeta's eyes widened at the recitation. Those were the same rules his father had taught him when he was a child. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd repeated them to himself like a mantra before a big battle.

"Good. And four..."

"Obey Papa's orders."

"And if it all goes to hell?"

Trunks' serious expression broke into a sly smirk. "There are no rules."

"Kami," Krillen muttered. "If it wasn't for the hair I'd think Vegeta had his own mini-me."

Vegeta hid his own smile. There was no way he would get involved with the woman and impregnate her now that he knew to avoid it, but he had to admit that despite his colouring, the brat had the attitude of a Saiyan. It would be interesting to watch the kid fight. If his older self had trained him, the boy would likely have good technique. But would his human blood make him weaker in battle?

Vegeta sat down on a nearby rock and watched the spaceship continue its descent. He'd find out soon enough.

His ki fizzed around him, and he had to purposely suppress it to avoid making his excitement obvious. Finally, after over a decade the moment he'd waited his whole life for was here. This was the only reason he'd chosen this specific date to travel back to. He could have returned at any moment to warn the Z fighters and change the future, back he couldn't pass up the opportunity to annihilate Frieza.

Vegeta hadn't been supportive of Bulma's idea to build a time machine at first. He'd been convinced he would defeat the androids eventually, and he didn't care about saving the dead Z fighters. The only two people that meant anything to him were alive, and that was all that mattered to him. But when Bulma had suggested he go back to this day and kill Frieza for himself, he hadn't been able to resist. He'd taken over watching Trunks, cooked all their meals, and even been her sounding board for the occasional physics problem. Even after she'd died he continued her work, building the machine himself to rather selfishly give himself this opportunity. Of course, escaping the androids with Trunks had been his priority, and preventing a devastating future was a bonus, particularly since it would also save Bulma, but in this moment, watching the giant round spaceship land, dust spewing out around it, he could only focus on his one goal. Kill Frieza.

"The soldiers will come out first," Vegeta said as the ship's engines turned off, glancing behind him at the Z fighters. "If anyone is looking for a fight, this is your chance to draw blood." He looked at his younger self at the last word, and got a nod in return.
"I could do with blowing off some steam," the three-eyed freak said with a grin.

Yamcha cracked his fists and mimed a punch. "Me too."

Both Vegetas snorted at that. That idiot would be lucky to survive even the weakest of Frieza's soldiers. Although if he got himself killed it might make things easier in attempting to convince Bulma and his younger self to give things a try.

"What about you?" Trunks asked, looking at Gohan. "Are you going to fight?"

Gohan clenched his fists and stared at the ground. "If they are a threat to Earth."

"They are here with Frieza," Trunks said, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Of course they are a threat! Weren't you on Namek with my papa? They aren't here to hold hands and sing songs."

"We should give them a chance," Gohan insisted. He glanced up at the tall green man who'd remained silent so far. "Don't you think, Piccolo?"

Piccolo shrugged. "Sorry Gohan, but Frieza is dangerous. So are his men. I'm not willing to take any chances."

Gohan's face fell and Vegeta smirked. He knew there was a reason the Namekian had been the only one of the group he could stand.

The dust billowing around the ship settled and a door lowered into a ramp. The Z fighters went silent as soldiers spewed out of the ship. Vegeta counted them as they exited. Twenty, just as he remembered.

The soldiers formed two lines of ten, then upon seeing the nearby Z-fighters, broke into a charge.

The Z-fighters, including Vegeta's younger self, ploughed forward, even Gohan, but Vegeta kept his hand on his son's shoulder, holding him back. "This is their time," he said. "We should give them the chance to defend it themselves. At least for now."

Trunks nodded silently, and crossed his arms. Vegeta did the same, and they watched the bloody battle unfold.

Bulma moved forward so she stood shoulder to shoulder with him. Vegeta could feel the warmth coming off her, and she was so close he could smell that strawberry shampoo she loved, but he refused to allow himself to glance in her direction. He needed to keep his focus on the main prize, which at the moment was still inside the ship.

His younger self fought with glee, taking apart soldiers with his bare hands, hardly using his ki at all. Vegeta watched him, hiding a smile. He'd seen himself fight on video screens, back when he would study his moves to work out how to improve, but it was quite disconcerting watching himself fight live. He had more skill than anyone else fighting, but was cocky enough to not be completely aware of his surroundings. None of the soldiers were tactical enough, but if they were they could take the younger Vegeta down temporarily using the element of surprise. He'd since learnt to combat that particular weakness of his. Fighting androids that didn't give off ki meant constant vigilance was necessary for survival.

Gohan battled with a large purple soldier with a squashed face and an underbite. The boy fought well, but Vegeta could tell he wasn't fighting to kill. He held back, delivering decisive blows but without his full force.
The Namekian seemed to have his hands full with three soldiers, but he made short work of them, cutting them down swiftly before turning to Gohan. He must have come to the same conclusion as Vegeta, because a frown flashed across his face before he sent a ki blast through the purple soldier's heart. The man dropped to the ground, unmoving, and Gohan jumped back with a yelp.

"If you are going to fight, fight, Gohan," Piccolo commanded. "Otherwise go stand by Bulma."

Gohan grit his teeth and attacked another soldier. Piccolo shrugged and found someone else to battle.

The short bald man held his own against a couple of soldiers. Vegeta had to admit with grudging respect that the man had considerable skill on the battlefield - for a human. However, both the three-eyed man and the weakling struggled against their opponents, which was unsurprising to Vegeta.

Yamcha got knocked back by a hefty kick, and slammed into a pile of rocks. They collapsed around him and he lay unmoving, blood trickling down his forehead.

Bulma gasped and uttered his name, placing her hand over her mouth.

Vegeta felt a flash of irritation, and fought the urge to send a ki blast in the weakling's direction to finish off the injured man.

"Aren't you going to help them?" Bulma demanded.

"They have it handled." Vegeta gave her a sideways glance, and couldn't resist a smirk. "Well, most of them."

Bulma hissed at him, but didn't voice a reply.

"If they want our help, they must ask," Trunks added. "It would be dishonourable to take this fight from them otherwise."

Bulma raised her eyebrows incredulously. "Honour… do you think your father is an honourable man?"

Trunks blinked, then a scowl crept onto his face. He glanced up at Vegeta, who kept his face purposefully blank. That Bulma believed him to be dishonourable was no surprise. In her time, he'd never given her a reason to believe otherwise.

Trunks looked back at his young mother. "There are many kinds of honour. Both my parents taught me that."

Bulma flushed a little under Trunks' sharp stare.

Vegeta went back to watching the battle, which was coming to an end. The humans and Gohan all flew back, leaving Piccolo and Vegeta to finish off the rest of them. The three-eyed man brought the unconscious Yamcha back, and Bulma ran over to the weakling's side.

Once the rest of the soldiers were dead, the young Vegeta and Piccolo joined the others.

"Is Frieza ever coming out?" Young Vegeta asked, brushing dirt off his now torn pink shirt while watching the ship's entrance. He gave Vegeta a devilish grin. "Maybe he's scared."

Vegeta couldn't help but grin back. "He'll come out shortly. He's not scared. But he will be."
At his words, two figures emerged from the ship. King Cold, taller and bulkier than his son, led the way, with Frieza following behind. Vegeta had almost forgotten that Frieza had shown up with parts replaced by machinery. In his nightmares, which he was embarrassed at having to admit he still got on occasion, Frieza looked as he did when he'd tortured him all those times when he was younger.

Vegeta grit his teeth. It didn't matter what the monster looked like. Today would be the end of him.

The two stopped walking when their feet touched Earth's soil. Frieza's gaze flicked between the two Vegetas, confusion flashing across his face. His stare settled on the future Vegeta though, and a cruel smile appeared.

"Did you miss me, my prince?" he called out in his smooth, icy voice. "I thought you were dead. How wonderful that I get to kill you twice."

Vegeta cocked his head, meeting Frieza's unflinching gaze. "You can try, my Lord," he said, throwing all the sarcasm he could behind the word. "But I'm afraid your reign has come to an end."

Frieza let out a cackle, throwing his head back. "Oh, son. You really think you can defeat me! You forget, I raised you since you were a little brat. I know everything about you. And, Vegeta, you are weak. You always have been. You couldn't defeat a third class Saiyan. How do you expect to beat me?"

Vegeta felt his younger self's ki flare in response, so he threw him a cautioning glare. This was his fight, and no one, not even a younger version of him would get in his way.

"You were right," Trunks said. "This guy is even more of a jerk than you!"

"Hard to believe that's possible," Krillen said with a nervous laugh. "But Frieza is pretty much as bad as they get."

"He is nothing," Vegeta said, glancing at the bald man. "There are much worse out there."

With that, Vegeta flew over to Frieza and King Cold, landing in front of them.

"Stay out of this, father," Frieza said. "This little punk is mine."

"Whatever you say," King Cold said, his tone laced with boredom. He leaned against the outer wall of the spaceship, studying his fingernails. "Just make it quick. Then we can blow up this planet and get out of here."

"Come on then, monkey." Frieza showed his teeth in a mad smile. "I'll even let you make the first move."

Vegeta gave Frieza a mock bow. "How kind." He rushed at Frieza fist first, landing a blow that the lizard blocked with his forearm. The force of it sent Frieza skidding back, and the creature snarled and retaliated. Vegeta stayed in his base form, enjoying the feeling of knuckles against skin, bones crushing bones and the adrenaline that came with battling someone on equal footing.

Frieza managed to land a hit to Vegeta's jaw, and he tasted blood in his mouth. Jumping back to avoid another punch, Vegeta laughed at the sheer joy of it all. His jeans were now ripped and muddy, his shirt torn, and his skin covered in numerous abrasions. He knew to the Z fighters it probably looked like he was struggling, and maybe in this form he was. He didn't care. He'd been fighting for his life against the androids for so long that he'd almost forgotten how much pleasure there was in a good spar.
Their exchange of blows and kicks escalated to the use of ki quickly, with Frieza firing a series of frustrated blasts at Vegeta. He blocked them, careful to rebound them in the opposite direction to where Bulma, Trunks and the other Z fighters stood. Vegeta let his own energy increase, powering up to release a strong blast towards Frieza.

It sent the monster spiralling into a cliff, and he hit the side and crumpled to the ground. Vegeta waited patiently for him to stagger to his feet, and let Frieza get in a retaliatory blast. The force of it, powered by Frieza's anger, was impressive enough to knock Vegeta back in the air.

Frieza smirked, and let out a sharp laugh. "You're stronger than you were, I'll give you that, but you aren't a match for me, Vegeta. Surrender and I'll make your death a quick one."

Vegeta snorted, and lowered himself to the ground. "I would give you the same offer, but I'm afraid I'm too selfish for that. I want to watch you die slowly, painfully, as I rip you limb from limb." He put his hands out in a mock surrender. "But I'm not completely evil like you. I'll give you one chance. Your most powerful shot. Take it and I promise on my father's soul, I won't move."

Frieza looked taken aback, but gave Vegeta a shrug. "As you wish, monkey prince." He rose into the air and began to power up. Purple lightening crackled around him as he ki throbbed and grew exponentially. He'd been holding back as well.

Vegeta threw a glance in the direction of the Z fighters. Everyone looked terrified except Trunks, who threw him a thumbs up. Vegeta gave his son a smirk in return, and crossed his arms to wait for Frieza's ki blast.

The lizard formed a ball of ki in front of him, letting it expand until it was twice the size of him. When he sent it hurtling down towards the ground, Vegeta did as he promised and stayed where he was.

He raised his hands as ki blast hit him, and let the energy drive him into the ground. At the last moment, Vegeta released his own golden ki and threw the ball back up towards Frieza.

Frieza dodged it, but stayed in the air, a look of horror widening his eyes and gnashing his teeth. "You... you're..."

"A Super Saiyan," Vegeta finished rising up to meet Frieza in the air. "Would you like to see what I can do?"

Frieza sent a powerful ki blast at him with a furious yell. Vegeta blocked it, overpowering the blast completely and sending it back towards Frieza. It hit the monster dead on, sending him crashing to the ground in an explosion that created a crater.

"Yay, Papa!" He heard Trunks shout in the distance and turned his head to see his son jumping, fist in the air triumphantly. "Kick that lizard's butt!"

His younger self stared up at him, his mouth agape for a moment before turning into a delighted smile that made him look as thrilled as Trunks.

From inside the hole in the ground, Frieza clambered to his feet. "Papa?" He let out a low laugh. "So, you were hiding a son from me for years? And what about your lookalike. A brother perhaps?"

"They are not your concern," Vegeta said coldly. "You only need to worry about me."

"Is that so?" Frieza's red eyes glinted. He made to send another blast towards Vegeta, but twisted at
the last moment, sending a ball of ki in the opposite direction, straight towards the Z fighters.

And Trunks.
chapter summary

Vegeta takes the fight with Frieza to the next level.

Chapter Notes

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The ki blast barrelled directly towards the cliff that the Z fighters, Bulma and Trunks all stood on, hurtling through the air like a fiery meteor hell-bent on destruction. Freiza's mouth twisted into a triumphant smile that he flashed in Vegeta's direction, his cruel expression one that the Saiyan recognised all too well as the one given to him many times throughout his life, usually when Frieza had discovered a new way of inflicting torture upon Vegeta, and knew he was about to revel in the prince's pain.

Vegeta hovered mid-air and remained where he was, watching the ki blast approach the others, and Frieza's face fell into disconcertion. The Saiyan could tell from the Z fighter's equal expressions of horror, that they were unnerved by the fact that he obviously wasn't going to step in to help them. Bulma's widening eyes, followed by the narrowing of her brows as she went from scared to angry was almost enough to make him attempt to catch up to the blast and block it. He could have - he was quick enough.

But he didn't need to.

Trunks was the only one on the cliff looking unconcerned. As Vegeta predicted, when Frieza's shot got closer, his son lit up with yellow ki, the power of it radiating around him in waves and shaking the ground beneath his feet. With an outraged yell, Trunks fired his own ki blast at Frieza's, overwhelming the purple ki with his own golden ki, and sending it straight back to the lizard.

The blast careened towards Frieza at an impressive speed. Like Vegeta, Trunks' strength increased dramatically when angered, and in his Super Saiyan form, the pure power of the boy was enough to give Vegeta a good workout when they sparred. If the blast hit Frieza, it would be sure to do some damage to the lizard.

But Frieza threw himself out of the way, landing on the rocky ground, narrowly avoiding the blast. "That shouldn't be possible," he gasped as he clambered back to his feet, his eyes wide as he looked from Vegeta to Trunks. "He's just a kid."

"He's my son," Vegeta said, not bothering to hide the pride in his voice as he glanced back at the boy. "Of course it is possible." He motioned for Trunks to join him and the boy flew over, his jaw set with determination.

"I think he's scared now," Trunks said, curving his mouth into a smile.
"That he is." Vegeta powered down to his base form. "I promised you a turn. Now's your chance to show everyone what a bad idea it is to mess with a Saiyan prince."

Trunks' eyes lit up with glee. "Yes, sir!" He balled his fists and flew down towards Frieza, attacking him immediately with a flurry of punches.

Vegeta retreated, flying backwards so he could keep an eye on the fight's progression, then perched at the edge of the cliff in front of the group.

Bulma moved from the side of her unconscious boyfriend to stand beside Vegeta. "You knew he would save us," she said, her tone thick with irritation.

Vegeta kept his gaze on Trunks, but nodded. "You were in no danger."

"I thought…" Bulma clicked her tongue in annoyance. "You could have said something."

"And take away from my son's big reveal?" Vegeta shook his head and crossed his arms. "Please, he'd never have forgiven me if I'd prevented him from showing off."

"He's really a Super Saiyan," the younger Vegeta murmured as he approached to stand on Vegeta's other side. "Unbelievable. I've been bested even by an eight-year-old."

Vegeta recognised the struggle between admiration and jealousy in his younger self's tone. "It doesn't work like that," he said, keeping an eye on his son's moves against Frieza. The boy held his own nicely, although he needed to work on his left kick. Frieza had clearly started to panic, because his ki blasts grew wilder and wilder, and weak left kick or not, Trunks had the upper hand.

"The power does not necessarily come to those who are better. You could become a Super Saiyan right now if you had the right trigger."

"A trigger?" His younger self stiffened beside him. "Is it not simply about getting stronger?"

"No, although strength helps control it." Vegeta sighed, remembering how unstable the form was when he'd first transformed. He'd nearly blown apart the planet with the power of it. "But achieving the form comes at a price. Trunks is powerful, and has trained hard. I'm happy that he accomplished this, but I regret the price he had to pay to get there."

"Will you teach me?" Young Vegeta asked. "I don't care what the price is, I am willing to pay it."

"You won't like it," Vegeta said. "But I will tell you what I know."

Vegeta stiffened as he felt another power level rise beside Frieza's ship. His gaze fell to King Cold, whose brows furrowed in an expression of hatred, and fists shook with anger. Vegeta had almost forgotten the man, he'd been so focussed on Frieza. But his father was even more dangerous, even if he hadn't ever done anything personally to Vegeta. Ki crackled around the man in jagged flashes of lights, and the large lizard formed it into a ball, and appeared to aim it at Trunks.

With a huff of annoyance, Vegeta powered up to Super Saiyan and flew in front of King Cold, just as he released the ki. It exploded around him, and Vegeta, unwilling to drag out a second fight, thrust his hand straight into King Cold's chest.

The lizard's eyes bulged and he sucked in a gargling breath, blood dribbling from his lips as Vegeta gripped his still beating heart.

Frieza's wild shriek echoed through the desert, and Vegeta knew the fight between him and Trunks had paused.
With one quick yank, Vegeta pulled his hand back, and the heart with it. He dropped the still beating organ it to the ground, and both the muscle and the body of King Cold hit the ground at the same time.

Vegeta glared at his hand, now covered in slick, purple blood that dripped to the ground in congealed globules. "Disgusting." He shook it off and purple splattered across the red ground like paint.

He glanced up at Trunks and raised his eyebrows. At that look, the boy lowered himself to the ground and stood in front of him.

"You fought well, son." Vegeta couldn't help giving a small smile back at his son's wide grin. "I will finish him off. Go to the others."

Trunks gave him a sharp nod and flew off to the Z-fighters, who all looked dumbfounded, their mouths hanging open, except for his younger self who laughed silently, his shoulders shaking and elation lighting his eyes.

Frieza landed and staggered over to his father then knelt next to the body. "You killed him!" He threw an accusatory glare at Vegeta, who didn't reply. His fists clenched and trembled. "I'm going to make you pay for this!"

Vegeta stormed up to him and gripped Frieza by his throat, picking him up and dangling him in the air. "You made slaves of my people. Murdered my father. Destroyed my planet. Tortured me. The only one here who is going to pay is you." He smashed him into the ground and hovered over the man, baring his teeth.

"Vegeta," Frieza gasped out. "Don't do this. You've been like a son to me."

He barked a laugh at that. Frieza had made his life a living hell for the majority of his life, taking a sick pleasure in Vegeta's suffering. At first, Vegeta had been unconcerned about being sent to work for the man. As a child, he'd been bored and looking for adventure. But when adventure was accompanied with no food and regular beatings that only got worse, it lost its appeal quickly.

He grabbed the lizard's wrist with his free hand, then leaned in close and hissed in Frieza's ear. "Do you remember when I was six, and stole food from the kitchens? I hadn't eaten in a week, and the pain in my stomach as it ate itself was unbearable. You broke my hand for it, and starved me for another week." He smirked and wrapped his hand around Frieza's, then slowly snapped each of his fingers, one by one, their cracks echoing across the silent desert. Frieza hissed in pain but didn't cry out.

"And when I refused to purge that planet - I forget its name - because the inhabitants looked like Saiyan's... I was seven I think." He gripped Frieza's neck harder, making his breaths rattle. "You beat me until I was half dead, then sent me to purge it without allowing me medical attention." Vegeta slid his hand down to Frieza's wrist, and broke it with a quick movement.

Again, Frieza didn't cry out, but Vegeta was confident it was because he'd blocked the man's windpipe. He formed a ki ball in his hand and brought it up the Frieza's side, listening to the skin sizzle as Frieza let out a gargled cry. "You turned me from a warrior prince into a monster, and now it's time you paid the price."

Frieza tried to say something, so Vegeta loosened his grip on the lizard's throat slightly. "You were loyal, once," he gasped out.
"An impressive charade, I know." Vegeta let out a dark chuckle. "How could you ever believe I would be a loyal servant? All you've done is cause pain and suffering to everyone around you. And now you will die, begging for mercy that I cannot give because it was never given to me." He kicked out at Frieza's kneecap, grinning as the lizard's leg buckled under him.

"Please…" Frieza managed to choke out.

Vegeta dropped the man who fell to the dusty ground clutching his neck.

"No hesitation," Vegeta whispered to himself. "No mercy." He rose his ki and formed a ball in front of him, then knelt down and brought it to Frieza's chest. "Will this kill you?" He asked. "Or will I need to disintegrate your cells?" At Frieza's terrified stare he grinned. "Better safe than sorry."

He sent the blast through Frieza, ripping a hole in the man's chest. Vegeta felt the man's ki fading fast and let out a triumphant scream, then attacked the dying lizard with abandon, firing close range ki blasts in conjunction with fierce punches disintegrating scaly skin until Vegeta's own knuckles had shredded to the bone with the force of it and all he was hitting was the bare ground.

Vegeta pounded his fists into the ground one last time and screamed on his hands and knees, emptying his lungs with all the fury he'd ever felt in his life. When his voice died out, he sucked in a desperate breath, and took in the desert before him. He started laughing, hysterical tears coursing down his face.

Finally.

*Finally.*

The only thing left of the monster who'd ruled his life was the purple blood staining the dirt.
His father's cry ripped through the air, a haunting sound of loss and anguish. All of the Z fighters, who had just been remarking back and forth about how Vegeta's power level was higher than anything they felt (and was Bulma sure that this version of him was on their side because even Goku wouldn't stand a chance against him), fell silent, and as the wail petered out and the swirling desert dust and ki died down, everyone remained quiet and still, taking in Vegeta's slumped form.

Out of the corner of his eye, Trunks saw his young mother place her hand over her mouth, tears forming in her eyes. Trunks spared a glance for the younger version of his father, who had watched the fight - or rather, the brutal slaughter - without blinking once, an odd serene expression on his face. He'd tensed at the sound, and lurched forward slightly but pulled himself back, as if physically fighting an urge to jump off the cliff and see to his older self.

Trunks' didn't hold such qualms. When his father's hair faded from gold to ink black, but the man still didn't move, remaining on his hands and knees as if the weight of the world bore down upon him, Trunks noticed the ground smeared with purple bruising, and the lack of Frieza's body, then launched himself into the air and flew over.

He landed in front of Vegeta on ground slick with blood, but the man didn't budge from his position. He stared at the ground, head bowed and shoulders trembling, his fists on the ground and locked arms appearing to be the only thing keeping him from keeling over.

Trunks placed a cautious hand on his father's shoulder and held it there.

Slowly, Vegeta lifted his head, revealing pale track marks through the dirt and blood on his face. His eyes were red, but dry, and when his dark gaze met Trunks and he took in a sharp breath and blinked, as if he'd only just realised his son was in front of him.

"It's over, Papa," Trunks said. "You killed the monster."

Vegeta let out a low laugh and shook his head. "Yes. But there are always more monsters, aren't there?" He stared off in the distance, just beyond Trunks' shoulder "I thought I'd feel… different. But I'm just sorry… sorry that wasn't the androids," he said, his husky voice cracking. "I'm sorry I'm not strong enough…"

Trunks dropped to his knees and threw his arms around his father's neck. Vegeta stiffened, but
didn't throw him off, and Trunks held on tighter. His father never talked about his time serving
Frieza, other than to say the man was a tyrant, but Trunks' heard his father's cries when lost in a
nightmare, and knew most of his terrible dreams were not about the androids. He didn't know what
Frieza had done to his father, but he knew the lizard got what he deserved. Anyone who he
succeeded in making his strong, prideful father scream out in agony in his sleep had to be a
monster.

Trunks let out the breath he didn't realise he'd been holding as his father gradually returned the
embrace, circling his arms around him and clinging with the same force Trunks held him with. His
father was not a hugger. He'd said once that it was a human show of affection that he'd never heard
of before Earth and had gone so far as admitting that it made him claustrophobic. It went against
every one of the Saiyan's instincts to allow himself to be that close and vulnerable to another
person. And yet, he now held Trunks with the same intensity that he had when Trunks had nearly
died more than two years ago.

His father let out a sigh, his chest heaving with the depth of it. He pulled back, then clambered to
his feet, his eyes weary. "I need another shower," he muttered. "Kakarot will be another hour or
two. Let's ditch these losers until he turns up."

Trunks eyed his father carefully. He was a hard man to read, and Trunks might have only been
eight and a half, but he still knew when his father was upset and trying to hide it.

"We probably have time to get some food as well…" Vegeta raised his eyebrows and quirked his
mouth in his version of a smile.

Trunks couldn't help a grin at that. His father had told him about what food had been like at
Capsule Corp before the androids, and their meal earlier today had more that met his expectations.
If every meal in this time was like that, Trunks would never want to leave.

Vegeta seemed to take the smile as Trunks' acceptance and rose in the air. Trunks followed and
they hovered in front of the cliff. "Kakarot will arrive in a while," Vegeta said, looking directly at
Bulma. "We will meet you back at Capsule Corp, and I'll explain everything then."

The younger Vegeta scowled. "Why do we have to wait for that idiot?"

"Because I don't want to explain things twice," Vegeta replied shortly. He glanced at Trunks and
tilted his head in an indication to follow him, then took off into the sky.

Trunks gave the group a mock salute, then did what he always did, and followed his father into the
sky.

Vegeta wolfed down the noodles in front of him. He'd travelled to many planets in the universe, but
Earth food certainly ranked at the top of the list when it came to food. They sat outside in the cool
early evening air, plates of food made by Bulma's mother in front of them on a banquet sized
outdoor table. Trunks ate with the same gusto as his previous meal, but had thankfully seemed to
have recalled some of the manners Vegeta had drilled into him when he was younger, and used the
chopsticks provided instead of his bare hands.

The Z fighters had returned to Capsule Corp, along with Kakarot, but Vegeta hadn't given any of
them more than a passing glance. He knew they were impatient, especially his younger self, but not
even the end of the world would stop him half way through a meal. Kakarot was the only other
person eating, saying he'd missed Earth's food, but as soon as Vegeta put down his chopsticks, he
did the same, watching him closely.
Vegeta leaned back in his chair and studied the other Saiyan. An odd pang cut through him as he remembered the last time he'd seen the man, face contorted with pain, his hand grabbing at his chest as he sucked in breaths that didn't seem to deliver any oxygen to his lungs. "One year from now, you will die," he said.

There was a collective gasp from the group, and Kakarot's eyes widened at first, then he gave a shrug and smiled. "Who kills me? Is there a fighter stronger than Frieza out there?"

"No one kills you," Vegeta replied. "You contract a heart virus, and it kills you within the day."

Kakarot frowned at that, and stared down at the table. "Are you sure? I mean, of all the things to kill me…"

"I'm sure," Vegeta said bitterly. "You did not get a warrior's death. I do not like you Kakarot, but I did not wish that upon you." He turned to the rest of the Z fighters. "Three years from now, two androids appear and wipe out one third of Earth's population in three days. Myself and Kakarot's brat are the only ones here that survive." He glanced at Bulma briefly. "And you, of course."

She flushed under his stare, and he noticed her fists tighten. Not in anger but in fear, although whether she was afraid of the future, of him revealing the truth to her boyfriend about the boy sitting next to him, he wasn't sure.

He looked back at the others. "When I ascended, I was certain I could defeat them." He looked at his younger self, who had his arms crossed and a deep scowl on his face. "But they are stronger. Much stronger. And there are two of them. They do not tire, they can fight forever and they feel no pain. There was only one advantage they had that I could hope to neutralise. There were two of them, and only one of me." He looked at Gohan who clung to his father's side like he was scared the man would disappear. "I trained you, and when you ascended, we fought the androids together."

"He ascended?" Young Vegeta spluttered.

"Yes," Vegeta said coolly. "With my training, and the right trigger, it did not take long."

"Then what happened?" Kakarot asked, his gaze fixed on Vegeta.

"We got the shit kicked out of us, and barely made it out alive," Vegeta said, barking out a harsh laugh. "We couldn't even take down one of them, which had been my main goal. So Bulma started designing a time machine."

"I built the time machine?" Bulma asked, her eyes lighting up in excitement. "I recognised immediately that it was a Capsule Corp design, but thought it was my fathers."

"You designed it," Vegeta corrected.

"Papa built it," Trunks said through a mouthful of noodles. "And I helped."

"Why… why didn't I build it?" Bulma asked, even though her pale pallor suggested she already knew the answer.

"Just after you completed the plans, the androids found out hideout. I was too far away, and I couldn't…" He sucked in a deep breath and clenched his fists. "I didn't get there in time. You and Gohan died, and Trunks…" He looked at his son, who stopped eating and looked at him with blue eyes that bore his mother's colour. "He survived and that was all I needed to keep going with the plan."
"You managed to build the machine from my plans?" Bulma raised her eyebrows, looking impressed. "That is an incredibly complicated piece of engineering."

"You'd spent hours talking me through the plans," Vegeta said. "And you left me detailed notes. You had prepared for that eventuality."

"Fuck." Yamcha stood up beside Bulma, his face bright red. "Bulma is that boy's mother."

Vegeta narrowed his eyes at the man. He'd never liked him, even before Bulma meant anything to him, but until this moment he hadn't remembered why his dislike had been so strong.

Before Vegeta could reply, Yamcha turned to Bulma. "Did you cheat on me with him?"

"What?" Bulma shrieked, standing up as well. "How dare you!"

Yamcha flared his ki around him. "Are you sleeping with him now?"

A resounding slap echoed across the garden.

Yamcha touched the red mark on his face with one hand, and brought his other hand up and fisted it. Before he even had the chance to move his hand in Bulma's direction, Vegeta launched himself out of his seat and gripped the furious man's wrist.

"Don't even think about it," Vegeta growled.

Yamcha's ki died down, and Vegeta let go, but stayed in front of Bulma, burrowing his gaze into the man's head as he turned and stomped to the edge of the deck.

"So… uh… you came back to warn us, right?" Kakarot asked, letting out a nervous laugh. "So we can train and be strong enough before they arrive to defeat them?"

"What?" Vegeta turned to Kakarot in disbelief. "No! You have dragon balls in this time, idiot. Use them. I just told you they can't be defeated."

"You die regardless," young Vegeta said to Kakarot with an evil grin. "But I want to fight them. If I train instead of letting unnecessary… distractions prevent me from my goal I am certain I will defeat them."

"You can help find a cure, right?" Kakarot asked Bulma. "Now that you have enough warning." He grinned at young Vegeta. "I want to fight them too."

"You… for the love of… haven't you heard a word I've said?" Vegeta asked.

"If they are that dangerous, shouldn't we at least consider the dragon balls?" Bulma asked.

"Of course you'd agree with him," Yamcha snapped in the distance.

"I'm tempted by the dragon balls too," Krillen chimed in. "Death by android won't look as cool on my gravestone as death by alien lizard, and I'm not too keen on dying again."

"Either way we have months before the dragon balls can be used again," the Namekian pointed out. "So maybe we can bicker about this closer to the time."

"You are all idiots if you think I came back to this time if there was a chance of defeating them." Vegeta glared at them, then let his gaze fall to his son. Trunks had finished eating, and had his chin leaning on his hand as he looked around at the Z fighters. The dark circles around his eyes, and the
way they kept fluttering shut made Vegeta realise that they'd left their time much later in the day, and it was well past midnight there. "Do what you want," he snarled at the Z fighters. "If you all die again, I won't care any more than I did then."

Without another word, Vegeta scooped Trunks into his arms, ignoring the boy's small yelp of protest, and marched inside the house. Those morons could let everyone in their universe perish if they so desired - it was their time. But he was going to do what he always did and look after his son.

When Bulma entered the dining room adjoined to the kitchen inside the house after seeing everyone off, she found Future Vegeta making coffee, operating the machine like a professional barista. She stopped halfway into the room, struck by his deft movements as he made two cups like he'd done this domesticated task a thousand times before. Maybe he has, she realised as he made one black, then rather than warming milk with the machine like Yamcha always did, heaped three large teaspoons of sugar and a generous dollop of cold cream into the other - just like she liked it.

He glanced up at her and pushed the creamy coffee across the breakfast bar, towards her, meeting her gaze with his dark, unblinking stare. "Trunks is asleep. I put him in one of the guest rooms."

"That's fine." Bulma approached the bar and sat down on one of the stools, wrapping her hands around the mug. "Use whichever rooms you want."

Vegeta nodded then ventured around to her side of the breakfast bar and sat in the stool next to her. He took a gulp of his coffee and sighed as if it was the most wonderful thing he'd ever tasted. "I managed to find some instant coffee a few months ago," he said quietly, before taking another slow slurp of the steaming liquid. "But it wasn't the same."

"I didn't know you liked coffee." Bulma took a sip of her own drink. He'd made it perfectly, the sweet creaminess completely disguising the richness of the beans. She drank coffee for caffeine, not taste.

"I don't think I do yet, in this time." Vegeta frowned, as if deep in thought. "You introduced me to it when we were becoming…" He clicked his tongue in irritation, a sound he often made during their verbal spats when he struggled to come up with a retort. "Not friends, but…I don't really know what we were."

"Fuck buddies?" Bulma asked, grinning as Vegeta's cheeks flushed instantly. It looked like this Vegeta would be just as easy to rile up as the other.

"N… no!" He clicked his tongue again. "I almost forgot how crass you can be. We were not having sexual relations," he said stiffly. "You'd broken up with that idiot and started working late hours, and my body clock was completely out of sync with Earth day night cycles, so I would train late. We seemed to keep meeting in the kitchen at odd hours, and we…” He frowned again and let out a large huff of air. He lifted the mug with both hands, giving it in front of his face, but he didn't drink it. He merely stared into the black liquid, as if waiting for it to reveal the secrets of the universe. "We talked," he said finally. "You made us coffee, and we talked most nights. Although you did most of the speaking I think and I'm not sure how much I really listened. You didn't seem to mind. I think we were both…” He trailed off and took another drink of his coffee. Vegeta remained looking dead ahead, and didn't seem to give any indication that he planned on finishing that last sentence.

Bulma watched him out of the corner of her eye, struggling to reconcile this man, who seemed so familiar, yet so unlike from the alien prince she knew. Physically, he didn't look any different to
the Vegeta of her time. Despite being a decade older, he hadn't aged a day. Lucky bastard. The black t-shirt he wore stretched deliciously over his muscles, and even though she'd seen his younger version's butt in tight training suits often enough, Vegeta in jeans was simply sinful. He seemed perfectly comfortable in human clothes, while his younger counterpart wore his training suit whenever possible and appeared stiff and awkward, tugging at human clothing when forced to wear it. Other than his clothing, there was little to distinguish the two men. This Vegeta may have been ever so slightly taller, and slimmer too even though he still retained his compact build, but it was hard to be sure without his younger self next to him. There was also something about the way he carried himself too, less arrogantly while somehow appearing more confident, and in the way he spoke, with a voice still accented but softer on the hard consonants.

Vegeta's elbows leaned on the table and he cupped his mug between his hands, breathing in the steam undulating off the hot liquid before sipping it. Kami, he was devilishly good looking - both versions were - but even so, despite his vague reference to them talking to one another, she couldn't imagine how a relationship between the two happened.

"I can't see it," Bulma said, starting when she realised she'd voiced that aloud.

Vegeta threw her a sideways glance. "See what?"

"How we got together." Bulma spread her hands in front of her and gave him a wry smile. "You're so…"

"Evil?" Vegeta asked with a grin. "Morally corrupt?"

"You're so closed off," Bulma replied. "I don't feel like anyone could ever truly know you."

Vegeta let out a low chuckle and placed his mug on the table. "Does anyone really know you?"

She frowned at that, confused by his meaning. "Of course."

He stared at her intently. "I mean really know you. They see a pretty woman with all the money, all the opportunities in life on offer. But do they know you?"

Bulma dropped her gaze to her hands which she uncurled from around the mug, and placed flat on the surface of the table in front of her, needing to feel something solid as a nauseous sensation crept into her stomach. Everyone knew her. She was one of the most famous women in the world. But he was right. No one really knew the hidden depths of her. Not even Yamcha understood her.

Vegeta touched two warm fingers to the bottom of her chin, making her let out a small gasp. He gently nudged her head up so she looked at him again, and when he dropped his hand away she met his dark gaze, feeling lost in their depths.

"Do they know that it will never be enough for you?" He asked in his husky voice. "That you will always need to be better, to be smarter than you already are?" His hand slid across the table so his fingertips touched hers. "Do they know you wake up every day and wonder if today will be the day they figure it out? That as much as you proclaim you are a genius, inside you worry that you are nothing but a fraud, because no matter what you invent, what you achieve, it will never be enough for you, so how could it be enough for anyone else?"

She chewed on her bottom lip. How did he know that? "I don't -"

"You do," he insisted, his eyebrows narrowing and creasing his forehead. "We are the same, you and I."
Bulma shook her head, but didn't break eye contact with him. "We are nothing alike."

Vegeta placed his large hand over hers and leaned in. She couldn't sense ki, but he had an intense energy coming off him in waves that seemed to draw her in yet gave her the urge to flee at the same time. Her hand stiffened under his, but she didn't pull it away, letting the warmth of his envelop hers.

"You are the only person on this planet who could ever truly know me," he said. "And I am the only person who will ever understand what it means to be you, because it is the dying stars that burn the brightest."

"I don't know what you mean," she croaked out, swallowing hard under the heat of his stare. His eyes were a disconcerting black, something she'd noticed early on because he was the only person she'd met other than Goku who seemed to have no colour distinction between their pupil and iris. Looking into his eyes now though, she realised she could see flecks of brown and red, still so dark they were barely indistinguishable, but there nonetheless. How had she never spotted that before?

"Greatness is in both of our destinies," Vegeta said, as if that explained everything. At her blank stare, his brow furrowed even more. "You and I were born to outshine almost everyone in the universe, but because of that, we are both dying inside." He leaned closer until his lips almost touched her ear, his hot breath making her shiver. "You cannot deny that you were meant for so much more than what Earth can offer you any more than I can deny that my need to ascend is not a mere goal, but as necessary as breathing. We are the same and we fought it and fought it but what happened between us was inevitable, Bulma."

The shock of hearing her name on his lips, uttered as one lover would whisper sweet nothings to another, made her jerk her head back with a sharp intake of breath.

She stared at him, her lips slightly parted to attempt a reply, but for the first time in her life, she didn't know what to say.

"I gave you purpose," he said, closing his eyes briefly before returning his gaze to her. "And you gave me hope." He pulled back and stood up, the loss of the warmth of his hand chilling her. He looked at her for a moment, then turned and left, leaving his half empty coffee mug on the table.

Bulma let out a shaky breath. Despite being choosy with his words, Vegeta had always been reasonably eloquent, especially considering this wasn't his first language, but Kami... she almost felt like he'd made love to her and he hadn't done anything but speak.

She sighed into her own coffee, unsure what to make of the heat burning inside her. Was that how it had happened? He'd simply spoken to her every night, and it progressed from there? "I still can't see it," she said to herself, knowing even as she uttered the words aloud that they were a lie, and that the heat pooling inside her were embers that could easily combust.

And he most definitely held the match.
The secret to becoming a Super Saiyan

Chapter Summary

Future Vegeta attempts to explain to his younger self about becoming a Super Saiyan.

Chapter Notes

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

Vegeta shut the door to the kitchen behind him and stopped in the dark hallway to take a deep breath that he then exhaled loudly, the air coming out pathetically shaky. Having her next to him, close enough for him to smell her shampoo, close enough to feel the warmth radiating off her, close enough to lean forward just a little more and capture her mouth with his… it would have driven him to madness, or at least driven him to do something he would regret if he'd stayed any longer. He'd missed the woman more than he'd been willing to admit to himself, and seeing her, so young and without the lines of worry that had been drawn onto her face, deeper with every encounter with the androids, made the hole that had been ripped through his heart when she died worse not better.

She's not my Bulma, he reminded himself as he forced his feet to start walking down the hall. As much as he wanted her to be, she wasn't the woman he'd grown close to out of loneliness. She wasn't the woman who cried over his injured body each time he dragged himself home after fighting the androids. She wasn't the mother of his son, the woman who read Trunks bedtime stories, baked atrocious chocolate cakes that tasted more like charcoal than cocoa, and never once insisted that Vegeta act more 'human'. No, she was not his Bulma.

Vegeta continued down the hall and into the wing that contained the guest room where his son slept, relief flooding through him at the realisation that he'd left the kitchen in time. He hadn't kissed this Bulma, as much as his body screamed out in the need to feel his woman again, for if he had, it would have only been a momentary sense of peace before the guilt set in. Doing anything with this Bulma would be an affront to the relationship he'd had with his Bulma, and he couldn't let his weakness for those blue eyes, and those silken tresses and that delightfully sharp tongue of hers make him forget that.

He turned the handle and opened the door to his son's room, pausing in the doorway to watch the boy. Trunks lay curled in the foetal position on the bed closest to the window, cocooned in a thick blanket with only his head poking out. He didn't move in his sleep, but Vegeta could sense the fluctuations in his ki and knew his slumber was a troubled one. That wasn't unusual by any means - they both had their share of nightmares and had formed an unspoken agreement over the last couple of years to wake each other from them if they got bad, but to never, under any circumstances, talk about them in the morning.

The two of them had slept in the same room since Bulma had died. Mostly because the places
Vegeta found for them to hide were too small to allow them the luxury of separate bedrooms, especially once the parts for the time machine started spreading out over their hideout, but also because Vegeta knew Trunks had vivid nightmares of the androids coming into his bedroom - just like they had that day. Not only were loud nightmares a sure giveaway of their location, but Trunks slept better when he was nearby, and the boy needed all the sleep he could get.

Vegeta had used the same excuse when he picked a guest room with two beds, but as he entered the room, and crawled into bed without removing anything but his shoes, suddenly bone tired despite the half cup of coffee he'd downed, he knew that he felt safer sleeping in the same room as his son as well.

"I've done what you asked," he mumbled into the night as he closed his eyes and felt the heaviness of slumber pull at him. He'd been many things in his life time, including an oath breaker when it was a choice between his life and someone else's, but there were some promises he couldn't break. There were some promises he would travel across time to keep.

He stared at the black liquid in front of him, watching the steam dance its way out of the mug and into the air. It smelt a little smoky, or maybe earthy - he couldn't quite define it. He picked up the mug with both hands like he'd seen the woman do, and enjoyed the warmth radiating onto his skin through the ceramic.

From the other side of the breakfast bar, Bulma grinned at him and took a sip from her own mug. She'd made her drink differently, adding in sugar and a spoonful of something thick and white before stirring it in.

Vegeta breathed in the scent of the beverage. There was something appealing about it, although he couldn't help suspect that it would taste like dirt on his tongue. At Bulma's daring raise of her eyebrows, he cautiously rose the mug to his lips and took a sip. He wrinkled his nose in disgust at first - it did taste like dirt and it burnt the inside of his mouth - but then a pleasant after taste filled his mouth. With a frown, he took another sip, blowing on it first this time. He couldn't help grimace again as the hot liquid splashed across his tongue and down his throat, and Bulma let out a giggle.

"Here." She pushed her mug towards him. "Try mine."

He threw her an apprehensive glare before accepting her mug. The liquid's colouring was lighter, more of a golden brown, and the smell of it was sweeter. When he took a sip, the sugary taste filled his mouth, making him gag. He shoved her mug back towards her, sloshing the brown liquid over the side.

"Don't like it?" Bulma laughed and grabbed a cloth to wipe up the spilt drink. "Coffee isn't for everyone."

Vegeta looked at his own mug, and took another sip. "This one is... acceptable," he admitted.

Bulma's eyes lit up like he'd said it was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted. "Hopefully it doesn't prevent you from sleeping tonight," she said. "I drink so much of it the caffeine doesn't keep me awake, but it does for a lot of people."

Vegeta shrugged and took another sip. He didn't care much for sleeping anyway. The monsters of his past lurked there, and enjoyed tormenting him. He didn't particularly care for company either, and usually enjoyed the isolation he got at this time of night, but her presence was less of an annoyance than he'd expected. During the day, they bickered every time they talked, but here, in
the dimly lit kitchen, the woman seemed relaxed, and for once Vegeta wasn't interested in entering into a battle of words with her.

"Strawberries, chocolate, and coffee," Bulma said as she came around to his side of the bar and sat next to him. "They are the foods I couldn't live without. You know, I wanted to wish for a life time supply of strawberries on the dragon balls."

She started talking, babbling on and on about her childhood adventures. Vegeta didn't really listen to her words, but he found her voice oddly soothing. So he stayed. He drank this peculiar beverage that tasted like dirt, and stayed.

Bulma placed her hands on her hips and gazed at the egg-shaped machine taking up the middle of her lab. It wasn't the most aesthetically pleasing design with its metal panels curved roughly, as if someone had beaten them into shape with their bare hands. It was more than twice as tall as her, nearly touching the roof, and had a hatch at the top to enter and exit which didn't seem to be particularly user friendly.

She walked up to the machine and placed her hand on the cool metal, over the painted stick figure picture of two adults and a child. The word 'hope' had been scrawled next to it, and she slid her hand over it to touch the painted letters. I gave you purpose and you gave me hope, he'd said with such passion that in the middle of the night the prospect of falling for him wasn't so improbable. Here during the day, with the fluorescent lights of her lab glaring down at her, reality set it. What had he meant by hope? Did he mean the emotional feeling of hope, or had he been more literal, meaning this machine in front of her?

Deciding that turning Vegeta's words over and over in her head wouldn't help, she went back to assessing the time machine. It had been cobbled together for a specific purpose, not for anything marketable, but Bulma marvelled at the care that had gone into each of the joins of the metal, and the reinforcement of panels clearly done to make the machine as safe as possible.

There was a panel on the side held on by screws, so she grabbed her screwdriver and opened it up, keen to see what the insides of the machine looked like. The mass of wires and the cluttered circuit board didn't obey that colour standards she would have used to allow her to pull it apart and put it back together easily, but there did seem to be some kind of logic in the way everything spiralled around each other.

"It's out of fuel," a young voice said, making her jump.

Bulma turned around and saw Trunks standing awkwardly in the doorway.

"We only had enough for the trip here." The boy gave her a small smile, his eyes wide and earnest in an expression that was so odd to see on someone with Vegeta's features. "It might have been damaged in the jump, and one of the androids fired at us before we left, so it will need to be checked over before we can use it again safely."

"I can do that for you," Bulma said.

Trunks nodded and started walking around the machine, pointing out the different parts. "Here's where the fuel injectors are located. And here, this is the navigation system." He kept talking and Bulma listened in fascination at the words coming out of this eight year old's mouth. Clearly, he was intelligent, although she supposed with his genes it was a given. But his understanding of the machine went far beyond someone who had merely watched their father build it.
"You helped," she said, cutting him off mid-sentence. "You helped Vegeta build this, and I don't mean just handing him tools."

"I did a lot of tool handing," Trunks said with a grin. "But yes, I mainly worked on the circuit boards, and electrics. Papa did all the main structure and built the engine." He glanced down at his shoes and scuffed the floor before looking back up at her. "We made a good team."

"I can tell," Bulma said softly. "This is impressive work."

The boy's cheeks flushed and his embarrassed expression looked so much like the one Vegeta made whenever Bulma said something that he considered 'vulgar', that she had to smother her smile. Krillen had been right - he was like a mini Vegeta in so many ways. Was that because she had died in his time? The smile threatening to burst into the corners of her mouth faded away at the thought. If she had lived in the future, would this little boy be any different?

Trunks fished into his pocket and pulled out the phone he'd shown her yesterday. "Papa said to give you this." He handed it over to her. "It's about to run out of battery but he said you'd be able to figure it out. It contains schematics of the time machine and has all the research you did on Kakarot's heart virus. He said there should be enough to make a cure."

Bulma turned the phone over in her hand, looking at the charging port. "I thought Goku died quickly," she said. "Why did future me bother trying to make a cure?"

Trunks gave a shrug. "I don't know. I wasn't even born then. Maybe you were worried Papa would get the virus too?"

"Is Vegeta okay with me searching through this?" Bulma asked, waving the phone in her hand. "From the photos you showed me I'm guessing there is a lot of personal stuff on here."

Trunks tilted his head, looking at her with a critical gaze. "It was your phone," he said. "Everything on it is what you put there." Then he turned around and left, almost as abruptly as Vegeta had left last night, closing the door behind him.

Vegeta leaned against a tree and crossed his arms over his chest as he watched his older self and the boy move in co-ordinated circles around the back lawn of Capsule Corp, passing two ki balls back and forth with one another in an elegant dance. Future Vegeta had barged into his room before breakfast, demanding to borrow one of his training suits, then told him he'd reveal what he knew about becoming a Super Saiyan today. So far, Vegeta had learnt nothing, because the man had insisted on having breakfast, then doing katas with the brat before anything else.

Their katas looked effortless, as if they'd done them a thousand times. Vegeta never trained with anyone, other than the occasional spar with Nappa and Raditz. No one else could keep up with his fierce dedication and brutal training regime, and even if they could, he still would have trained alone.

Yet this older him and the boy had clearly been training together for a long time. Their movements were synchronised, yet Vegeta could tell that his future self was leading by an indiscernible amount of time, but the boy so in tune with his father's kata that he kept up without breaking step once. Seeing the two of them side by side, Vegeta was struck by how much the boy was like his future self - and him he supposed - despite the purple hair and blue eyes. The features were all him, and even the boy's ki seemed to vibrate on the same frequency.

Vegeta had never wanted children, and half breeds were an abomination on Planet Vegeta, but he
supposed that if he had to have a child, the boy wasn't a complete disappointment.

His future self however…

Future Vegeta had run away to the past, and then had the nerve to demand they use the dragon balls to prevent the apocalyptic future. What a joke. How could his future self think he would want to miss out on the chance to fight an opponent, even if they were ten times stronger than a Super Saiyan? Even Kakarot, who Vegeta loathed to admit he agreed with, didn't want to use the dragon balls. Vegeta knew the benefits of retreating, but that was not the same as running away, and as far as he was concerned, that was exactly what his future self had done.

He scowled at his future self, and the man must have sensed it because he glanced up from his kata and mirrored Vegeta's expression.

"You said you'd tell me how to become Super Saiyan," he snapped at his older self. "Not dance around the lawn all day."

"We are waiting for Kakarot," future Vegeta replied, looking down his nose in disdain.

"What do we need to wait for that third-class clown for?"

"Hi Vegeta!" Kakarot appeared on the lawn in front of him with a vague popping sound. He turned around to future Vegeta who continued his kata smoothly. "Hi other Vegeta."

Both Vegeta's grunted in response and Kakarot let out a laugh. "I can't tell who's who! You're even wearing the same clothes."

Vegeta rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue in disgust. First, he gets shown up by himself, and a half breed brat, and now he was forced to be in the presence of Kakarot. He could feel any hope he'd had for the day slipping through his fingers.

"Tell my younger self what triggered you to become Super Saiyan," future Vegeta instructed, halting his kata then sitting cross-legged on the grass, his back straight and arms on his knees as if he was about to start meditating.

Trunks stopped his kata movements as well, and glanced at his father before flopping down on the ground and pulling his limbs into the same position as his father, mimicking him down to the serious facial expression.

"Well…" Kakarot scratched the back of his head then glanced from the older Vegeta to the younger one. "Krillen died and I felt… angry I guess. Angrier than I'd ever been. It felt like my skin was on fire, and the next thing I knew… that rage exploded and I'd transformed."

Vegeta frowned at that. He'd been angry plenty of times in his life. He was the epitome of angry - he could argue that it was his resting emotion most of the time.

"Tell young me how you became Super Saiyan."

"Nonsense," future Vegeta growled. "Tell young me how you became Super Saiyan."
Trunks pressed his lips together and reached down to pluck out a long strand of grass, then began to rip it into small pieces.

Kakarot cleared his throat awkwardly. "If he doesn't want to talk about it you shouldn't…"

Future Vegeta threw Kakarot a ferocious glare. "Do not presume to tell me what I should or should not ask of my son. If I think he can handle it, then he can." He turned back to his son and raised his eyebrows.

Trunks looked up at him, and Vegeta saw something pass between the two in the small nod that the boy gave his father. When Trunks looked back at Vegeta, his hardened expression was back, smoothing his features like stone. He dropped the torn grass and brushed his hands off before starting. "They found our home. I was playing in my room, and I didn't know anything was wrong until I felt Gohan's ki." He paused and took in a deep breath, before continuing, his words tumbling out. "It wasn't like the other times, when he and Papa would go out and fight them. Those times their ki would drop slowly. This was different. One moment he was in the hall, calling my Mama's name, the next… nothing. His ki vanished too fast for him to have just been suppressing it."

Vegeta dug his nails into his palms, at the boy's quivering voice. He had been five when his father died. How old was this kid when he felt the first person he cared about perish? This was exactly why he didn't want children. Who would want to purposely bring life into this twisted universe where death and misery were the only certainties?

Kakarot's fists clenched and the usually cheery expression had vanished, replaced with… anguish, maybe? Kakarot's facial movements were all human, and Vegeta hadn't quite learnt how to interpret the nuances, but given that they boy was describing the death of Kakarot's son to him, it seemed like the most likely.

"Did you know Gohan well?" Kakarot asked, his voice coming out strained.

Trunks gave a small shrug, but it was future Vegeta who replied. "He trained with me the moment we realised the androids were not going to be defeated easily. He then came to live with us after his mother died."

"You took him in?" Kakarot asked, and Vegeta could tell that he'd forced himself not to emphasise the you.

Something flickered across future Vegeta's face, and again Vegeta found himself unable to recognise it, much to his frustration. "He made a good babysitter," the older Vegeta replied, the ghost of a smile on his lips.

Did his future self actually… care about Kakarot's brat? Just how different was this older version of himself?

"I don't remember much from before, but I remember that Gohan was my friend." Trunks blinked quickly then cleared his throat before continuing. "After that, Mama ran into my room. The androids followed her. I tried to stop them. I tried to protect her. I used everything I'd learnt from my training but I still wasn't strong enough." His eyes watered over, but he grit his teeth and no tears fell. "17 killed Mama. Her ki faded slower than Gohan's, but I knew it was too late. And then I felt… hot. My ki went crazy and it burned my skin. It hurt, but I couldn't stop it. Then I realised I'd done it. I'd become a Super Saiyan. But it was still too late, and I still wasn't strong enough. 18 threw me out the window and we fought outside, but I… I thought I was going to die."

"But you didn't," Vegeta found himself replying, unable to tear his gaze away from the small boy
in front of him who had attained at such a young age what he'd been trying to do his whole life.

Trunks glanced at his father. "No. I didn't."

"Gohan became Super Saiyan when Piccolo died," Future Vegeta said. "He described the experience in a similar way. A feeling of pure rage, fuelled by grief that felt like it was burning."

"And what about you?" Vegeta demanded of his older counterpart. "How did you become a Super Saiyan?"

Future Vegeta's lips drew a white line across his face and he appeared to hesitate before replying. "They attacked Capsule Corp," he said finally. "They blew the whole building up. I thought I was the only survivor. No one human should have been able to survive that and Trunks was just a baby. My ability to sense ki was still patchy, but I felt everyone's ki around me drop. I've been angry a lot of times in my life, as you are aware. But this was... different. Even when furious I have some level of control. I take my anger and channel it in a fight. But this couldn't be controlled. I let everything go and the transformation just... happened."

"You make it sound easy," Vegeta said.

"It wasn't." Future Vegeta's dark eyes bore through him. "Letting go - allowing all of my control to disappear is the hardest thing I can do. But I have a theory."

Vegeta raised his eyebrows at that. "Should I take notes?" he asked with a smirk.

Future Vegeta scowled at him. "Do you want to hear this or not?"

Vegeta sighed and waved his hand for his future self to continue.

"Training endlessly doesn't seem to force the transformation, although there does seem to be a correlation between strength in your base form and in the transformation." Future Vegeta explained. "I think there is a reason the transformation in myth was said to be only for the pure of heart. The trigger is an emotional one - it is a response that isn't diluted by any other thoughts, and any of your preconceptions. I assume the trigger does not need to be grief, but in the limited examples I have seen, that has always been the trigger."

"So you are saying that Vegeta - uh, the one from my time - needs to care about someone else, then have them die?" Kakarot asked. "That doesn't seem like a great option."

Vegeta frowned as he found himself agreeing with Kakarot, although he suspected that he was talking about the having the person Vegeta cared about die, while Vegeta couldn't imagine caring about anyone else in the first place.

"I'm sure it seems impossible," Future Vegeta said, ignoring Kakarot and looking at Vegeta. "I... we've been programmed our entire lives to believe that caring about someone else is a weakness."

"It only gives the enemy something to use against you." Vegeta pushed himself off the tree and took a step forward. "Look at father. He let our entire world be destroyed because he wanted to save me."

"I know," Future Vegeta said. "I'm not disagreeing with that reasoning. But-"

"-Of course there is a but," Vegeta growled, rolling his eyes.
"But caring for someone else gives you strength in battle. When you don't care if you live or die, it is easy to give up. But when you care if someone else dies… giving up isn't an option."

"I would never give up, no matter what!" Vegeta said.

"That's not true, and you know it," his older self said.

Vegeta flushed, remembering Namek, much to his shame. He had given up when Frieza blasted a hole through his chest. He'd given up and begged Kakarot to kill Frieza instead of dragging himself up and trying again. Not that he would have done any good, even if he had been able to move his legs, but he regretted not going out fighting right to the end.

"I don't think anyone needs to die," Future Vegeta said, giving Kakarot a brief frown. "I'm sure there is another way."

"Oh good, you're here Goku." Bulma's cheery voice rang out across the yard and she practically skipped over, giving Vegeta a flash of annoyance. What the hell did she have to be so damn happy about all the time? It was more irritating than her screeching when she was annoyed at him.

"Hey Bulma," Kakarot replied with a wide grin that made Vegeta want to punch his face in. "Did you need something?"

"Yes…” Bulma said slowly, glancing between the two Vegeta's with a frown. "But I need to talk to Vegeta first."

"What do you want, woman." Vegeta sneered at her.

Bulma flashed a smile at him. "Well that was easier than I thought to figure out who's who. I'm not interested in speaking with you, Vegeta. I want to ask your future self something." She chewed her lip and looked at Future Vegeta, who still sat cross-legged on the grass. "Privately?"

Future Vegeta frowned, but rose to his feet. Bulma took his hand and dragged him to the other side of the yard. She seemed to whisper into his ear, and his brow furrowed before a sly smile spread across his face and he nodded.

Vegeta felt a pang in his stomach as he watched them. He'd sensed their ki in the kitchen together last night. Had something happened between them? Bulma was still holding his future self's hand lightly. Vegeta shook his head and looked away. It didn't matter. He did not care about that woman, or whomever she was having relations with. Even if it was his future self. He did not care.

Their hands fell apart and future Vegeta strolled over, focused on Kakarot.

"We need to spar," he said. "No Super Saiyan - we are too close to the house."

"Sure!" Kakarot bounced on his feet. "I can't wait to see how strong you are. Krillen told me you cut down Frieza like he was-"

Future Vegeta's fist cut Kakarot off as it collided with his jaw, sending the third class Saiyan stumbling backward. Kakarot steadied himself, but Future Vegeta attacked with a swift uppercut that sent Kakarot flying before phasing behind Kakarot and slamming his fist into the back of the clown's head.

Kakarot dropped like a stone.

Both Vegetas laughed, and even Trunks let out a giggle.
"Three hits, and he's out," future Vegeta crowed. "I've waited years to be able to do that." At Bulma's horrified look his face fell. "What?"

Bulma rolled her eyes and pulled out a syringe with a large needle attached. "You could have just held him down," she muttered.

"You think he'd want to be awake for the amount of blood you need to take?" Future Vegeta asked, laughter lacing his tone. "Really, I was doing him a favour."

Vegeta chuckled at that. Maybe his future self wasn't as much of a disappointment as he'd thought.

Bulma grumbled under her breath, but got to work, taking five tubes of Kakarot's blood.

"What's it for?" Trunks asked, watching the procedure with intrigue on his face.

"It's to create the cure for Goku's heart virus," Bulma replied. She looked at each of the Vegetas, an evil grin on her face. "I need your blood too. Which one of you is brave enough to volunteer?"

Future Vegeta glanced at an imaginary watch on his wrist. "Look at that, it's time to eat. Come on Trunks, let's see what your grandmother has prepared." He and Trunks rushed inside, leaving Vegeta on the lawn with Bulma and an unconscious Kakarot.

Bulma brandished a large needle, her eyes sparkling as she threw him a winning smile that made him shrink back towards the tree behind him. "I guess you just volunteered yourself."
Vegeta shrank towards the tree behind him, stepping backwards until his shoulders hit the tree trunk. The late morning light slipped through the wide maple leaves, casting moving contrasts of light and dark across his features, making it difficult for Bulma to read his expression.

She peered at him quizzically. He didn't look terrified like Goku would have been, but his brow had furrowed and he had one foot in front of the other, knees slightly bent as if he were about to launch into battle. As she stepped closer again, his hands flinched into fists, and his nervousness became obvious. His gaze seemed fixed on the needle, so Bulma lowered her hand and put the syringe behind her back.

"What's the matter?" she asked, genuinely curious about his reaction. "I didn't think you were as much of a baby as Goku when it came to needles."

That got him going. He fixed a sharp glare on her and took a step forward, slowly unclenching his white-knuckled fists. "I'm. Not," he said through gritted teeth.

Bulma just raised an eyebrow at him and tried not to laugh.

"It doesn't mean I like being a laboratory monkey," he spat out, the odd phrase and the sharp edge to his tone making her wonder if he was talking from actual experience as opposed to a general dislike of the idea. He crossed his arms in front of him. "And I have no interest in saving that idiot's life." His lip curled into a sneer. "Why don't you go and get my future self's help?"

Bulma started at the venom in his tone when he mentioned his future counterpart. "Oh…" Bulma grinned and waggled her eyebrows at him. "Why, Vegeta… are you jealous of him?"

"What?" Vegeta's back straightened and a furious glint entered his eyes. "Of course not!"

"You are!" Bulma took a step closer and saw him recoil. "He's stronger than you, and a Super Saiyan. It looks like you are both afraid of giving blood though."

"I… I am not jealous!" Vegeta spluttered.

"And then you saw me and future Vegeta whispering together… It's quite understandable. I'd be jealous too." She dropped him a wink as she got close enough to lay a hand on his bicep.
Vegeta flushed bright red and jerked away from her, making her burst out into laughter.

"Look, I know your future self said he'd tell you about becoming a Super Saiyan, but you still need to train, right? I think I have some great ideas for how to help you. I can improve the gravity machine in the ship, and I have a few plans to weaponise robots with ki and have them withstand the higher gravity."

Vegeta stared at her, his muscles relaxing ever-so-slightly. He didn't say anything, and kept his arms crossed, but he didn't run away either, which Bulma took as a good sign.

"Come to my lab," she said. "I'll take your blood then show you what plans I've drawn up so far."

She could feel the tension rolling off Vegeta as he clearly tried to make up his mind. Kami, he was wound tighter than anyone she'd ever met. Bulma glanced at Goku who was still out cold. She should probably move him somewhere more comfortable, but it likely wouldn't be too long before he woke up, and he'd been hit on the head enough times for her to not be too concerned for his wellbeing.

Bulma gently touched Vegeta's shoulder, and this time he didn't flinch, but turned his head to look at her hand.

When he didn't brush her off, but instead lifted his head to look at her, his endlessly dark eyes swirling with what she suspected was confusion, she dropped her hand and smiled. "Let's go."

She turned and walked in the direction of her lab, holding her breath to listen for evidence of him following. After a moment, she heard his quiet footsteps behind her and smothered a grin. He was too easy.

Inside one of Capsule Corp's smaller labs Vegeta sat in a long medical chair, tilted back to elevate his feet. The machine clicked and whirred as blood flowed from a vein in his arm to a bag attached to the machine.

Since agreeing to it, his facial expressions had been stoic, but Bulma noticed he was a little pale once the needle was in, and when she told him to keep squeezing his fist to keep the blood flowing, he took it to an extreme, going white knuckled with the effort.

"I don't see why you couldn't have done it with a syringe like Kakarot," he grumbled. "You're sucking me dry with this thing."

"Nonsense, if you drink lots of water you'll be fine," Bulma said, chuckling as she sat down at the desk to label Goku's samples. "I would have done this to Goku because I would have got more blood from it, but if he woke up during the procedure he would have flipped."

Vegeta snorted. "Being scared of something that small is pathetic."

"Oh yeah?" Bulma grinned and swivelled on her chair to face him. "Says the man who's scared of itsy bitsy worms."

Vegeta's cheeks flushed and he opened and shut his mouth like a fish as he stammered out a reply. "I... I'm not! How..."

"I saw you when my mother got the Namekians to help her dig up the front garden for replanting."

Bulma threw him a wink that made him blush even more. Gosh he was kind of adorable when he did that. "One look at all those wriggling worms and you fled like Yajirobe from a fight."
"I am not scared of worms," he said, narrowing his eyes at her. "I merely… dislike them."

"Whatever you say, tough guy." The machine started beeping, letting her know the bag was full, so Bulma stood up, turned off the machine and disconnected the bag. Vegeta's arm muscle twitched as she placed one hand on his elbow and the other on the needle embedded in his vein. She hid a smile at his flinching and carefully removed the needle. "All done. Stay seated for a while, because I took quite a bit of blood."

Vegeta scoffed at that. "I've lost more blood than that before."

"From fighting, or donating your blood for medical research?" Bulma asked as she placed a bright pink plaster over the spot where the needle had penetrated his skin.

"Both," Vegeta muttered, a deep scowl marring his youthful features and making Bulma wonder exactly what medical research he'd been subjected to under Frieza's reign. He swung his legs over the chair so he sat sideways on it and leaned his hands on his knees. "Now, are you going to show me these plans for ki weaponised robots?"

"Don't stand up yet," Bulma instructed. She carefully labelled Vegeta's bag of blood then put it in the fridge with Goku's samples. "I'll be back in a minute."

She went up to the kitchen and got Vegeta a large glass of juice and some biscuits, then headed back down to the lab. When she returned, to her surprise Vegeta was still dutifully sitting on the chair, although she noticed that the pink plaster had been ripped off, and sat crumpled on the chair beside him.

"Drink," she said, thrusting the glass into his hands.

Vegeta looked at the glass, crinkling his nose suspiciously, but took the glass from her hand and sipped it. He grimaced and tried to hand it back.

Bulma shook her head. "Drink it all. The hydration and sugar will prevent you from feeling like crap."

"I feel fine," Vegeta growled, but he tossed back the rest of the glass, sticking his tongue out in disgust when he'd finished.

Bulma handed him the pack of biscuits, glad that she'd picked plain ones instead of chocolate. He seemed to have an aversion to sweet food. Vegeta sighed dramatically, but accepted the packet and started popping them one by one in his mouth, crunching obnoxiously. Satisfied that he was doing as she asked, she dug into her filing cabinet for the draft plans for the gravity machine's upgrade and the robots. She spread the plans over the wide desk, placing paper weights on the corners to keep the paper flat.

"Is this them?" Vegeta asked from beside her, making her jump. He was always so stealthy in his movements. He placed one hand on the edge of the desk and bent over it, his eyes scanning from top to bottom as he inspected the plans.

Bulma frowned at his standing up too soon, but he didn't look pale, so she figured the risk of him keeling over on her was low.

"The hardest part of the bots isn't harnessing ki," she said. "I figured out how to do that out years ago. The tricky part is managing the blast acceleration with the targeting system because any increase in gravity will alter it. On top of that, I need the shell of the gravity room to not only withstand the increased gravity, but the ki blasts themselves." She tapped the paper next to the
Vegeta frowned and placed his finger at the beginning of the formula and started tracing along it as he read it. When he got to the end, he started muttering under his breath as he worked out what it meant. "The gravitational constant on Earth is nine point eight. But as the machine increases the gravity, the constant is no longer constant, affecting the acceleration of the blasts proportionally. The increased speed also increases the ki's power on impact. So, as I turn up the gravity, the robot's ki blasts will also become more powerful." He glanced sideways at her and raised his eyebrows. "Clever."

Bulma felt a blush creep onto her cheeks. She knew it was clever, she was a genius after all, but Vegeta so rarely complemented anyone or anything.

He must have noticed, because he immediately scowled at her. "Don't let it go to your head. How are you going to reinforce the room so it doesn't collapse on itself or get damaged from the ki blasts?"

"I'm not sure yet," Bulma admitted. "I was thinking about simple reinforcement but it has the potential to wear down over time. And knowing you, that won't take long."

Vegeta grunted in agreement. "You are using the increased gravity to increase acceleration… working with the changes in force rather than trying to work against them. Maybe you need something that increased gravity will make stronger," Vegeta said, turning back to the plans. "A material that becomes stronger when compressed perhaps?"

Bulma blinked slowly, taking him in. "That's brilliant."

He looked up at her, his eyes widening and mouth open slightly in surprise for a short moment before his lips twisted into his trademark smirk. "Of course it is."

Bulma slammed her hands down on the desk, trying to bump Vegeta out of the way with her hip to pour over the plan. Her pushing didn't budge him, but at her frown he stepped to the side. "I think this could work," she said, grabbing a pencil to make notes in the margins of the plans. "We've been developing a new capsule material that increases its compressive strength when shrunk. I think I can apply the same logic…" she trailed off and started mumbling equations under her breath and writing them on the plans.

"When?" Vegeta asked. When she looked up at him, he crossed his arms. "You also need to create a cure for the idiot and if I'm not mistaken that machine my future counterpart arrived in will require repairs."

Bulma glared at him. "It will be ready when it's ready. I'm not going to rush it and have the room blow you up, so you'll need to be patient."

"We only have three years," Vegeta pointed out.

Bulma tossed her hair over her shoulder. "Oh please, I'll have the machine working soon, and you'll be kicking those android butts in no time."

Vegeta snorted and shook his head. "It had better be soon." His mouth quirked again. "I'll just keep pestering you until it's done."

"Kami help me." Bulma rolled her eyes. "It's not like you wouldn't pester me regardless."

Vegeta bared his teeth and leaned in close to her, placing his warm hand lightly on her elbow.
"Clearly you love me pestering you," he said, his husky voice making her shiver. "Since the evidence of that is sitting in your kitchen right now, eating your mother's food."

Bulma drew in a sharp hissing breath and slapped his arm, which felt like hitting a brick wall, but found herself unable to make a retort. It was true after all. She'd missed his 'pestering' while he'd been off in space chasing Goku. No one else had both the intelligence and the will to argue with her, shooting back creative insults as quick as her.

Vegeta gave her a wolfish grin and let out a laugh as he dropped his hand. "I'll return pester you later. Have fun figuring out the gravitational compression." Then the jerk left the room, still chuckling as Bulma found herself horrified that she'd actually let him get the last word.
Betrayal

Chapter Summary

Future Vegeta and Trunks really like eating. A flashback reveals some things about Goku from the future timeline.

Chapter Notes

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

Food in the past was a thousand times better than food in his time. No, a million times better, Trunks decided as he bit into a sandwich layered with chicken, a good helping of creamy mayonnaise, and three types of cheeses. "This is the best holiday ever," he said in between mouthfuls. "If we can restore the dragon balls in our time, I'm wishing for an endless supply of food like this."

Mrs Briefs - Nana, Grandmother? - smiled widely and ruffled his hair as she placed another plate of sandwiches on the table. "It's wonderful having more people to cook for, dear. Your papa has a healthy appetite and a solid appreciation for my cooking. I'm glad to see you've inherited it."

Vegeta scowled at the woman who disappeared back into the kitchen, humming to herself. His glare moved from her to Trunks. "I think we have more important things to wish for. And this isn't a holiday, brat." But despite his sharp look, his tone held no edge and when he bit into his own sandwich and sighed, his expression relaxed into something resembling bliss. "I suppose if we have a spare wish…"

Trunks couldn't help grinning. His usually serious father had seemed less uptight since killing Frieza. He wasn't sure if it was the death of his old enemy or the food and relative safety in this time, but since Vegeta hadn't snapped at Trunks once since they'd arrived, there was no way he was complaining about the sudden change in his father's personality.

"I know it's not really a holiday…" Trunks did his best to keep the whine out of his voice since he knew his father reacted badly to that, but he couldn't help the excitement that crept in. "But you did say that if we got the chance you'd take me to an amusement park."

"That sounds like a wonderful outing," Mrs Briefs said from the kitchen as she pulled a tray of steaming chocolate chip biscuits from the oven then placed it on the bench top. "I remember when my dearest took me to the theme park in Sunshine City as our first date. It was so romantic!" She let out a loud exhale and laid her kitchen-mittened hand on her chest. She gave Vegeta and sly smile. "You should take Bulma."

Vegeta coughed on the sandwich he was devouring, so Trunks passed him a glass of water, hiding his smirk.
Vegeta took the drink and gulped it back, then slammed the glass on the table. "That's a terrible idea! Don't try your meddling on me, woman." He narrowed his eyes in her direction. "If you're going to meddle, do it with this time's me, not... me... uh... not future me... oh forget it." He waved his hand in frustration at Mrs Briefs' blank look then glared across the table as Trunks finally burst out laughing.

"We should go with Gohan," Trunks suggested, still struggling to contain his giggles.

"I had to deal with Kakarot's brat for years in our time. Why the hell would I want to spend time with him in this one?" Vegeta asked.

"But papa, if he comes you don't need to go on the rides with me."

Vegeta growled then muttered a couple of the Saiyan curse words he'd taught Trunks recently under his breath. "Fine. Kakarot's spawn can come." He threw Mrs Briefs a frown. "But no one else."

"Where are you taking Gohan?" Kakarot walked into the dining room from the ranch sliders that opened out onto the garden, rubbing the back of his head and wincing.

"To the amusement park!" Trunks bounced in his seat, unable to contain his excitement any longer. He'd never been to one but had watched a few old Earth movies and they looked fun.

"Can I come?" Kakarot's face lit up like a child's. "The food there is the best. The candy floss, the candy apples..." He smacked his lips together as he pulled out the chair next to Vegeta and sat down on it.

Trunks watched curiously as his father edged away from Kakarot on his seat and fixed his dark stare on the other Saiyan. "No. You are not invited."

Vegeta had talked about Kakarot a bit to Trunks, and the boy hadn't ever worked out if Vegeta saw the other Saiyan as an enemy or a friend. The words Vegeta used to describe Kakarot were never very nice (then again, Vegeta was never particularly nice to anyone), but Trunks always caught something in his father's tone when he spoke about Kakarot that made Trunks wonder if he actually liked the man underneath it all.

Kakarot pouted at Vegeta. "Come on, you'll be bored if you have to drag the two kids around by yourself. It will be fun if we all go. Trunks doesn't mind, do you buddy?"

Trunks frowned in annoyance at the endearment. He hated being treated like a child. Papa might still have still acted like a father - or a commanding officer depending on the situation - but he never talked down to Trunks. "I am not your buddy," he growled, snatching the last sandwich out from under Kakarot's reaching hand.

Kakarot looked in disappointment at the empty plate, then laughed and scratched the back of his head awkwardly. "Gosh, like father, like son, right Vegeta? You sure can tell he's your kid."

Vegeta smirked at Trunks, who felt a sudden surge of pride.

Kakarot grabbed one of the baked cookies instead and grinned at Trunks. "How are you liking the past?"

"S'fine," Trunks mumbled as he swallowed the rest of his sandwich. Kakarot seemed nice enough, but he couldn't imagine him surviving in the future. A good nature like that would either be beaten out of him or get him killed.
Perhaps guessing that he wasn't going to get much out of Trunks, Kakarot turned to Vegeta. "I'd be mad at you for knocking me out so easily, but that was impressive back there. Are you going to stick around for a while? I'd like to spar with you again. You caught me by surprise. I think you'll have a harder time next time."

Vegeta grunted and gave a shrug. "We'll see," he muttered, giving Kakarot a sideways glare.

"My head hurts like hell," Kakarot said cheerfully, grabbing three more cookies and eating them in one bite. "So does my arm. I must have fallen funny."

Both Trunks and Vegeta snickered at that, grinning at each other from behind their mouthfuls of food.

Kakarot let out another loud laugh. "You two look so alike! You have the same facial expressions and everything!"

Trunks rolled his eyes. "We are related." He sensed his father's ki move downstairs and felt a flash of confusion. Trunks glanced at his father, but Vegeta sat across the table from him, accepting a plate of stir fried noodles from Mrs Briefs.

"Your favourite," she said to Vegeta with a wink.

Trunks realised that the ki must be his young father on the move just as the younger man walked into the room. Young Vegeta frowned when he saw his older self eating noodles, and took a seat at the far end of the table, the furthest spot from everyone, then glared at Mrs Briefs expectantly.

"I made enough for you too," Mrs Briefs chirped, bringing over a heaped plate to young Vegeta. "This is lovely, having so many young men to cook for!" She bustled away again, and Trunks hoped it was to make more sandwiches.

Young Vegeta started eating the noodles with the same ferocity as his older self. Trunks watched him closely, concentrating on his ki. If he didn't know the man sitting across from him was Papa, he could have sworn this other Vegeta was. They both looked the same, and even ate in the same way - slightly hunched over as if afraid someone would snatch their plate out from under them. Their ki was identical... Or was it?

Trunks turned to his father and focussed on his ki. Individually their ki was too alike to make note of any differences, but sensing them side by side... Papa's ki had a heavier, darker tone while his younger self had a sharper ki. It was hard to spot, and probably only noticeable because Trunks had been around his father his whole life.

"Are you going to come to the amusement park too?" Kakarot asked young Vegeta. "We are taking Trunks and Gohan."

Trunks' father slammed his fist on the table making the food around him jump. "For the last time, Kakarot - you are not invited!"

"You should come as well," Kakarot continued talking to the young Vegeta as if Trunks' father hadn't spoken. "If anyone needs to loosen up and have a good time, it's you."

"I've just been through one form of torture," young Vegeta said with a low growl. "I will not subject myself to another."

Kakarot cocked his head, his brow crinkled in puzzlement. "What have you been doing?"
Young Vegeta grinned viciously. "Bulma wanted my blood to assist in finding a cure for the heart virus." He leaned forward, looking intently at Kakarot. "She hooked me up to this machine, inserting a needle into my vein." He brought his arm up on the table and lay it out, then tapped the inside of his elbow. "She placed it right here. The needle was attached to a long thin tube, then blood started flowing through the tube into a bag."

Kakarot's golden skin paled dramatically, and his hand remained frozen, holding a biscuit part-way to his mouth.

"At least she only used a basic syringe on you." Young Vegeta took a slow mouthful of noodles, swallowing before raising an eyebrow at Kakarot. "How is your arm?"

Kakarot's gaze flicked downwards as he glanced at the crook of his elbow. Then his eyes rolled back and he crashed to the floor in a dead faint.

Young Vegeta grinned triumphantly, while the elder just rolled his eyes.

Trunks started laughing, clutching his sides as the giggles ripped through him. "Papa, you knocked Kakarot out in three hits," he choked out in between bursts of laughter. "But young you did it without laying a hand on the man!" Trunks kept giggling, unable to stop even though his father laid a ferocious glare on him. "You must be losing your touch."

His father let out a loud growl, not unlike that of the wild dogs that roamed Earth's streets in their time. Trunks shrank back, still laughing, but to his surprise, another laugh joined him.

Young Vegeta's laugh broke across the room, a harsh sound that was different from his father's. It was dry, unused perhaps. But even as his own laughter died down, Trunks couldn't help grinning back at young Vegeta as the man smirked at him.

"You know," young Vegeta said, still chuckling. "For a half breed you aren't the worst brat in the world."

"Of course he isn't," Papa snapped, throwing his younger self a glare before softening into something resembling a smile as he set his gaze on Trunks. "He's my son."

Trunks and Kakarot flew at each other, two golden balls of light dancing across the afternoon sky, just below some sparse, streaky clouds. The two fighters appeared evenly matched in strength, although Vegeta suspected that Kakarot's years of experience in fighting would see his son defeated in this spar.

Young Vegeta stood beside him, shielding his eyes from the glaring sun with his hand as he followed the fight with the same intensity as Vegeta. "The boy will surpass you soon."

"Then I shall know how father felt," Vegeta replied, not disagreeing. When the boy achieved that, Vegeta would know he had done his job as a parent and a trainer.

His younger counterpart snorted and turned to Vegeta, dropping his hand and narrowing his eyes. "When I was young, I thought Father was proud of my strength. But he was merely happy that he had someone to bargain with. He traded me without a thought for what it would mean."

"He regretted it," Vegeta pointed out. "He attempted a rescue."

Young Vegeta's lip curled into a sneer as he turned his head back to the fight taking place above them. "You never would have let Frieza take your son in the first place."
Vegeta closed his eyes briefly. It was one of his worst nightmares, seeing his son in the hands of that sadistic monster. "I would have fought to the death before allowing that."

Trunks landed a powerful hit on Kakarot that sent the Saiyan hurtling to the ground. Young Vegeta bared his teeth into a grin. "You trained him well."

Vegeta nodded in agreement. It had been necessary for his survival, but his son had been easy to train. His natural skill was impressive, and unlike when Vegeta had trained Gohan, Trunks had no bad habits slowing him down.

Kakarot recovered quickly and flew back at Trunks, his furious blows making the small boy back up.

"Only one more year before this pathetic planet would have been rid of that idiot." Young Vegeta let out a huff of air. "Why did you warn him of his impending doom? It would have been an easy way to get rid of him without anyone blaming you."

Vegeta winced at his younger self's words. "You'd be surprised at how easy it is for grieving people to blame someone, whether it is their fault or not. But having Kakarot die like that was not the way I wanted to become the best. If I allowed him to die in this time it would be like using the dragon balls to become Super Saiyan."

"Still, having him die must have given you a moment's joy?"

Vegeta grit his teeth, remembering Kakarot's face as he'd clutched his hand to his chest, his eyes filled with a genuine fear that Vegeta had never seen on the man's face before, even in the heat of battle. "I thought it would, but no."

Vegeta sat underneath a tree, leaning his back against the bark, shaded from the afternoon sun and enjoying what little peace he could get in a garden filled with morons. All the human fighters he once tried to kill milled around chattering happily, throwing him the occasional wary glance, but leaving him alone for the most part. Only Kakarot had greeted him without any obvious resentment, in fact he'd been overly enthusiastic at Vegeta's presence. Vegeta had ignored the man's greeting and piled a few plates high with food before making his escape to the edge of the garden as soon as possible.

How Bulma had convinced him to come with her to Kakarot's house for this 'get together' as she'd called it, Vegeta hadn't quite worked out. How she convinced him to do half the things she did, like lugging heavy equipment across the compound, or using his ability to fly to reach something up high, he didn't know either, but lately when she asked him to do something he would grumble and complain, but would eventually do as she requested.

It was pathetic. Him, the Saiyan Prince, destined to rule the universe, had his strings tugged by a weak human.

"Yamcha will be there," she'd said this morning, her large blue eyes wide as she placed her soft hand on his forearm. "He's going to bring her. I just know it."

Vegeta glanced at the hand on his arm, unable to understand how she could bear to touch him. Didn't she know how many people he'd slaughtered? How many planets he'd destroyed? She should be recoiling in disgust, not placing her hand on his skin.

"I don't want to go alone."
Vegeta tensed under her fingers as her admission struck him to the core, not because he gave a damn about her feelings, but because this woman had never admitted weakness in front of him before and he found it disconcerting.

And so, without fully realising what he was doing, he agreed to attend this ridiculous event, even demeaning himself by sitting with her in her flying metal contraption.

Kakarot's house may have been small, but it had a large garden, and the Z fighters all congregated there. The woman stood next to Chi Chi, who was cooking on a strange box-shaped outdoor oven and speaking in furious hushed tones about Bulma's guest.

"Why did you bring him?" Chi Chi hissed. "That psychopathic monster will probably kill us all by the end of the day."

Bulma snuck him a furtive glance, likely to see if he could hear, but Vegeta kept to the shadows under the tree, refusing to let his body react to the harpy's words. It wasn't as if Kakarot's woman had formed an incorrect opinion of him. He would much rather be slaughtering everyone here instead of being forced to listen to their meaningless drivel as they all 'caught up', whatever that meant.

"He's not like that," Bulma said, a note of irritation lacing her tone. "Vegeta is my friend and I wanted him to come."

Friend? Vegeta nearly scoffed allowed at that. He'd never had a friend in his life! The two of them might have got into an odd routine at night, drinking coffee before bed most nights as she regaled him with tales of her past, but friends? The woman was delusional.

Chi Chi obviously thought the same thing. "Have you forgotten that he killed your boyfriend?" She asked, waving the tongs in her hand like a weapon.


The ex-boyfriend in question chose that moment to turn up, his arm around a curvy brunette. Bulma appeared to physically shrink in on herself and she glanced almost desperately in Vegeta's direction.

He looked away. He'd said he would attend, not take part in Bulma's crazy scheme to make her seem less pitiable to her ex. It didn't look like he was going to get much choice in the matter though. He cursed inwardly as he heard her soft footsteps heading towards him, and leaned his head back against the tree and closed his eyes, determined to continue ignoring her.

"If you were going to leave me alone the moment we arrived, I wouldn't have brought you," Bulma said sitting down next to him so her arm brushed his.

Vegeta sighed and opened his eyes, peeking at her out of the corner of his eye without looking at her directly. With her shoulders slumped and eyes downcast she seemed deflated, and so unlike her usual self. Was this the weakling's doing? Vegeta narrowed his eyes at Yamcha. It was obvious he had brought his latest woman to make Bulma uncomfortable, and judging from her body language, it was working.

"Show no fear," Vegeta said quietly already breaking his decision to ignore her.

"What?" Bulma looked up at him, her blue eyes curious.

Vegeta met her gaze, keeping his face purposefully blank. "It is the first rule of battle. You are
letting Scarface win by revealing your feelings."

Bulma's back slowly straightened. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yes." Vegeta tilted his head back and stared at the leaves, watching Bulma out of the corner of his eye.

"I suppose I should act like he's not even here."

Vegeta grunted noncommittally. He didn't care what she did as long as it wasn't moping around after that moron.

"What are the other rules?" Bulma asked.

Vegeta frowned. "Of battle?"

"Yes. I want to win."

Vegeta gave a low chuckle. Of course she wanted to win. She fought to win every verbal battle with him, why would this battle with her ex be any different? "Strategy over strength. You should be able to manage that... being a genius and all," he said, throwing us much sarcasm behind the word 'genius' as he could muster.

Bulma grinned at him. "So, you finally admit my brilliance?"

"Never." Vegeta snorted and rolled his eyes. "You dated that weakling human for a decade. I refuse to believe anyone with brain cells could do that."

"You don't complain about my lack of brain cells when I make you new weaponised robots," Bulma pointed out.

"Hm." Vegeta flicked his gaze sideways to look her up and down. "You are occasionally useful I suppose."

"And you aren't useful at all," Bulma complained. "You can't even tolerate one party at my side to fend off Yamcha and his bimbo?" She plucked a sushi roll off one of his plates and popped it into her mouth. Vegeta's eyes widened at her audacity and he swung his head round to face her with a growl.

"What?" she asked once she'd finished chewing, batting her eye lashes at him. "You weren't eating it." She grabbed another, and Vegeta snatched her wrist before she could eat it.

"What are you doing?" Vegeta snarled.

"I'm hungry," Bulma said with a cheeky grin.

"Never take food from a Saiyan." Vegeta kept his grip on her wrist and leaned closer towards her. "It's considered to be a direct challenge. You don't want to challenge me, woman."

"Don't I?" Bulma asked, a smirk appearing on her face. "What will you do? I know you won't hurt me."

Show no fear. She had that one perfected, Vegeta realised. But what exactly was her strategy? There had to be one. The woman was like him. She never did anything without a greater purpose behind it.
He became vaguely aware of Yamcha watching them. He couldn't see the man, but his burning gaze was obvious. So that's what this was about. Vegeta smirked back at Bulma, realising that while he didn't need to help her, making Scarface jealous certainly wouldn't harm him. "You have a lot of misplaced faith in me, woman," he said, dropping his voice to a husky tone and leaning forward even closer. "I could eat you alive."

Bulma laughed and shook her head. "I'd like to see you try."

He leaned forward again, so the only thing separating them was her delicate hand and the piece of sushi.

"There's another rule," he said softly.

Bulma swallowed hard. "What is it?"

"No hesitation..." Vegeta dropped his voice to a whisper. "No mercy." He flashed her a grin before deftly taking the sushi out of her hand with his teeth, swallowing the piece whole.

Bulma's cheeks flushed and her chest hitched, and Vegeta wondered if she even cared that her ex was still watching.

"Hey Vegeta!" Kakarot appeared in front of them, a huge grin on his face as he glanced at Bulma and Vegeta's hands.

Vegeta dropped Bulma's wrist, his cheeks burning.

"I'm glad you came," Kakarot said, apparently oblivious to whatever was or wasn't happening between Vegeta and Bulma, who hadn't stopped staring at him.

"You'd be the only one," Vegeta ground out. "I'm fairly sure everyone else wants my head on a spike."

Kakarot laughed and gave an awkward shrug. "They'll come around eventually. Did you want to spar? The food's nearly run out and I haven't had a good fight in ages."

Vegeta nodded and stood up, eager to get away from the woman. He met her gaze but couldn't read her expression. It didn't matter - he was sure she'd use her loud mouth to tell him her thoughts later. She always did.

"Let's get out of here," Vegeta said. "Your woman won't be happy if we blow up her party."

Kakarot nodded eagerly and placed his hand on Vegeta's shoulder, making them both disappear with a popping sound.

They reappeared in an open field, which judging from the distance of the ki signatures of the Z party it would have taken them at least twenty minutes to fly here.

Vegeta stepped away from Kakarot, making the man drop his hand from his shoulder, and looked around. The field's grass grew to just above his ankles, and wildflowers littered the clearing, bouncing in the light breeze. One side of the open space was sheltered by trees blossoming with pink flowers.

"You are getting close, you know," Kakarot said. "I've felt your ki when you are training. I think you just need a trigger."
Vegeta frowned at the other Saiyan. A trigger? "How can you tell by my ki how close I am?"

"It tastes different."

"Tastes different," Vegeta repeated incredulously.

"Yeah." Kakarot nodded enthusiastically then fired his ki up around him in white waves. "I know you are new to sensing ki, but try get a feel for mine. You can tell that this is my ki, and not just because of the power level, right?"

Vegeta cocked his head, watching Kakarot carefully. "I think so. It feels different from mine, or anyone else’s, but I'm not sure how I tell them apart. I just do."

"Keep concentrating on my ki." Kakarot powered up even more, and golden waves surrounded him, turning his black hair golden. "Can you taste the difference?"

Vegeta let out a low growl. "I don't taste anything." He focussed on Kakarot's ki, trying to pick up on any subtle differences. "I suppose it does feel a little different."

"It's like a green apple instead of a red apple," Kakarot said. "Similar, but different."

Vegeta rolled his eyes. "Trust you to make this about food." He thought he understood what Kakarot meant though. His Super Saiyan ki had a different edge to it. Something that made his skin tingle slightly.

Kakarot powered down and grinned at him. "When you are training, I feel your ki change sometimes. It's there, bubbling under the surface, waiting for you to release it."

"It's not doing much good under the surface," Vegeta grumbled. "I'm training myself to death and I don't feel any closer."

"You need a trigger."

"What exactly is a trigger?"

Kakarot shrugged, his wide smile never leaving his face. "Could be anything. Krillen dying was mine. Maybe if someone you care about is in danger it will happen."

"It will never happen then," Vegeta said. "I don't care about anyone."

Kakarot raised his eyebrows. "If you say so."

"Can we spar already?" Vegeta asked, not liking Kakarot's knowing look.

"Okay, but with Earth sparring rules," Kakarot said, bouncing up and down and shaking out his limbs. "Base form only. No ki. First to five hits wins."

"No sparring to the death then?" Vegeta asked with a smirk.

Kakarot laughed. "Not today. Maybe when you are Super Saiyan."

Vegeta scoffed at that. Kakarot sounded like he was joking, but if Vegeta became Super Saiyan and had the power to take Kakarot's life, the man wouldn't be laughing then.

"If either of us breaks the rules, that's an automatic loss."
Vegeta nodded, then pressed his lips together in a tight line, considering Kakarot carefully. "No holding back."

The other Saiyan gave Vegeta a two-fingered salute that he assumed was acceptance of his request.

The two Saiyans positioned themselves in the middle of the field and adopted their battle stances. Kakarot motioned Vegeta with his fingers. "We are on my territory, so you start."

Vegeta flung himself forward before Kakarot had even finished his sentence, feigning a hit to the right but getting in a quick uppercut to the left that scraped Kakarot's jaw, but didn't land a decisive hit, much to Vegeta's frustration. Kakarot fought back immediately, fighting with what seemed to be pure instinct rather than any kind of strategy.

Vegeta paid close attention to Kakarot's moves, and when he saw one he recognised, he ducked under the other Saiyan's arm and twisted around, delivering a kick to the back of Kakarot's knee, making him stumble.

"One," Vegeta said with a smirk.

Kakarot narrowed his eyes and grinned back. "The second point will be mine." He leapt forward, throwing a powerful punch that missed Vegeta, who used Kakarot's forward motion against him by pulling him forward even faster, straight into Vegeta's well placed knee.

"Two. Stop holding back!" Vegeta cried out, attacking Kakarot with a flurry of furious blows that had the taller Saiyan in full defence position and backing up.

"I'm not!" Kakarot said, gasping in between hits. He collapsed suddenly to his knees, clutching his chest, and Vegeta pulled back a vicious punch to the other fighter's jaw at the last millisecond as he felt Kakarot's ki plummet.

Kakarot had paled, and his face contorted into an expression of pure pain. When he slumped to the ground on his side, closing his eyes and wheezing, Vegeta dropped to his knees beside the man to try figure out what was going on.

"What's wrong? I didn't hit you that hard. Stop clowning around!" His voice rose at the last sentence as he realised something was seriously wrong with the Saiyan.

"Chest... hurts..." Kakarot managed to gasp out before his eyes rolled back and his body went limp.

Vegeta froze for a moment, staring at the prone man in front of him. He'd been talking and sparring perfectly normally a moment ago and now his ki indicated he was on the edge of death.

Cursing under his breath, Vegeta scooped up Kakarot in his arms and blasted off in the air, flying as fast as he could back to Kakarot's house. He tore through the air, reaching a speed that shouldn't have been possible while carrying another person, and in twelve minutes saw the cottage in the distance.

When he landed in the middle of the lawn, collapsing on the grass and sucking in deep breaths, everyone ran towards them, crowding around and making Vegeta's skin itch with claustrophobia.

"What's going on?" Chi Chi demanded. Vegeta lay Kakarot on the ground and she fell to her knees beside her husband. "Goku?" She patted his face, and when he remained unresponsive, looked up at Vegeta, fire in her eyes. "What did you do to him?"
“Nothing,” Vegeta replied, a heavy weariness seeping to his bones.

“Daddy?” Gohan pushed through everyone to be at his father’s side, then shook Kakarot’s shoulder. “Daddy, wake up!”

“His ki… I can barely sense it but there doesn’t seem to be any wounds.” Krillen set a furious glare on Vegeta. “Where did you hit him?”

“He’s not injured!” Vegeta ground out, but no one listened as they all started speaking over him.

“Is he sick?”

“He was fine earlier.”

“He’s never been sick in his life! He must have hurt himself.”

Vegeta clambered to his feet and shoved his way out of the group to stand off to the side, clenching his shaking hands.

“Maybe he ate something?” Bulma suggested tentatively, kneeling beside Chi Chi to take Kakarot’s pulse.

“What, you don’t think it’s suspicious that he goes off with the guy who’s vowed to kill him and returns half dead?” Yamcha threw Vegeta a nasty stare. “Maybe he poisoned him or something.”

Bulma frowned at Yamcha, but when she looked through the group and her gaze caught Vegeta’s, her eyes held the same question as everyone else. “What happened?” she asked.

“I don’t know!” Vegeta spat out. “We’d barely started sparring and he… he said his chest hurt and then he collapsed.”

Bulma stared at Vegeta, her face impassive while everyone else looked at Vegeta as if he were the very devil.

“We need to get him to a hospital,” Bulma said finally, placing a hand on Chi Chi’s shoulder. She fixed her stare back on Vegeta. “You need to go.”

“But I didn’t-“

“Go!” Bulma yelled as the three-eyed man started hoisting Kakarot into his arms, presumably to take him to the hospital. “Go,” she said again, quieter this time, but for a split second her face crossed with the same expression as everyone else and Vegeta felt something crack, deep inside, as a feeling that he hadn’t had since his father sold him to Frieza flooded through him.

Betrayal.
Vegeta returned to the field where Kakarot had collapsed just as the heavy clouds broke above, sending thick, splattering raindrops to Earth. He stood in the centre of the clearing, face tilted to the darkened sky with his eyes closed, letting the rain batter his skin in sharp pinpricks.

Kakarot's ki hadn't improved. In fact, with every second the thread of life deteriorated further. Vegeta doubted the other Saiyan would last much longer. He was hanging on - hanging on desperately - but whatever was wrong with Kakarot was winning, and as impossible as it seemed, unless a miracle occurred, the man would be dead by day break.

Vegeta sighed and opened his eyes as the rain continued to plummet in a cool sheet around him, soaking his jeans and shirt so the clothing clung uncomfortably to his skin.

It seemed bitterly unfair, even to Vegeta, whose life had been a series of one unjust event after another, all piling on top of each other to leave him with no kingdom, no people, no planet, and no real purpose. To be felled by sickness, which is what Vegeta suspected was the cause of Kakarot's condition, instead of the joy of battle was every warrior's nightmare, and as much as Vegeta hated the man for taking what should have been his, and for representing a life that by all rights Vegeta should have been able to have, he did not want Kakarot to die. Not like this anyway.

So Vegeta stood vigil in the field, knowing that if he bothered to show up at the hospital he would be met with hostile stares and turned away. He'd been met with hatred his whole life - from Frieza, jealous soldiers in the Cold army, from the people whose lives he took and planets he purged... from himself. Therefore, he didn't care that the Z fighters hated him. It wasn't their looks he avoided. It was hers.

He couldn't bring himself to go to the hospital and be faced with those large, sad eyes again, eyes that had always seen him as more than the monster he knew he was, but now... Well, it was ironic really. It took something that wasn't even true - a belief that he'd had something to do with Kakarot's death - for her to finally see the truth about him. Because he really was nothing more than a monster, and all the coffees and late-night conversations in the universe couldn't change that about him.

Bulma rubbed her eyes and stared blearily at the computer screen in front of her. She'd downloaded the information from the phone and had been comparing the test results her future self wrote with
the blood samples she'd taken from Vegeta and Goku.

She hadn't been able to find any difference between the blood results of this Goku and the Goku of the future, no matter how hard she looked. But there had to be something. He couldn't get sick and have it not show up in his blood at all.

Frustrated, Bulma buried her head in her hands. She should get some sleep and try again in the morning. Clearly the late hour wasn't helping.

"Bulma."

A voice from the doorway made her jump and she placed her hand in her chest and glared at him. "Vegeta! Don't sneak up on me like that!"

He grinned at her and held up a mug of steaming liquid. "Coffee?"

Bulma raised an eyebrow at him. "Future, I presume? I can't imagine younger you being so considerate."

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "Please, if I was being considerate I'd tell you to go to bed instead of finding a way to help you stay up later." He handed her the mug and she took it, taking in a sharp breath when the fingers collided. Vegeta didn't seem to notice, because he continued talking, that trademark smirk set onto his face. "It's selfish actually. The sooner you create Kakarot's cure, the sooner you can help figure out how to defeat the androids."

"And repair the time machine and create a gravity room and weaponised robots for your younger self." She stood up and accepted the mug of coffee. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

"I don't ask for anything you can't handle," he replied, his black eyes sucking her into his gaze.

"I suppose not," she murmured, taking a sip of her coffee. Yes, this was definitely future Vegeta, because the coffee was made to perfection. "I'm struggling to see any difference between the blood sample I took from Goku and the results future me has on him. It's like he never had a virus."

Vegeta's brow furrowed as he appeared to think. "Or maybe he already has it in this time," he said, retreating to the doorway to lean on it. "He did just come back from travelling in space. I've caught a few illnesses from other planets. When I was a kid one nearly killed me but it didn't make me sick until I entered another planet's atmosphere. Maybe he already has the virus but it needs something to activate it."

Bulma stared at the man so casually resting against her doorway. "You are scary smart sometimes, you know that?"

He smirked at her and shrugged. "I'm not just a pretty face."

Bulma chuckled and turned back to her screen, pulling up Vegeta's blood results to compare against Goku's. There had to be a clue there…

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When the hovering clouds lightened and the early morning sun broke through them in a watercolour display of reds and golds across the horizon, the rain petered from a downpour to a drizzle to nothing at all, and the thinning thread of ki that Vegeta had been concentrating on all night finally snapped.

Kakarot's presence on Earth had been one that Vegeta had felt keenly over the last year, constantly
reaching out mentally and searching for, usually to see how much more advanced Kakarot's progress was over his and to either punish himself for not achieving the legendary, or to give him a reason to keep striving, keep pushing, depending on his mood and current level of self-loathing.

Now that ki was gone. Snuffed out by something unknown. Maybe the Z fighters had figured out Vegeta had nothing to do with it, or maybe they were plotting together right now, figuring out a way to slaughter the Saiyan prince before he came and murdered them in their beds.

Vegeta didn't care.

He didn't care about anything.

It was odd really, this not caring. His entire façade was a mask of apathy, something he'd hidden behind since he was a boy. If they didn't know they'd hurt you, they could never really touch you. Not where it mattered. He'd learnt that early on. But the reality was, up until this very moment, Vegeta cared a great deal. He'd just hidden it so well for so many years that he didn't think he would even know how to show that his real feelings, even if he had them.

Vegeta sank to his knees in the lush, damp grass, mud soaking into his already wet jeans. A peculiar numbness flooded through him, soaking through his pores and filling his chest with a weight that seemed to press down on his very soul.

He should be rejoicing, for now that his rival, his sworn nemesis was dead, Vegeta was the strongest being on this backwater planet… and possibly the strongest in the universe, although he knew better than to take that for granted. And yet, despite now having the power to take over this planet, or to rule the universe, Vegeta found that he didn't have any urge to do so. In fact, he didn't have an interest in doing anything at all.

He did not feel upset at Kakarot's passing either, although he knew he had reasons to feel so, in spite of his hatred for the man. Vegeta was now the last Saiyan in the universe, as far as he knew. On his death, the great Saiyan race would be extinct (for Vegeta refused to think of Kakarot's half breed brat's heritage as truly Saiyan).

Vegeta remained kneeling on the ground, his body shaking from cold, that dull emptiness gnawing away inside him and found that he no longer had the will to even assess why he felt as though the solid ground had been ripped out from under him and he was now floating adrift in space, into a black expanse with nothing but the crushing weight of an oxygen-less atmosphere around him.

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I'm too late, the typed notes read. He's dead.

Bulma scanned the notes she'd downloaded from the phone onto the computer screen, feeling oddly intrusive into her future self's life, even though she knew it was technically her that had written these notes. Future her had been devastated by the loss of Goku. Even in her shorthand notes the grief came through, with the scientific documentation riddled with rambling commentary about his death, her feelings and… Vegeta? Bulma frowned and re-read the section referring to the Saiyan prince.

What if he's sick already? the notes asked. What if Vegeta dies as well and it is my fault for chasing him away?

It seemed that after Goku's death future Bulma had been determined to discover a cure anyway, despite being unable to wish Goku back thanks to Shenron's limitations. Bulma would have thought she'd wanted to create a cure in case the virus spread to humans, but it seemed that the
main reason for continuing to develop a cure was in case Vegeta got sick.

Bulma put down the phone and tapped her red-painted fingernails on her desk. The notes were dated about a year from now. She glanced at the doorway where she'd seen future Vegeta a few hours ago. Had she already fallen for him by that point, or was she merely care enough not to let him die?

Deciding that pondering a future that was no longer hers wouldn't do any good, Bulma kept reading, searching for more specific information about how to create a cure for Goku.

He stayed away from Capsule Corp for weeks, roaming the planet and killing wild animals for food. Vegeta certainly hadn't minded the comforts that the Briefs had offered him over the last year, but neither did he find living out in the elements difficult. Back when he was a planet purger he'd spent weeks at a time this way, flying from city to city, living out in the elements, sometimes with his squad, sometimes alone depending on the mission, purging as he went.

He refrained from purging any Earth cities, although he considered it at one desperate moment, wondering if the act would bring something to the surface. He'd remained numb inside since Kakarot's death, eating the bare minimum to survive, and not bothering to train at all, unable to see the point in any of it.

It was evening in his current part of the world, and the fire he'd lit to cook his meal crackled in front of him, the gold and red fingers licking the air. He sat cross-legged, peering into the flames as if they could offer him answers. It was futile of course; the mysteries of the universe were never answered by sitting there and wondering.

Vegeta was contemplating laying down and getting some sleep when he felt a familiar ki approaching. He scowled at the flames, ignoring the boy as he landed beside him. To his surprise, and relief, Gohan didn't say anything for some time, and simply sat down next to Vegeta and looked into the fire as well.

"It wasn't your fault," Gohan said finally, his voice holding the weariness of someone four times his age.

Vegeta couldn't help lifting his lip in a snarl. "I am aware."

"I hope you aren't out here because you think everyone blames you."

Vegeta could feel Gohan's gaze boring into him, and flicked an annoyed glance his way. "I do not care what anyone thinks of me."

"Why are you here then?"

Vegeta clicked his tongue in frustration, and contemplated telling the brat to mind his own business, but the words "I don't know," fell out of his mouth before he could stop them. He narrowed his eyes at Gohan. "Why are you here."

"I don't know." Gohan retorted before letting out a deep sigh. "My mother hasn't stopped crying since he died. Everyone keeps giving me this look." He shuddered and drew his knees up and wrapped his arms around them before looking sideways at Vegeta. "I suppose I knew you wouldn't look at me like that, and that maybe you'd... understand."

"I don't understand anything anymore," Vegeta muttered, picking up a stick to jab at the dying fire.
"I hate him." The boy's admission came in a hushed whisper.

Vegeta paused in his fire stabbing and took a proper look at the kid. He looked pale, and the dark circles under his eyes indicated he hadn't been sleeping. His ki seemed fine, but the way the boy curled into himself reminded Vegeta of himself the day he'd been told his planet had been destroyed, killing his family and all his people with it.

"I hated my father after he died," Vegeta said, turning back to the fire. He heard Gohan shift slightly to look at him, and continued. "He died trying to rescue me, but if he hadn't sold me to Frieza in the first place it would have been unnecessary."

"When did you stop hating him?" Gohan asked.

Vegeta couldn't help a small laugh. "I don't know... I suppose I never have, really. My father died a warrior's death, in battle, but he was nothing but a coward, too afraid to act until desperate. Your father... I did not like him, but he was no coward and his death was not a worthy end."

"No, it wasn't." Gohan's voice was barely above a whisper, and out of the corner of his eye Vegeta saw him put his chin on his knees. "I still hate him for leaving me, even though I know it wasn't his choice." He clenched his fists, his expression fierce as he turned his head to look at Vegeta. "Does that make me a bad person?"

"Are you asking me because you think I have some experience with being a bad person?" Vegeta asked, holding back a grin and looking back at the boy.

"No." Gohan looked up and flushed under Vegeta's stare. "Maybe."

"I never hated my father for being a coward, or even for choosing our people over me," Vegeta found himself admitting. "I hate him because he was supposed to protect me. Fathers are supposed to protect their children, and the moment he died any protection I had from Frieza died with him." Vegeta dropped the stick and held his hands up to the fire as a cold chill ran through him. "You are not an idiot like your father. You were there on Namek and saw the monster. I'm sure you can imagine what being a five year old in Frieza's custody with no protection meant."

Gohan looked away at that, but gave a sharp nod.

"Do not fret about feeling angry," Vegeta said. "It will likely pass, and it is still better than feeling nothing at all."

Gohan sucked in a loud breath and swiped under his eyes with his hand, but didn't reply. They sat quietly side by side, the prince and the half breed, watching as the stars began to dot the night sky. Eventually, Gohan stood up, brushing dirt off his pants. "Bulma's looking for you," he said. "She said if I saw you I should tell you to go home."

"I don't have a home." Vegeta had meant to make the words sound angry, but they just came out tired.

"Are you sure?" Gohan asked. "She seemed to think you do." He rose into the air, his ki pulsating around him, but seemed to hover hesitantly. "Vegeta?"

"What now, brat?"

Gohan gave him a smile, so similar to one Kakarot might have given, but tainted with grief that his father had never really known. "Thank you."
Vegeta growled low in his throat, and waved his hand to shoo Gohan away.

The boy flew off, becoming a small dot in the sky until he disappeared completely. Vegeta remained where he was, watching the stars and wondering how anyone thought this odd watery planet filled with so many weaklings could ever really be his home.

"Hey, Future!" Bulma called out from the living room, hearing the coffee machine going in the kitchen. Given it was just before dawn, she knew that only the Vegetas would be awake at this hour, and only one of them drank coffee.

"What?" Vegeta's husky voice growled out.

Bulma grinned at the confirmation of her hypothesis. She sat on the floor at the coffee table, paperwork sprawled around her on the table and the carpet as she scanned her chaotic notes trying to piece together enough to come up with a plan for a cure. Her own coffee cup sat next to her half full and cold, since she'd been distracted when she made it an hour ago. "Can you make me one?" she called out to the Saiyan prince.

Vegeta mumbled something unintelligible that sounded like a complaint about a 'demanding woman', but a few minutes later he appeared with two coffees and a scowl on his face.

"I make you a couple of coffees and now I'm your barista?" he asked as he handed one over.

Bulma chuckled and took a sip of her drink. "If you worked at a coffee shop I'd frequent it daily," she said. At his smirk, she flushed. "Because your coffee is good, not because you're good looking. Not that you're bad looking, I mean I'm sure me in any time has taste, but I..." she trailed off at Vegeta's low chuckle and felt her cheeks brighten even further. "Shut up," she snapped, staring at her notes to hide her embarrassment.

She heard Vegeta's soft footsteps leave the room, and looked up. "Oh, wait! I wanted to ask you something."

Vegeta paused near the doorway and turned to face her, taking a long drink from his mug and raising an eyebrow at her.

"Before Goku died, did you spend much time with him?"

Vegeta blinked at the question then shrugged. "No. He came around to Capsule Corp a bit but I avoided him for the most part. We didn't really do anything together until the day he got sick."

"Why do you think you didn't catch it?"

Vegeta shrugged again. "I have no idea. It's not like we were in close contact, so I guess I got lucky. I would have thought Gohan would have caught it if it was something Saiyans were susceptible to. Or maybe it was something that isn't transferrable like that human one... the one named after a constellation."

"Cancer?" Bulma frowned. "Maybe. Or maybe Gohan's human blood made it non-transferable and you were immune."

Vegeta grunted noncommittally. "You're the genius. You'll figure it out."

"What were his symptoms when it first came on?" Bulma asked, scanning her notes. "Did he complain about pain in a specific area? Did he look pale? Did his temperature seem too high or too
low?" She looked up when Vegeta didn't reply and saw that the man had paled slightly. "Vegeta, are you-"

"I don't remember," he snarled at her. "It was years ago and at the time I was too busy trying to get him back home to worry about his temperature."

Bulma raised her hands. "Okay, sorry. I didn't realise remembering seeing Goku ill would upset you. You hate the guy!"

"I…" Vegeta laughed suddenly, a harsh sound that didn't sound amused at all. "I forgot how obtuse you can be." His accent, which was usually subtler than his younger self, flared with the insult and he glared at her over his coffee cup with those endless black eyes. Bulma was struck by just how alien he seemed in that moment, despite having lived on Earth for the past decade, as she found his expression impossible to decipher. His mouth set in a hard line and the warmth that had been in his eyes when he'd handed her the coffee had been replaced with something cold… something foreign. "You don't know me at all," he ground out through gritted teeth. "Don't make assumptions about how I feel about anything."

He stomped out of the room, making Bulma jump at the slamming door as guilt pitted in her stomach even as she tried to work out which part of what she said was so offensive to him.

Vegeta slipped into his room in the Briefs' home via the balcony then had a shower, washing away the weeks of grime that bathing in freshwater lakes couldn't remove. Once clean and dressed, he headed for the kitchen, glad that it was the middle of the night and he could save being peppered with questions until the morning. He'd eaten very little in the last few weeks, but after Gohan's visit he'd found himself starving and craving something that wasn't wild animal meat.

But the light for the kitchen was already on, and when he entered Bulma looked up at him, hands wrapped around her coffee mug as if he'd never left. He cursed internally, kicking himself for not explicitly checking for her ki.

"Vegeta." As his name left her lips, her blue eyes widened and she set the mug down on the counter. "You're home."

He paused in the doorway, his feet frozen to the floor as she stepped out from the kitchen wearing a Capsule Corp t-shirt and shorts. She walked forward and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her head to his chest.

Vegeta kept his arms at his side, unwilling to reciprocate this odd Earthling sign of affection that made him feel trapped, but equally reluctant to push her away because despite how uncomfortable the gesture made him, she felt so warm and soft and right, and truthfully, she was the only good thing he'd ever had in his life and for a second… he wanted to pretend that he deserved her welcome.

"I was worried you got sick as well." Bulma mumbled against him. "I'm glad you're okay. I missed you."

"Why?" His voice came out sharper than he'd intended and the woman pulled back, her quizzical eyes studying him with the same focus she gave to one of her experiments.

He expected a verbal tongue lashing in response, but instead she reached out and placed her hand on his chest, just over his heart. "I'm sorry," she said, her expression softening. "I should have defended you. I knew you didn't have anything to do with Goku's…" She trailed off and swallowed
hard, as if unable to finish that final word.

"Did you?" Vegeta cocked his head, drinking in her soft features in the dimmed kitchen lights. She opened her mouth to speak again, but he cut her off abruptly. "It doesn't matter. I only came back to ask you for the ship."

"The ship." Bulma dropped her hand and curled it into a fist.

"Yes. I would like to leave this planet."

"For how long?"

Vegeta raised an incredulous eyebrow. "There is nothing for me here. If you are concerned about your property I can send it back once I secure another ship."

"Concerned about my… Vegeta, you can't leave!" Bulma's chest heaved and other hand fisted as well.

"My asking is merely a courtesy, woman. I will take the ship one way or another."

Bulma inched closer, giving Vegeta the urge to retreat, but he held his ground determinedly.

"I just lost my best friend," she said, her eyes welling with unshed tears. "I don't want to lose you as well."

"I am not yours to lose," Vegeta replied closing his eyes and flinching under her hand as she placed it on his upper arm. "I am not anyone's to lose. I am nothing but darkness and destruction and now…" He opened his eyes as a wave of… what was it… grief? Anger? Terror? Maybe all three, he'd felt nothing at all for weeks and suddenly these feelings washed over him, pummelling his chest so hard he wanted to collapse into a ball on the ground. "Now I am as alone as anyone in the universe could be," he gasped out, his breath hitching in his struggle not to cave in on himself.

"You are not alone," she whispered, a lone tear finally spilling over. She raised her hand from his arm to his cheek, her gentle touch making him wince as if in pain, but she kept her hand there and held his gaze. "You have me."

Vegeta reached up and took her wrist, but didn't pull her hand away and only just resisted the need to lean into it. "Bulma, for a genius you are the stupidest being I have come across in the universe."

She stiffened at that, her beautiful features narrowing into a scowl.

"You think that after I shared a few stories of my life over coffee - which I heavily censored I might add - you know me?" He laughed bitterly and pulled her warm hand away from his face, keeping a gentle grip on her wrist. "I can never have someone like you in my life, Bulma. You might be spoiled and self absorbed, but you are good."

Her face crossed with annoyance then confusion. "You are not a bad person, Vegeta. You might have done some bad things, but you aren't inherently evil."

"I am death incarnate," he hissed, tightening his grip on her wrist and leaning towards her so hardly anything separated their faces. "You have no idea what I have seen, what I was forced to do… and what I did to others because when your life is nothing but a living hell why shouldn't everyone else's be?"
Bulma blinked and the tears that she’d been holding back until now rained down her cheeks. Vegeta could only hope that maybe now she understood, although he felt sick at the thought. Maybe now she would truly see him for who she was.

To his infinite surprise, Bulma closed the gap between them, shut her eyes, and pressed her lips against his.

He’d never felt anything like it, never been touched so gently in such an intimate place, and while he stiffened under the soft, warm press of her mouth, and dropped her wrist completely, he found himself unable to wrench himself away from her lips. He’d never come across another culture in the universe who did this as a sign of affection, but he'd seen her do this with her scar faced lover and he'd seen enough of it on television during his stay on Earth to know what it was and what it meant.

She pulled back and set a glare upon him, and he wondered if she was angry at his lack of reciprocation.

"You are not evil," she said fiercely. "And you are not alone."

Vegeta licked his lips, tasting the salt from her tears on them. He wanted to argue, but found she had quite literally rendered him speechless with that move.

"You are smart, brave, and have more determination in your pinkie than anyone else has in their whole body," she continued, looking less and less angry with each word. "I know what everyone says about you. I also know that you could hurt me with one finger but have never raised one against me, even when I insult you and say the most horrible things."

"Don't," he choked out. "Don't make me into something I'm not."

"I'm not." And she looked at him so earnestly that he almost believed her. Gods, he wanted to believe her. "You don't see me the way everyone else does. You don't care about my money. You don't care that I'm beautiful. You only care that I'm smart enough to help you with your training. When you look at me it's like you see me. The real me. And I... I am surrounded by family and friends but I always, always feel alone unless I am with you."

She reached up and touched his cheek to wipe away something damp. He blinked in surprise at the tears on his face. When they had fallen, he had no idea.

"I know you are grieving, in your own way," she said. "So am I. Please don't give me another reason to..." She dashed away her own tears with the back of her hand. "I'm barely holding on as it is. Please don't go."

Vegeta tentatively stretched out and ran his fingers through the silky lengths of her blue curls. "I will only hurt you. I can never be who you need me to be."

"I want you," she said. "Not some version of you that may or may not exist. I want the man who demands ridiculous things of me and my technology because he has absolute faith that I can achieve it. I want the man who will listen to me for hours as I complain about my day even though my problems mean literally nothing in the scheme of the universe and no one could know that more than him."

She touched him again, placing both her hands on his chest and he had to fight back a groan threatening to burst from his throat with the need to touch her back.
Bulma wide eyes caught his gaze and he couldn't look away from those blue depths. She lowered her voice to a whisper as she curled her hands into his shirt, gripping it tight. "I want this man. The one who looks at me like he's dying of thirst and I am the only one who can quench it."

Vegeta shuddered as his resolve caved inside him, leaving him with nothing but a crushing need for this woman in front of him. This time he leaned towards her, placing his large hands on her hips and capturing her mouth with his. She tasted of salt and coffee and the whole experience was clumsy and awkward, but she clutched the material of his shirt in her hands and kissed him back with a soft moan and Vegeta finally understood why humans found this kissing thing so appealing.

He had no idea what to do next - while no virgin he hadn't exactly bothered with the softer side of romance when visiting the brothels Raditz dragged him to. He didn't even know if she wanted anything more, but she smelled intoxicating, her sweet strawberry shampoo filling his nostrils, and his hands crept up her shirt of their own volition, caressing the soft plane of her stomach.

Bulma pulled back, her chest rising and falling breathlessly and her cheeks flushed. Vegeta thought she would put a stop to this - surely now she had come to her senses and realised what a bad idea this was?

"Not here," she said instead, taking his hand in hers and leading him out of the kitchen doorway and down the hall. She led him to her bedroom, but when she went to open the door he took her hand to stop her.

"Are you sure?" he asked with what remained of his sanity.

Bulma responded by grabbing the front of his shirt and yanking him forward to kiss him again, igniting the embers burning within into a raging fire. He threw his concerns away, his hunger forgotten and replaced with another as he lost himself in the taste of her, consumed by his desire to feel this woman, to dive inside her and have her scream his name in rapture.
Humans are vile, unhygienic creatures

Chapter Summary

A cure is found. Flashback: Bulma is knocked up.

Chapter Notes

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

“How did you get this one?” Bulma asked, tracing a jagged white scar that ran across his left pectoral, making goosebumps rise on his flesh with the soft touch.

“Zarbon,” Vegeta mumbled sleepily, peeking at her from between his lashes. "During a training session.” A 'training' session that had brought him to the brink of death several times over a week as Zarbon decided to teach the teenage Saiyan a lesson for a brief moment of insolence, but the woman didn't need to know the gory details.

Bulma leaned down and placed a soft kiss on the scar before running her hand over his abdomen and pausing on a scar shaped like a crescent moon, tapping her fingers on it. "What about this one?"

Vegeta grimaced, completely uninterested in discussing how Frieza had delivered that particular mark. It was an embarrassment that the number of scars he received from actual battles were far lower than the marks that Frieza and his men had branded him with. Deciding distraction was in order, he took her wrist, then flipped them over so she lay on her back on the bed, cheeks flushed and chest hitching in a gasp while he hovered over her.

She was the most beautiful creature he'd ever come across, pure and unmarked in every way. Desire flooded through him and he had to forcibly hold himself back from letting it take control and rutting her like a wild animal, knowing how easily he could hurt her. He breathed in deeply, luxuriating in her scent, the salty sweetness doing nothing for his control, but reminding him exactly where and when he was, grounding him in a strangely comforting way. He dipped his head to kiss her, but paused, hovering just above her skin. There was also something odd about the woman. He'd noticed it on and off for the last few days. He frowned at her, trying to work it out.

“Like what you see?” Bulma asked, fluttering her eyelashes at him as she wriggled provocatively underneath him.

"Whatever do you mean? You're hideous, woman," he teased blowing out a hot breath on the hollow of her collar bone.

Her eyes narrowed and she opened her mouth to respond.

"And you talk too much," Vegeta said, capturing whatever indignant remark she was about to make
with his mouth.

She melted underneath him, her lips moulding to his, just as she had every night since they'd first found their way to the bedroom months ago. He knew he should be horrified at his inability to stay out of her bed - his ancestors were probably writhing with disgust in hell - but he honestly didn't care anymore. Bulma was intoxicating, and every time he considered resisting, knowing he should be concentrating on his training, on becoming the legendary, he found his thoughts disappearing until the only thing left in his mind was his need to possess her, to consume the affection she so willingly gave, and to be the cause of her cries of pleasure.

He shifted to bury his nose in the crook of her neck and breathed in her scent, suckling on her salty skin. "You smell different," he muttered against her, making her moan as he gently nipped her. That was it. That was what was different.

"Maybe it's my new shampoo," Bulma gasped out, rocking her hips upwards to grind against him.

He shuddered as she ran her fingernails down his back, then wrapped her legs around his waist, holding him tight for someone with no discernible ki. When she placed a kiss on his shoulder, then bit down in retaliation, Vegeta let out a groan and focussed on the task of making her scream in the best possible way, forgetting all about the odd difference in his lover.

"He was right," Bulma breathed, looking at her latest test results. Vegeta had suggested that Goku already had the virus, but it wasn't giving him any symptoms yet. Once she compared Goku's blood to Vegeta's, looking for differences, the virus, which seemed to camouflage itself as white blood cells, became easier to spot.

"Who was right, my dear?" Dr Briefs asked, poking his head into Bulma's lab.

"Vegeta." She turned around to smile at her father. "Believe it or not."

Dr Briefs chuckled. "I think that boy is a lot smarter than most people give him credit for. Both versions seem to have your mother wrapped around their fingers." He shook his head, the unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth wiggling with the movement. "Both versions. I didn't expect there to be two of them when I got back from my conference, I can tell you that."

Bulma laughed and nodded in agreement. "I've seen a lot of things, but time travel? It's incredible. Do you think you could have a look at these results? Microbiology isn't my specialty."

"Sure." Dr Briefs came in and leaned his hands on the desk next to her, reading the notes on the screen. "Interesting. You wouldn't know the virus wasn't a white blood cell unless you were looking for it."

Bulma nodded and brought up a diagram on her computer. "The virus burrows into the white blood cell and kills it, and seems to take on the cell's traits as a disguise before duplicating itself many times over. It's the perfect disguise. Future Goku's sample had a dangerously low amount of the white blood cells, and many more of the virus than the Goku of this time does." Bulma pointed to a chart on the screen. "The question is, what caused the virus to give him such sudden symptoms? Was there a trigger that made them multiply, or had they simply been increasing gradually, until they reached tipping point?"

"A gradual increase seems more likely..." Dr Briefs hummed under his breath. "Send me the results. I'm off to that board meeting but I'll take a look later."

"Thanks, Dad." Bulma stood up and stretched as her father left. She wasn't going to make any more
progress on this without eating first, so she headed to the kitchen, wondering how the two Vegetas and Trunks were spending their day.

Training it seemed, she realised as she entered the kitchen and saw Vegeta (which one she wasn't sure) standing at the dining table with the first aid kit spread out all over it as he sloppily bandaged up a nasty gash on his forearm running from just below his elbow to a couple of inches before his wrist. Blood spilt all over the floor from the wound which was deep enough for Bulma to spot white bone from the other side of the room.

"Kami," she muttered, crossing the room to snatch the bandage out of his hand and inspect the wound. "You've done a number on yourself. This needs stitches."

Vegeta pulled his arm out of her grip with a growl. "You told me that your title of 'doctor' is for mechanical engineering and nanotechnology, and does not stretch to injury treatments."

Bulma raised an eyebrow at him and grabbed a clean cloth to wipe the blood away from the wound. "So you do listen when I speak to you," she said with a grin, recalling a conversation they'd had about how she wasn't a medical doctor before he'd departed for space, and narrowing her chances of him being her time's Vegeta to about seventy percent. "I might not be a medical doctor, but I'm also not an idiot." She wiped away as much blood as she could, grumbling under her breath at how deep it was. "What the heck did you cut yourself on? It's going to leave a scar."

"Add it to my collection," Vegeta muttered. "The brat got a bit enthusiastic and went Super Saiyan and attacked me, likely forgetting I'm not his father."

Make that one hundred percent her time's Vegeta. She winced at the frustration in his voice. He'd been training himself to death ever since he'd realised becoming a Super Saiyan was in his grasp, but to no avail. It must be eating him alive to see physical proof that he could achieve it in the form of his future self, but not be able to tap into it. And then to be showed up by a kid who'd achieved what he couldn't at such a young age... she would pity the guy, but she knew that in time he'd achieve his goal, and he'd probably rather her give him another scar than her pity.

"Wait here," Bulma said with a sigh, then went to the lab for the larger first aid kit. When she returned, Vegeta remained obediently in the dining room, and had sat himself down on a chair, propping his still bleeding arm on the table.

She brought out the needle and thread and sat next to him.

"I can do it," he grumbled, trying to take the needle from her.

Bulma frowned, wondering how many times he'd been forced to stitch himself up. He had numerous pale scars marring his bronze skin, and some of them looked as though poor stitching had prevented them from healing well. "It will scar less if I do it," she said, jerking her hand away from him to prevent him snatching the needle. "Let me. It won't take long."

Vegeta grimaced, and placed his arm back on the table. Taking that for permission, Bulma finished cleaning and disinfecting the wound, then deftly stitched it up.

One done, Vegeta twisted his arm to peer at the work, a frown crossing his face. "How do you get the stitches so small?"

Bulma glanced at him in surprise before heading to the kitchen to wash the blood off her hands. "It is easier to stitch someone else up than it is yourself I suppose."

"You stitch people up very often?" Vegeta sounded genuinely curious, his voice free of his usually
Bulma shrugged, then dried her hands on a paper towel. "Yamcha and Goku a few times I suppose. It's not a regular occurrence." She gave him a sideways smirk. "Although with you staying here I can guess that it might be."

Vegeta grunted, then pushed his chair back and stood up before joining her at the kitchen sink. He washed his own hands and went to wash the wounded arm, but Bulma grabbed his wrist.

"Don't," she said urgently. "Don't get them wet for a couple of days. They could get infected."

Vegeta made an odd growling sound in the back of his throat, reminding Bulma of a wild animal. Then he blinked and glanced at her hand, which was still wrapped around the warm skin of his wrist. "Let… let go," he said, fixing a furious gaze on her. But his voice didn't match his expression, and while she suspected that he'd tried to sound angry, to her ears he sounded unnerved, his words coming out in rough gasps.

She slowly unfurled her hands from his wrist, then took a step back. After looking at her with an unreadable mask on his features, he stomped out of the room, holding his injured arm to his chest.

Bulma stared at her hands, a small grin forming on her face. Who knew a simple touch could befuddle the mighty Prince Vegeta?

Vegeta was a creature of habit. He always had been, keeping to a strict routine where possible as it was often the only control he had in his life. Lately he found himself enjoying the comfortable routine he and Bulma had fallen into. He trained during the day, stopping only for meals, they met at midnight for coffee then went to bed, which he had to admit was his favourite part of the day because it certainly didn't involve sleeping - not until the early hours of the morning anyway.

Lately though, the woman had been shifting their schedule - losing herself in work and not turning up for coffee, sleeping during the day, and even coming to bed and falling asleep straight away.

Now, not only had she missed coffee altogether and come to bed late, she'd shut herself in the bathroom for far longer than usual. Vegeta didn't particularly care about her cleaning habits, but even if she didn't want to spend the night passionately wound into his arms, he also wanted to sleep and had found that he did so nightmare free more often when she lay at his side.

He rapped on the door impatiently. "Hurry up woman! Have you flushed yourself down?"

An answering sniff came from behind the door, and Vegeta furrowed his brow, confused. Was she… crying? He started to run over the events of the day, trying to remember if he'd said anything to upset her. The reality was he usually said something offensive at least once a day, but she'd never cried about it - at least not as far as he was aware.

He contemplated leaving her to it and going to sleep back in his old room, but when another miserable sniff came from the bathroom, he let out a frustrated sigh and pushed hard on the door, breaking the lock then swinging it open.

Bulma sat on the tiled floor, her knees drawn up and arms wrapped around them, her head tilted down with her hair hiding her face. In one hand she held some kind of white stick.

"Bulma?" Vegeta asked tentatively. Was she sick? He concentrated on her minuscule ki and was surprised to note that it felt off, somehow both weaker and stronger at the same time, as if it was tainted somehow.
She lifted her head, revealing red rimmed, puffy eyes and tear streaked skin. She glanced at the stick in her hand, then waved it, indicating that he take it from her.

Vegeta stepped into the room and took it from her, inspecting the item and the two lines on the side. "What is it?"

"It's a pregnancy test," Bulma said, her voice cracking.

Vegeta blinked, then peered at the item in his hand again. "A what?"

"A test to see if you are with child," Bulma explained, wiping new tears from her eyes. "The woman pees on the stick, and if two lines appear she is pregnant."

Vegeta stiffened. "You... you urinated on this?"

"I... uh..."

Vegeta flung the stick to the other side of the bathroom. It hit the wall and fell into the bath with a light skitter. "That's disgusting!" He shuddered and rushed to the sink beside Bulma, scrubbing his hands with soap. "You humans are vile, unhygienic creatures."

"Vegeta... did you hear what I said?" Bulma stared up at him, her wide blue eyes filled with something familiar. Something he'd seen in the eyes of everyone he'd ever met, but hadn't seen in hers since Namek. Fear.

That was when it hit him what she'd actually said. Pregnant. With child.

Fuck.

He almost bolted then and there, his flight or fight instinct most definitely turning to flight. The look in her eyes rooted him to the spot though. The woman was scared of him. Or maybe of what he would say?

Getting his now near hyperventilating breathing under control, Vegeta sat on the floor next to her and leaned back against the cupboard under the sink. He licked his lips and tried to swallow but his mouth and throat felt parched. Slowly, he twisted towards her then placed a hand on her knees, pushing them gently downwards so he could access her stomach. Her eyes widened as he slid his hand under her baggy t-shirt and held his palm steady against the smooth skin of her abdomen.

"That explains your ki," he muttered, focussing on the small spark inside her. "And the smell."

"You knew!" Bulma's eyes flashed with fury and she placed a hand on his bicep, digging her nails into the material of his shirt.

"No." He stared at her and the anger etched on her face faded slightly. "But I should have guessed."

Tears spilled over running down her cheeks, and she leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Is the idea of carrying my child really so abhorrent?" Vegeta asked, pulling his hand away from her. He wasn't truly offended - no one in their right mind would want him as a father - but she'd been so vehement in her insistence that he was not evil that he'd begun to believe that at the very least, she believed it to be true.

Bulma let go of his arm and placed her own hand on her stomach, shaking her head. "No, I... this
"is just unexpected. And it isn't as if you and I have ever defined what we are or talked about the future. Did you ever want kids?"

"No," Vegeta admitted. "If I had spawned a child Frieza would have likely taken it from me to use as leverage. The child would have had the same miserable existence as I... that was not a fate to wish upon anyone, let alone my own flesh and blood."

"And now?" Bulma asked.

Vegeta pressed his lips together and clenched his hands in his lap, staring at the skin peppered with the white patchwork of a warrior. "My father sold me into slavery," he said without looking up. "I was pretty much raised by Frieza, and he... he was not fatherly. My experience with such things lead me to believe that I will be a terrible parent." The idea of a murderer like him playing house and being a father was preposterous - Bulma would be better off kicking him out and raising the child alone.

Bulma's hand found his, her long, pale fingers curling around his. He tensed under her cool touch, unable to pull away, despite being tempted to flee. A few months prior, he would have. He would have taken off into space and forgot he'd ever felt his child's ki thrumming inside the woman. He still considered it, out of cowardice, perhaps, but also because he knew that he would only bring pain and suffering to this child's life. He wasn't meant for anything more.

"You are not your father," Bulma said quietly, nuzzling into his side.

No, he wasn't. In some ways, he was worse. But he would not leave his child unprotected. Vegeta knew exactly what kind of monster he was, but he also knew that the dark corners of the universe likely held monsters far worse than he. So he would stay to protect the child.

And her.

Bulma let out a whoop as she peered into the microscope. "Dad! It's working!"

Dr Briefs rushed over and Bulma stepped aside so he could look as well. "Incredible. The virus is trying to attack the cells, but they are immediately recognising it as hostile and attacking back."

"It's even stopping any already infected cells from duplicating. We have a cure." Bulma sank into her office chair and spun around in glee. "Even though the virus is already in him, it's duplication is exponential and it hasn't been long enough to cause any permanent damage. Goku is going to be fine."

"Now you can rest," Dr Briefs said, frowning over his glasses at her. "You haven't slept in three days."

"You mean now you can start working on my Gravity Room," Vegeta said, strolling into the room with a half-eaten apple in his hand. He crunched it obnoxiously, raising his eyebrows daringly. Bulma's eyes widened, then narrowed in annoyance. "No," she said.

Vegeta's scowl crumpled his brow and he placed the apple core on the corner of her desk. "No?"

"No," she said again, frowning right back at him. "I need sleep, food, and some time away from the lab. Then I'll look at the room."

"You agreed-"
"I am aware," Bulma said, rising from her chair and gritting her teeth. "But I need to be at full capacity to work on anything else, or I'll make a mistake. So I'm taking a break."

"You're going on vacation?" Mrs Briefs' bubbly voice chimed in as she walked into the lab carrying a tray of food. "The Vegetas and Goku are taking Trunks and Gohan to the amusement park tomorrow. You should join them."

"I am not attending!" Young Vegeta shouted.

"Don't be silly, dear," Mrs Brief said placing the tray down on the desk next to the apple core. "You can't disappoint your son."

Vegeta's eyes widened disbelievingly. "But he's not…"

"And I'm packing you all a picnic with all your favourite foods." Mrs Brief gave him a wide smile and picked up a chicken and cheese sandwich then offered it to him.

Vegeta stared at the sandwich for a moment, his face crossing with a mix of confusion and anger. Then he growled and snatched the sandwich out of her hand.

"There's more upstairs," Mrs Briefs said, clapping her hands together. She placed a gentle hand on Vegeta's shoulder, making him stiffen, but when she started ushering him out of the lab describing all the food in the kitchen now and everything she was making for tomorrow's picnic, he threw Bulma a befuddled glance but left with the woman.

Bulma glanced at her father, no longer able to hide the amusement on her face. "I think you had it the wrong way around, Dad. Mom has him wrapped around her finger."

Her face might have been pale and drawn, her hair stuck in sweaty blue tendrils to her forehead and neck, but Vegeta had never seen her look more beautiful. Bulma sat up in the sterile hospital bed, propped up by three pillows behind her as she held their newborn son in her arms, cradling him protectively as she traced his face with one finger.

"He's beautiful," she whispered, lifting her head to smile at Vegeta. "He looks like you."

Vegeta frowned as he inspected the tiny creature. Purple wisps of hair stuck up on his head and while he was sleeping now, Vegeta had noticed immediately that his eyes were blue. "He doesn't look anything like me. He doesn't look Saiyan at all," he muttered.

Bulma's smile fell and her eyes crossed into annoyance. "He is half human. My genes must be stronger."

Vegeta scowled at that and folded his arms, leaning against the wall of the hospital room.

"His eyes might darken," Bulma said, her frown turning back into an adoring smile as she looked back at the boy. "Most babies are born with blue eyes."

Vegeta grunted in response. Those eyes were far too much like Bulma's to magically transform into a Saiyan's. They only thing Saiyan about the boy was his ki, which was thankfully already of impressive strength.

"He does look like you," Bulma insisted. "Not in colouring, but look at the shape of his features." She giggled as the boy's face scrunched up in sleep. "He has your grumpy scowl."
Vegeta scowled even harder and glared at the boy. On closer inspection, he supposed that while the infant had Bulma's eye colouring, the shape of his eyes and nose were certainly sharper and much more like his own.

"What are you calling the brat?" Vegeta asked.

"What would he have been named on your planet?"

"First born sons were always named Vegeta," he replied.

Bulma scrunched up her face at that. "Saiyans weren't the most imaginative lot, were they? Ugh, can you imagine how confusing that would be - having two Vegetas in the house?" She stuck out her tongue cheekily, making Vegeta roll his eyes.

"You're one to talk with your family's ridiculous naming traditions related to underwear," Vegeta said, baring his teeth in mock anger. "What would you call the boy? Boxer? Trunks?"

Bulma's eyes lit up. "Trunks is perfect." She looked down at their son, grinning at him. "What do you think? Do you like Trunks?"

"You've got to be kidding me." Vegeta let out a deep sigh, knowing that the woman would call the boy whatever she pleased. He supposed after getting through the horrific battle of labour she earned that right.

"Do you want to hold him?" Bulma asked, almost shyly.

Vegeta's eyes widened and he stiffened against the wall. Hold the boy? He'd likely crush him. The child was so small, and despite his strong ki Vegeta knew he'd be at serious risk of hurting him. Not only that, but the boy radiated innocence and vulnerability. Vegeta was the opposite, all darkness and death and for a moment he imagined touching the boy and transferring the evil that lurked inside him onto his child, corrupting him from birth.

"No," Vegeta finally said, ignoring Bulma's look of disappointment.

It was safer this way.
**Show no fear**

Chapter Summary

The gang go to the amusement park.

Chapter Notes

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

His sensitive ears, alert even in the depths of sleep, heard the beep of the door unlocking and the hiss as it slid open immediately. Vegeta opened his eyes and saw the looming horned figure in the doorway, illuminated by the dimmed runway lights of the ship corridor. He sat bolt upright in his bed, shoving off his threadbare covers, then scrambled backwards into the corner of the walls. As the hair on his tail puffed out in fright, he wrapped it around his waist protectively, baring his teeth at the intruder with a feral growl. The monster might have only been a head taller than Vegeta, who had always been small for his age, but he was well aware that size and power were unrelated and that his master could crush him like a bug if he wished it.

Nappa had warned him the monster might come tonight. All the beatings and torture hadn't rid Vegeta of his irreverence towards the self proclaimed Lord of the Universe, and despite both Nappa and Raditz begging him to at least construct a pretence of deference, Vegeta had refused. He was the Prince of all Saiyans. He bowed to no one.

But after seven years of insubordination from the Saiyan child, the rumours were that Frieza had decided drastic measures were necessary.

"Don't fight back," Nappa had said in a hushed whisper after their evening meal. "Please, Sire, if you fight back it will never stop."

Vegeta hadn't known what he'd been specifically referring to, but had gone through enough beatings to understand from Nappa's tones that this one would be brutal. "I will never submit," he'd said stiffly. His pride was the only thing he had left, the only thing Frieza couldn't take away. The only thing that had to be offered willingly.

It was easy to be brave in the fluorescent lights of the ship, with Frieza nowhere to be seen.

Here in the dark, even though Vegeta had excellent night vision, it was more of a challenge to keep his limbs from trembling.

"Hello, my pet." The velvety voice curled through the room, making Vegeta stiffen.

**Show no fear.** The young prince swallowed and clenched his fists. He stood up, the height of the mattress making him almost eye level with Frieza, who had entered the room, closing the door behind him.
“You don’t look surprised to see me.” Frieza walked up to the edge of the bed, then brought his long tail up to Vegeta’s chest and tapped on his armour.

He’d worn it to bed, knowing it wouldn’t help, but feeling safer nonetheless. "A warrior is always prepared," Vegeta replied, proud of how calm his voice came out.

"Indeed." Frieza’s eyes narrowed as one side of his mouth turned up. "You won’t be needing that tonight, little prince."

The monster’s tail flicked back and forth, then slammed into Vegeta. Even though he’d been mentally prepared for it, the crushing weight of the limb hitting him and shattering his armour - armour made from the strongest material in the known universe - left him winded.

He sank to his knees on the mattress, wheezing noisily as he desperately attempted to suck in oxygen. The remnants of his Saiyan armour, meant to protect him through brutal battles, scattered on the bed as they fell from his body with each shuddering breath.

Frieza reached out a clawed hand and wrapped it around Vegeta’s throat, lifting him into the air until his legs dangled above the bed. Unable to breathe once again, the boy kicked out frantically, to no avail. The monster reached out with his other hand and stroked the Saiyan’s tail in a surprisingly gentle manner that made Vegeta’s skin crawl.

“So soft,” Frieza said, a grin widening on his lips. He forcefully unwound it from Vegeta’s waist, then dropped the Saiyan to the bed, keeping his hand on the tail. With a quick yank, he pulled Vegeta from the bed with the limb, then started dragging Vegeta out of his room by his tail.

Vegeta couldn’t help cry out at the pain, burning tears pricking at his eyes from the mistreatment of his sensitive tail, but he grit his teeth against it and against the humiliation of being pulled through the hallways like an animal on a lead. Frieza hauled him down several corridors before opening the door to a large central chamber that Vegeta had unfortunately had the privilege of visiting plenty of times before.

The expansive empty space didn’t look like much, with its metal walls undecorated except for a wide observation window that anyone in the room next door could use to spy on the ‘entertainment’. Similar areas on this ship were used for training, but the metallic scent of blood was stronger than anywhere else on this hellish vessel. The ‘death chamber’, the soldiers had dubbed it, for few had the good fortune of surviving. Vegeta seemed to be the odd exception, with his status as Frieza’s ‘pet’ coming with strict instructions that included not being killed, or harmed in any permanent way.

Frieza flung him into the centre of the room, making him skid along the ground until he hit a pair of boots. Vegeta looked up to see Zarbon standing over him, his gaze fixed on Frieza.

“Thank you sir. Am I correct in assuming you would like me to deliver the monkey's lesson?”

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Zarbon asked, his tone betraying his curiosity as to why his master had just thrown his pet at his feet.

"I have found myself in debt twice today," Frieza replied. "First by my dear little prince who I owe a lesson in manners, and second to you for the last exemplary work you did negotiating the buyer for planet F-116B."

Vegeta attempted to sit up, realising he was being thrown to Zarbon for punishment, but the green man’s foot lifted and slammed down on his stomach, pinning him to the ground.

"Thank you sir. Am I correct in assuming you would like me to deliver the monkey's lesson?"
"Indeed. And as a gift, I'm lifting all restrictions I had placed on your prior lessons with the young prince, except death. Keep him alive, Zarbon. Other than that... do whatever you wish."

Vegeta bit back a whimper as Zarbon finally dropped his eyes from Frieza and glanced down at the prince, his eyes glinting with something dark that somehow filled Vegeta with more dread than Frieza had.

"Thank you for this gift, my Lord," Zarbon replied, his smooth voice alight with anticipation. "I will endeavour to ensure the lesson is not soon forgotten."

"I am certain you will not disappoint," Frieza said, waving his hand in mock farewell as he started to leave the chamber. "I want my pet ready to submit by morning."

The door hissed closed again and Zarbon's boot dug deeper, drawing a husky gasp from Vegeta's throat.

"Are you ready, little prince?" Zarbon asked, lifting his foot before kneeling beside Vegeta. "This is going to be fun."

"There is nothing you can do that will make me submit," Vegeta hissed. "I will play soldier and purge planets murder on behalf of Frieza, but I will not-

Zarhon's fist to his face cut him off and he rolled into his side, spitting out blood.

"You will," Zarbon said. "You have no idea how much everyone has been holding back, do you? Frieza didn't want his pet maimed too much. Now though..." he chuckled and cracked his knuckles.

"You can beat me to death and I still will not bow to that monster."

"Beat you?" Zarbon let out a low chuckle. "Ah, little prince, you will be begging me to merely beat you after I am through with you."

Vegeta felt his skin tingle as the blood drained from his face. He'd heard of Zarbon's unique methods of torture of course, but had chalked most of it up to rumours. When Zarbon's hand reached out and touched Vegeta's cheek, the Saiyan flinched.

Zarhon laughed at Vegeta's reaction and the prince flushed, ashamed of revealing the fear that had been invoked within him.

"Let's start with the traditional beating, shall we?" Zarbon stood up, then slammed his foot into Vegeta's side, sending him across the room. "I like my victims compliant."

Trunks woke up slowly and glanced around the bedroom. It was pitch black, and there were no sounds, but he knew something had awoken him. His gaze fell to his father on the other side of the room. He didn't move other than the harsh rise and fall of his chest as he breathed a little heavier than usual. Trunks could hear Vegeta's heartbeat though, and it pounded loud and fast as if he were in the middle of a fierce battle.

No!

Trunks winced and touched his temples at his father's mental cry. Vegeta's ki flared wildly, and the terror in the psychic connection Vegeta had unwittingly opened with Trunks in his sleep made it apparent that the man was having a nightmare.
Trunks dragged himself out of bed and padded over to his father. "Papa?" He shook the man's shoulder but he didn't wake.

_Don't touch me!_ Vegeta cried out, sending a shooting pain through Trunks' head. The boy yelped and dropped to his knees as flashes of images that didn't make much sense slammed into his mind - metal walls, a twisted green face, and blood, _Kami_ so much blood.

"Papa!" Trunks struggled to his feet and shook his father harder. "Wake up!"

Vegeta let out a roar and sat up, his hand reaching for Trunks' throat. The boy dodged and retaliated automatically, slamming his fist into his father's jaw.

Vegeta fell backwards onto the bed and let out a groan, touching the bruise Trunks knew he must have caused. The man blinked a few times, then peered at Trunks.

"What… what are you doing?"

"You were having a nightmare…" Trunks hesitated for a moment, then opted to leave out the part where his father had shared some images of it. Vegeta's mental walls were powerful and such events were a rare occurrence. Telling him would only upset him. "It woke me up."

Vegeta sat up slowly and rubbed his face, breathing out heavily. He turned on the bedside lamp then glanced back up at Trunks, his face pale. "Did I hurt you?"

Trunks shook his head. "You're not that quick when you're asleep," he said, offering a small smile.

Vegeta growled in response, but there was no real anger behind it. He looked tired, Trunks realised. They'd been in the past for a while now but his father didn't look any less exhausted than he had when they were trying to stay hidden from the androids and build the time machine.

"Go back to bed," Vegeta said quietly, a small shake in his voice betraying how unnerved he was. He flicked off the light, plunging them into darkness, although their Saiyan genes meant they could both see well enough.

Vegeta lay back down, but Trunks stayed where he was beside his father's bed.

"Go!" Vegeta snapped.

"I…" Trunks swallowed hard. His father would mock him for eternity for being scared, but the images Trunks had seen kept floating through his mind. "Can I sleep in your bed?"


When his father shuffled over on the small bed, Trunks climbed in before he could change his mind.

"If you steal the blankets, you're out," Vegeta muttered, pulling them up over the two of them.

Trunks smiled to himself and curled up next to his father. He pushed away the images of his father's nightmare, trying not to dwell on the question of whether or not it was really just a nightmare. Or a memory.

Bulma stumbled into the kitchen sleepily, drawn by the rich smell of coffee and bacon. She fought back a yawn, and settled her gaze on Trunks who shovelled food into his mouth with impressive speed and dexterity.
"Good morning," she said with a tired smile, slipping into a seat at the table.

"Mph," Trunks replied, his mouth full of pancakes and bacon. He quickly glanced up at her and then stared at his plate.

She glanced at the kitchen, expecting to see her mother, but to her infinite surprise, it was Vegeta who stood at the cooktop, flipping a large pancake with one hand while holding a coffee mug with the other. Even though she knew this was a future version of Vegeta, not the man she knew, she couldn't help the shock of seeing him perform such a domesticated task.

"You're… cooking." She gaped at him and he gave her a frown in return.

"Something wrong?" He asked grumpily.

"No…" She drank him in, trying not to focus on him too much less she gave away how much the way his black t-shirt clung to his muscles made her feel. "It's just unexpected."

Her closer inspection made her realise that he looked as tired as she felt. His hair was rumpled he had a fading purple bruise on his jaw, and the skin around his eyes was dark. She'd been up all night concocting the final cure to give to Goku today. What had he been doing?

"I am a man of many talents," Vegeta said, the corner of his mouth lifting. "Unlike you, my food actually tastes edible."

Bulma huffed at that, but could hardly argue - cooking was not her forte. "Mom will be up soon," she said, taking a plate and placing some bacon from the middle of the table on it dubiously. "You could have waited."

Vegeta took a long drink of his coffee before replying. "Trunks was hungry."

"Can I have chocolate chip next?" Trunks asked, leaning back in his chair and motioning to his now empty plate.

Vegeta grunted in reply then put his mug down. He poured more batter into the pan and scooped out a handful of chocolate chips before scattering them into the cooking pancake, then flipped the pancake with expert precision, like something out of a MasterChef episode.

Bulma tentatively took a bite of the bacon. It was hot and crispy and seared with maple syrup… when did the man who once put a small pot in the microwave and blew it up learn to cook?

"Your mother taught me," Vegeta said as if he'd read her mind.

"How'd she manage to convince you to let her teach you?"

Vegeta shrugged then brought Trunks his pancake and pulled a plate piled with them out of the oven. He brought it over to the table and sat next to Trunks then started devouring his own breakfast.

Trunks kept glancing at Bulma and looking away quickly. He opened his mouth a couple of times as if he wanted to say something, but when she caught his eye a faint blush appeared on his cheeks and he looked down again.

"Spit it out," Vegeta snarled in between bites, elbowing his son.

Trunks spluttered then looked up at Bulma. "Are you… are you coming to the park today?"
"The park?" Bulma asked before realising her mother had mentioned it yesterday. "Oh! I uh…"

"Gohan's coming," Trunks said, a smile creeping onto his face. "And Goku and I think even young Papa might come if Nana has bribed him with enough food."

"I should probably come," Bulma said slowly. "If only to make sure that idiot doesn't blow up the amusement park."

Vegeta scowled at that and opened his mouth to say something, but Trunks jumped out of his chair in glee.

"Yay! I'm going to go get ready. I can't wait, I've been looking forward to this for two years!" He started to skip out of the room, leaving half a chocolate chip pancake on his plate.

"Excuse me," Vegeta growled, giving Trunks a pointed look. At his son's blank look he raised one eyebrow.

Trunks cheeks burst with colour - he was so much like his father Bulma wanted to squeal at the adorableness of it. He scuttled back to the table then sat primly in his chair. "May I please be excused?" he ground out.

Vegeta took a large bite of his pancake and chewed slowly, dragging it out until Trunks was jiggling in his seat with impatience. When he finished, he still didn't say anything, but glanced at Trunks' plate then back at his son.

Trunks' bottom lip stuck out, but he hurriedly finished the remainder of the food on his plate before trying again. "Now, may I please be excused?"

"Are you certain you've eaten enough?" Vegeta cast a frown at his son, looking him up and down.

Trunks nodded sharply. "Yes, sir."

"Very well," Vegeta said, coating his pancakes in maple syrup. "You are dismissed."

Trunks leapt of his chair and disappeared from the room in a flash, probably in case his father changed his mind. Bulma couldn't help staring at Vegeta. She'd always felt that the man wasn't evil - not like some of the Z fighters believed. Morally ambiguous, perhaps. Rude and arrogant, definitely. Still, she couldn't believe that this Vegeta was so different than the one she knew. This Vegeta might have been ten years older, and it was clear that he was strict, but it was equally obvious that he doted on the boy, and cared for him deeply.

"What?" Vegeta caught her gaze with a scowl.

Bulma chewed her lip, sinking into those dark eyes. "Nothing," she finally said, tearing herself away to concentrate on her own breakfast.

Vegeta hadn't wanted to admit that he hadn't known what an 'amusement park' was when he'd somehow been convinced by the blonde witch, with promises of delicious human food (which was some of the best in the universe, not that he'd ever admit that aloud), to attend this outing. Now that he was here, he found himself appalled at the stench of humans, dropped food, and cigarette butts. The only acceptable scent was that of terror permeating from some of the larger rides - roller coasters, the boy called them - but even that wasn't real terror. These humans didn't know what true fear was.
He watched as his older self was dragged around by his hand towards the largest roller coaster in the amusement park. He didn't understand what was so thrilling about it - by the gods, the boy could fly, and travel faster than that ridiculous piece of human machinery.

Kakarot's brat danced ahead of them, with his idiot father bumbling along behind him, stuffing his face with donuts. Vegeta grimaced in disgust. How did he end up here? He was a bloodthirsty warrior, a purger of planets, and somehow he'd been convinced to attend this pathetic excursion?

He knew it wasn't just the food, but also the child that had pushed him into dragging himself along. Curiosity that drew him towards the boy, making him study the boy's mannerisms, which were so like his own, and his laugh, which was a high chirp just like his mother's. Even if Trunks had looked nothing like him it would have been obvious that the child was his son - his ki radiated on a wavelength that was painfully familiar. The way the boy's ki pulsed around him made his chest ache with longing. He knew that if he closed his eyes he would almost be able to image he was back on Planet Vegeta, surrounded by his Saiyan peers.

While Kakarot's spawn may as well have been human, with his soft nature and naivety, the purple haired boy's Saiyan blood coursed through his veins proudly, showing in both his features and his wilful personality. The boy followed his father around, emulating his every move, from the way he stood, back always straight, to the press of his lips and narrowing of his eyes when angry. Vegeta knew he had done the same when he was a boy, believing his father to be worthy of such respectful imitation. He hadn't been worthy. Vegeta would have been better to do the exact opposite of anything his father did, but seeing the boy's blatant admiration for his father was nostalgic at the very least. He wondered how worthy his future self was of his son's devotion. The only thing Vegeta had done in his life was kill and destroy, but this man was ten years older. He had ten years out of Frieza's crushing thumb on him.

The woman, the one destined to become the mother of his child in another universe, moved between the two father child pairs, chattering away. Her odd blue hair glimmered in the bright sun, flicking from side to side with each of her airy movements. She was ethereal, fluttering through the crowds of people, radiating light and joy despite knowing that the world as she knew it could very well be at an end in three years. Vegeta watched as his older self's gaze fell on her, the deep furrow of his brow softening. The older version of him had allowed himself to soften, allowed this woman to worm her way through his walls and wrap her emotional tentacles around him.

But seeing her red lips curve up in a smile, and the way her hips moved as she dodged other people, and the way her eyes half shut when she laughed… he could begin to understand why she was appealing to the dark, cold depths of his heart.

There had been a moment, before he left to hunt in space for Kakarot, where he'd been sure the woman had felt something for him. He'd never been great at reading people, using violence instead of diplomacy to get his way, but the clues were in the way she'd reach out and touch his arm in the middle of a (albeit argumentative) conversation, and how her eyes followed him across the yard. Now though, her soft touches were primarily focussed on his older counterpart. Her gaze flicked over Vegeta as if he were nothing, then settled of the future version of him and stayed, accompanied with a quirk of her lips.

Vegeta stopped following them and stood still, clenching his fists as it hit him. If his future self hadn't turned up, this woman could have been his. Instead, she was drawn to his older counterpart, a man who could use and understand human facial expressions, telling her how he felt about her with his eyes instead of hiding behind thinly veiled insults. A man who responded to her touch not with flinching, brought on by years of abuse where any physical contact always meant pain, but by leaning into her.
A man who wielded the power of the legendary.

The crowds of people faded around him, their arms scraping past him as he remained still, their stink irritating his nostrils. With a growl, Vegeta took to the air and blasted back to Capsule Corp. His future self could have the woman. He didn't want her, he never had. He did not care. He did not care.

He did not care.
Cupcakes make everything better

Chapter Summary

Trunks is a brat. Young Vegeta indulges in a guilty pleasure.

Chapter Notes

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

Goku felt the young Vegeta's ki flare as he blasted into the air, making a crowd of people around him shout and gasp in surprise. Goku frowned in disappointment at the man's early departure, although to be fair it was surprising that he'd turned up at all. His rival didn't enjoy social occasions and the crowds of this place can't have been enjoyable for his heightened senses. There were people everywhere, filling every space of the park's winding pathways, and even Goku's temples ached from the noise. The boys seemed to be enjoying it though. They danced through the crowds like every other child here, as if they didn't have a care in the world. He knew Trunks' childhood had been a tough one, but so had Gohan's over the last year at least, and seeing his serious son smiling and laughing was something of a relief.

He could only begin to imagine how Future Vegeta must feel. Gohan had managed to have four years of peace before being thrown into the deep end of training and aliens and death. Trunks had been living in a world where surviving each day was a miracle since he was a baby. As a father that must have killed Vegeta inside.

Goku's gaze focussed on the older Vegeta and the woman walking next to him. Bulma kept glancing surreptitiously at Vegeta in a manner that reminded Goku of how she used to look at Yamcha. He'd been surprised at first when he'd learnt that the Vegeta of the future had made a life with Bulma and even had a son, but the more he thought about it the more sense it made. Those two were both stubborn, fiery and fiercely determined in everything they did. Together they would have made quite the power couple.

He couldn't help but feel concerned about what the changes to this timeline would mean for the Saiyan prince. Despite the violence of their meeting and their rivalry, Goku liked the man - both the younger and older versions. He only had a vague understanding of what Vegeta's life had been like growing up under Frieza, but he knew that the sheer force of will that had helped the Saiyan survive and come out the other side with his sanity intact had to be incredible.

After meeting the future version of Vegeta though, it was obvious that Bulma had made a positive impact on the man. Future Vegeta was less volatile, even more focussed, and just as determined as ever. Honestly, Goku was shocked that Vegeta hadn't defeated the androids in his own time. His only guess was that Vegeta spent too much time protecting his family and finding them food that he didn't have the ability to focus on his training or ensure he ate enough nutrients to power his Super Saiyan abilities. Maybe after some time here, being well fed and getting enough sleep the
androids wouldn't be a problem.

Or maybe they were really that strong.

Goku swallowed hard and shook his head to get rid of the swirling thoughts of impending doom. As he saw Bulma not-so-casually brush her arm against Vegeta's he decided that he had to do something to direct her towards the younger version of the man. The young Vegeta needed her, not this Vegeta, and she had to realise that she needed him too.

"Can I get cotton candy, Papa?" Trunks stopped dragging him through the park to stop at a fork in the path where one footpath diverged towards a group of food stalls. "Gohan says it's really good." The boy's wide eyes stared up at his father and he hopped up and down in excitement, his lavender hair bouncing and falling in his eyes.

Vegeta sighed to himself and rubbed his temples. They'd only spent a few days in this time and already his child was spoilt. "We have a whole picnic packed," he grumbled.

"Cotton candy isn't food," Kakarot said, directing his wide smile at Vegeta. "It's clouds of deliciousness. You won't taste anything better in the universe."

Vegeta rolled his eyes, sure that the clown was exaggerating, but he fished out some money that Mrs Briefs had given him for the occasion, then handed it to his son. He didn't want to coddle the boy, but life hadn't been easy for Trunks and now that they were somewhere safe Vegeta wanted to let the kid make the most of it. Even if they destroyed the androids in his time he was sure there weren't any theme parks left.

Trunks snatched the note and ran off, waving it at Gohan who Trunks had been leading around the park with enthusiasm all morning.

"Wait for me!" Kakarot chased after the boys as they headed in the direction of the food stalls.

Vegeta felt a soft touch on his arm, and turned to look at the woman next to him.

"Are you okay?" Bulma asked, letting her large sunglasses slide down her nose to peek at him over top of them. Her hand remained on his bicep and Vegeta struggled to fight the urge to lean towards her and wrap his arm around her waist like he might have done if they were alone, if she was his Bulma.

"I'm fine," he said, stepping away to follow the others. "Just tired."

"Bad dreams?" Bulma asked.

Vegeta gave her a sharp look. Did she know about his nightmare?

"I don't know if you still get them, but I know young you does…" She twirled a strand of hair around her finger and glanced at the ground.

Vegeta scowled and contemplated blasting the crowd of people between him and the food stalls. He hadn't been aware that Bulma had known about his nightmares this early on. As far as he'd been aware she'd discovered them when he'd accidentally fallen asleep in her room after they'd slept together. Had she just made it seem that way, or was this time somehow different?

"Is it the androids?" Bulma asked.
"No." Vegeta glowered at her, wishing that she'd drop it. Even if he'd irrevocably changed this timeline, he didn't really want to kill the potential mother of his child in this time.

"I can give you something to help you sleep if you want. I have nightmares myself you know. Ever since Namek I-"

"Will you be quiet?" Tension flooded his body and Vegeta halted in the middle of the crowd and spun around to glare at her, clenching his fists. "Take a hint, woman. I don't want to talk about it."

Bulma's cheeks flushed pink and her blue eyes narrowed into a sharp glare. "Now you sound like him."

Vegeta blinked in puzzlement for a moment until he realised she was referring to his younger self. "I am him," he pointed out, uncurling his hands and forcing his shoulders to relax.

Bulma shook her head, the glare fading from her eyes as she took on an expression his Bulma gave him whenever he'd done something she considered remarkable, like teaching Trunks to urinate in that damn 'potty' contraption. "You're different."

Shit. This was beyond bad. She was looking at him as if she… liked him.

"I'm not," he said, swallowing hard to rid his voice of its waver. "I might have ten years worth of experiences on him, but we have both destroyed planets, killing billions, and we both have no moral qualms about killing again if it would benefit us. We are fundamentally the same, Bulma. Don't think I am somehow different or better than my younger self just because I have act more human. I'm a Saiyan. I might hide it better because I've learnt that blending in benefits me, but I am still an alien."

"But don't you see?" Bulma said, touching his arm again. Her palm burned on his skin and gods, he knew it wasn't really her but her touch felt so good. "You are different because you care about someone other than yourself."

"Bulma, you're the only reason I-"

"Papa, want some cotton candy?" Trunks stood in front of him and Bulma, holding out a stick of something that looked like a large coloured cloud. The boy gave Bulma a sharp look before turning back to Vegeta with an eager smile on his face.

Bulma's hand dropped away and his skin felt cold where she'd touched. He nodded at his son and pulled some of the fluffy food off his stick, feeling relieved at the interruption. This was getting messy. How was he supposed to encourage a relationship between Bulma and his younger self when all she saw was him?

"I don't like it," Trunks muttered, scowling in the direction of his father and Bulma.

"You don't like this?" Gohan asked, his mouth full of cotton candy. "But it tastes so good!"

The two half Saiyans wandered through the park, just off to the side of Vegeta and Bulma. Kakarot had gone on the hunt for more food, and the blue haired woman seemed to be taking the opportunity to cosy up to Trunks' Papa, much to the boy's disgust.

"Not this. Her. She's all over Papa and he just… lets her."

Gohan glanced at the pair and shrugged. "Isn't she your mother?"
"No. My Mama is dead." Trunks frowned, trying to figure out how to explain it. This time travel business was confusing. "I'm worried that I won't be born in this time."

Gohan's eyes widened and he stopped shoving the cotton candy into his mouth. "Does that mean you'll stop existing?" He reached out and jabbed Trunks' arm with a finger. "Will you disappear?"

Trunks glared at Gohan. "Mama was sure that our time would continue to exist and that this time would end up being a different universe than ours."

"What's the problem then?" Gohan asked. "You're not in danger."

"That doesn't mean I don't want to be born in this time! But my young parents seem to hate each other. I don't understand how they ever got together."

Gohan grinned at Trunks, his smile pink and sticky from the treat. "My mother seems to hate Dad most of the time. Maybe arguing is an adult way of saying you love someone."

Trunks pressed his lips together with a frown. "Or maybe it's a Saiyan thing."

"Our mothers aren't Saiyans," Gohan pointed out.

"No…" Trunks said slowly, considering it. "But Papa once said that Mama was the closest he would ever find to a Saiyan woman."

"Maybe," Gohan said, shoving the rest of the cotton candy into his mouth. "Want to go on that?" He tugged on Trunks' arm to point at a ride that spun people around and flung them upside down.

Trunks frowned in irritation at having the conversation make such an abrupt turn, but he supposed he had plenty of time to think about what to do. And he would do something. He couldn't let their turning up in this time stop him from being born.

Bulma leaned back on her hands and tilted her face to the sun, enjoying the warmth shrouding her. She sat on the grass since the picnic blanket was covered in food, and despite the noise from the people in the park and the clatter of rides, it was peaceful.

The others devoured everything in sight on the blanket, and for the first time she realised that the Vegeta from her time had left with them, but had disappeared early on. Bulma shrugged to herself. It was hardly surprising that he'd bailed. She knew how much he hated crowds.

Trunks appeared in front of her, casting a shadow over her face. "Young Mama?" He asked, placing his hands behind his back and smiling sweetly at her. "Will you come on that ride with me?" He nodded towards the park's largest roller coaster. It had several loops and the screams emanating from it sent shivers down her spine.

"Can I come too?" Gohan asked through a mouthful of food.

"I'll go on it with you later," Trunks said, flashing a glare in the other demi-Saiyan's direction before settling his expression back into a serene smile.

"What about that one?" Bulma pointed to another ride with less twists and turns but Trunks pressed his lips together and shook his head.

"That one." His eyes narrowed into a glare even though the smile remained on his face. "It will be fun. And I thought it might be nice to spend some time together, just you and me."
Vegeta threw his son a frown from across the picnic blanket, but said nothing. When Bulma looked at him, silently begging him to find her a way out of it he just shrugged.

"Okay," she said, then found herself being hauled to her feet and dragged through the crowds by the boy before the word had even finished leaving her mouth.

When they got into the line the smile completely dropped from Trunks' face. His eyes narrowed and lips tightened and he looked so much like Vegeta that she could help but wonder if he got anything other than the hair and eye colour from her side of the family.

He didn't say one word to her until they'd made it through the line and into a cart of the roller coaster.

"You are not my mother," Trunks ground out as their harnesses automatically lowered over them.

Bulma blinked and sucked in a sharp breath. She'd been puzzling over why he wanted her to come with him on the ride, but she hadn't expected him to say that.

"I know," she started to say, keeping her tone gentle. "I never-"

"Stay away from my Papa." Fire radiated behind Trunks' eyes and Bulma gripped the handles on the harness tightly, her palms sweating. "Papa has a plan to get Mama - my real Mama - back, and I don't need you butting in and distracting him.

"Trunks, sweetheart…" Bulma let out a small yelp as the roller coaster started to move, clattering slowly up a steep ascent. Kami, how high did this thing go? "I would never keep your Papa from your Mother."

"I see how you look at him. I'm not stupid." Moisture glistened in his eyes and he gripped his own harness handles "Do you not want me that much?"

"What do you mean?" Bulma asked, a heaviness hitting the pit of her stomach as she began to realise what it looked like to this little boy.

"You don't want me to be born." Trunks blinked quickly, as if fighting back tears, but none fell and he just looked angry. "You are chasing after my Papa instead of the man you are meant to be with so I will never be born."

"That's not true!" Bulma gasped as the roller coaster paused at the top of the track. "You are incredible. You're brave and smart and handsome and any woman would be proud to be able to call you her son. I don't want to jeopardise your life in this timeline but I… I just don't feel that way about Vegeta - my time's Vegeta - but your Papa… he's…” She licked her lips, trying to work out how to explain her feelings for Future Vegeta, but before she could, the roller coaster stopped teetering on the track's hill and plummeted down, making Bulma shriek and close her eyes.

The cart tossed her from side to side as it blasted around the corners, then looped upside down three times in a row. Just as Bulma had run out of breath to scream, the coaster halted abruptly, slamming her back into her seat.

Feeling nauseous, Bulma groaned and opened her eyes. They were back at the beginning and Trunks was glaring at her with the same expression he'd had before the coaster's terrifying ride.

"I know," Trunks said as the harnesses lifted. "My Papa is the best. But he always told me that you are the only reason he is like that." He climbed out of the cart and to her surprise, offered her his hand to help her out too. "What do you think will happen to him in this time without you?"
Bulma sighed and looked at the floorboards, glad to be out of that ride. "I don't know," she muttered, but the sinking feeling in her stomach made her realise that the kid was right. Vegeta had never had anyone care about him in his life. If she never grew to care for him, how could he understand what it meant, and how to care for others in return?

Vegeta hated this planet and everyone on it. This damn backwater mudball could burn for all he cared - let the androids come and scorch the earth, let them purge the planet like he had done to so many others. *Gods*, he might even join them just for the pure pleasure of seeing these disgusting human creatures scream in terror.

He'd spent the last few hours attacking the cliffs in a desert, watching the red rocks crumble as he reshaped the landscape. The area was uninhabited, unfortunately, although he supposed Kakarot and his older self would get all moralistic and come stop him if he began slaughtering humans.

The hours of smashing rocks into oblivion had done nothing to quell the rage bubbling through his veins. He wanted a fight - a real one. He wanted to rip someone limb from limb then feast on their flesh. He wanted…

Food. And a shower.

Vegeta landed on his balcony at Capsule Corp then stomped to the shower. After letting the hot water run over him until it turned cold, scrubbing his skin to get the grime of the cliffs, and under that the stench of humans off him. Feeling only slightly less like blowing the planet up, he headed straight to the kitchen to find enough food to make up for the delicious picnic he'd missed out on.

The smell of baking permeating from the kitchen quickened his steps and he strode in, glaring at Mrs Briefs as he seated himself on a bar stool at the kitchen counter then leaned on his elbows miserably.

"Vegeta! The others aren't due back for a while. Did you leave early?" She gave him a wide smile as she pulled a batch of cupcakes out of the oven to join another batch already cooling on the counter.

Vegeta grunted affirmatively then let out a huff of air, scowling at the pink, yellow and brown baked goods only an arm's reach away.

"Not feeling well?" The woman clicked her tongue sympathetically. "You do look a little peaky, dear. How about you eat some lunch then help me ice these cupcakes and try a few for me? I'm sure that will have you feeling better."

Vegeta was in a bad enough mood to be tempted to tell her where to shove her cupcakes, and if anyone else had been in the room he probably would have. Deciding against it, he let out another sigh and stood up and joined her in the kitchen. He opened the fridge and wolfed down the pile of sandwiches she had premade, not even bothering to put them on a plate and sit down to eat. Once he'd finished, he turned to check how many batches she was planning on making.

He would have killed Mrs Briefs if she ever revealed his guilty pleasure, but prior to him blasting off into space to search for Kakarot, she'd convinced him to help her bake and to his surprise (and embarrassment) he found he enjoyed it. She never said anything about it to anyone either, and ever since whenever everyone else was out of the house he found himself in the kitchen baking sweet treats with her, his busy mind genuinely relaxed - a rarity for him.

He fetched the ingredients for a buttercream icing, grabbing some food colouring and grape food
essence as well, then got to work. Mrs Briefs hummed away as she started on the mixture for a third batch of cupcakes, and he concentrated on making the icing consistency perfect. He settled on blue icing that faded into purple for the first batch, using a couple of different nozzles to get the effect he wanted. It was odd concentrating on such a mundane task, but he took pleasure in the art, and in sneaking bites of misshapen cupcakes in between.

Mrs Briefs, usually a chatterbox around everyone else, didn't try to engage him in conversation. She never did during their baking activities. They worked in silence, creating a tower of treats for no purpose other than the joy of making - and eating - them.

When all the batches were baked and iced, the blonde woman made some tea, then brought the cupcakes and their teacups over to the dining table.

"If there are any left I'll take them to my book club this evening," Mrs Briefs said, settling into a dining chair drenched in sunlight. "But eat as many as you like, dear. Those ladies will barely touch them. They're all too worried about their waistlines."

Vegeta sat opposite her, nursing his teacup in his hands and feeling miles calmer than he had in months. He took her at her word and started making his way through the pile, savouring each bite despite the speed in which he ate.

Yes, he hated this planet and everyone on it, but even he had to admit that the food here was worth every minute of surviving on this hell hole.
Vegeta tensed as the small, purple-haired creature tottered across the freshly mown grass towards him, chubby arms outstretched and a look of fierce determination on his face.

"Papa, up!" Trunks gave him a toothy grin as he reached his goal and stopped in front of the gravity room doorstep that Vegeta currently stood on.

Bulma leaned against the doorway of the house, her face impassive as she watched the exchange. Vegeta bristled with irritation. She was constantly doing this - putting the boy in his way in the vain hope that he would start interacting with him.

"Out of the way, brat," Vegeta snarled, sidestepping his way around the boy, careful not to accidentally brush against him.

Trunks' face fell but Vegeta ignored the pang in his gut and strode towards the house. Bulma reached out and caught his elbow as he passed, her cool hand burning against his skin and making him pause and glance at her.

"Why are you even here," she hissed, her face reddening with anger. "You clearly don't give a damn about us. He's your son and you can barely look at him."

Vegeta pressed his lips together in a tight line to bite back the nasty response on the tip of his tongue about how the boy was nothing but a half breed abomination, a mockery of the Saiyan race. It certainly would have got a reaction from her, and maybe once he would have even believed the words. He held the insult back though, knowing he wouldn't even sound convincing to himself, let alone her. The boy was his son, and while Bulma had issues with how he acted around the boy, that didn't mean he hadn't accepted the kid as his heir.

"Why don't you just leave? The gravity room is a spaceship too." Bulma's nails dug into his elbow, but he didn't pull away, letting the sharpness grow with each of her words. "Growing up with a father that hates you is worse than growing up with no father at all."

Vegeta stared at her, taking in her heaving chest, her narrowed eyes and her lips, slightly parted and ready to spill more angry words. He fought the urge to slam her against the wall and kiss her passionately, both to slake the desire he felt every time he looked at her and to stop her talking. But he hadn't done that since the boy was born, too afraid of the rejection she would give him. She'd
begun to hate him for his coldness, for his refusal to show affection towards their son, and he feared that he'd lost everything they used to have.

"I do not hate the boy," he said finally, pulling his arm away from her.

Bulma's eyes flashed and she slammed her palm onto his bare chest, making him flinch - not from any pain but from the sharp cracking sound it made. "You could have fooled me."

He licked his lips, trying to form words to explain without angering her further. Did she not understand? He was a murderer. A broken psychopath who could snap at any moment. Having him anywhere near the child at such an impressionable age was dangerous. He only stayed to protect them both from the dangers he knew lurked in the corners of the universe, but he also had to protect the boy from himself. Vegeta had to keep his distance.

"Mama?"

Both Bulma and Vegeta jumped at the boy's voice. He'd made his way over to them, pudgy fists clenched as he looked up at them. Bulma slowly drew her hand away from Vegeta, then picked up Trunks, holding him close. She threw Vegeta one last disdainful glare before disappearing inside.

Vegeta remained outside for a moment, wishing that he could explain things to her. Instead, the words always tripped over themselves a thousand times in his mind before his mouth could form them, only to find that the moment had passed and it was too late to speak.

The moment everyone returned from the amusement park, Vegeta left the remaining cupcakes and escaped up to the room he'd claimed as his own. He felt Kakarot's ki vanish and reappear miles away, along with Gohan's, but stayed where he was, meditating cross legged on his bed.

Or attempting to meditate at least. For some reason, every time he tried to clear his mind he found himself concentrating on Bulma's ki and checking the distance between her and his future counterpart, which for the most part seemed to be in the same vicinity, if not the same room.

Eventually the smell of soy and cooking chicken drew him reluctantly downstairs and into the dining room. His future self sat next to Bulma who was chatting to her mother about the park. Trunks sat across from them and the first thing Vegeta noticed was the glare he had fixed on the woman.

Both Bulma and future Vegeta reached for the tongs in the stir fry in the middle of the table, and when their fingers brushed, Bulma looked at the man next to her with a smile.

Nausea washed over Vegeta as his future counterpart gave the woman a small smile back. Disgusted, both with his future self and with himself for letting it bother him, he began to back out of the room.

"Don't you want dinner, dear?" Mrs Briefs asked, her eyes widening in surprise and freezing him to the spot.

"Uh..." Vegeta found himself at a loss for words as everyone looked up from the dinner table, including Bulma who caught his stare with her blue eyes. A hint of pink brightened her cheeks before he tore his gaze away. "I'm not hungry," he muttered, escaping the room as quickly as he could. Gods, how long was he going to be forced to watch the spectacle that was whatever was going on between Bulma and his future self?

He strode down the hall towards the front door, intent on leaving. He was starving of course, but
could easily hunt a wild animal to tie him over. He didn't care where he sourced his meal, as long as he didn't have to watch them.

He became aware of soft footsteps behind him and spun around with a furious glare to see the boy looking up at him intently.

"Aren't you going to do something?" Trunks asked.

Vegeta stared at the kid for a moment. The boy's expression, eyes sharp, brows furrowed, lips tight, was like looking in a mirror. "Do something about what?" he asked carefully.

"Young Mama and my Papa. She's not supposed to be with him. She's supposed to be with you."

Vegeta let out a low growl of irritation. "She can fawn over whoever she wants. That woman is of no concern to me."

"I know you like her." Trunks cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. "I see you watching her."

Vegeta was taken aback by the kid's intense scrutiny. "I… I do not!"

"You think she's pretty."

"She might be gorgeous but that doesn't mean I want her!" Vegeta flushed at his accidental admission. "Look kid, you're not completely awful but I'm not getting in between your father and that woman. They are welcome to each other."

"I suppose you plan on letting Kakarot keep his victory too?" Trunks smirked and crossed his arms.

"What?"

"He took what was rightfully yours. He defeated Frieza. My Papa didn't ever let that go. He came back in time to ensure Kakarot didn't keep that victory." Trunks took a step forward and uncrossed his arms, looking up earnestly. "You won't get that chance. I bet you won't even be able to become a Super Saiyan. You give up too easy. And it looks like now you are going to let my Papa take something else that's rightfully yours."

Vegeta took in a sharp hissing breath and clenched his fists to avoid lashing out and walloping the brat. "You don't know what you're talking about. I shall achieve the Legendary and wipe the floor with that third class clown, but I am not interested in that blue haired she-demon."

"Really." Trunks' know-it-all smirk returned. "Then why did you leave the room?"

"They… She…" Vegeta spluttered, unable to come up with a good excuse as his rumbling stomach gave him away. "Ugh, it's none of your business you little brat. Go bother someone else." He started to walk away, but Trunks caught his elbow.

"I can help you," the boy said. "Papa… he's confused. He misses my Mama so much that young Mama isn't my Mama."

Vegeta shook Trunks' hand off but stood still, tempted by the boy's offer to help. As much as he hated to admit it, the kid had struck a nerve when he'd accused him of letting someone else take what was his once again. Clearly the brat knew him well.

"Let me help you," Trunks said. "I might not remember much about Mama but Papa tells me
stories about her all the time. Young Mama is only interested in Papa because he can't hide how he feels about her. But my Mama didn't fall in love with Papa like he is now. She fell in love with him when he was younger. When he was like you."

"Love." Vegeta clicked his tongue and shook his head. "There is no such thing."

Trunks laughed. "Do you really think Papa would have gone back a decade in time to change the future if he didn't love her?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never..." Vegeta growled under his breath. "Let it go, kid. If your Papa is anything like me nothing will convince him to stay away from her, and there is..." He curled his lips in distaste, but forced himself to spit out the words. "There is no way I can compete."

"Not unless you are willing to play dirty," Trunks replied with an evil grin. "Do you think you can trust me?"

Vegeta took a good look at the boy that could one day be his son. He seemed genuine enough, but he did have his genes, so being a good liar wasn't out of the realm of possibility. "I don't trust anyone." He pursed his lips thoughtfully for a moment. He had to admit he was curious. "What did you have in mind?"

"I'm working on it," Trunks replied, a grin breaking over his face. "But I'll let you know what I come up with."

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He peered down at his sleeping son, marvelling at the way his fingers curled his hands into balls in his sleep and how he kicked out at the blanket as if it were his nemesis. When Trunks finally defeated his enemy, and kicked the blanket off, the boy's limbs settled and soon the only movement was the steady rise and fall of his chest.

"Vegeta?"

The quiet voice in the doorway made him jump, and Vegeta felt his cheeks heat with both the embarrassment of being caught staring at his son and for not having felt her ki approach. He still didn't have as good a handle on ki reading as he'd have liked, but if he'd remembered to concentrate on it he would have been able to sense her approach and escape the room before she found him.

"I heard a noise on the baby monitor," she said by way of explanation, rubbing her eyes wearily.

"Go back to bed," Vegeta replied, taking a last look at the child.

"I can't sleep." Bulma tapped the side of her head. "Too much going on. Coffee?"

Vegeta shrugged in his usual noncommittal way of saying yes, but inside he felt a brief sense of elation that she'd made the offer. Since Trunks was born, the space between them had widened further and further. It was his fault, he knew, but the more he'd pulled away from their son, the more she pulled away from him, and now he didn't know how to find his way back to her.

She led him to the kitchen and started bumbling around with the coffee machine, her exhaustion apparent with each movement. Gently, Vegeta took the two mugs from her hands and motioned for her to sit. With a small frown, she did, and watched as he went about making their coffees like he'd seen her do many times before.

Once made they sat next to each other on the bar stools, the silence awkward instead of
"I meant what I said the other day," Bulma said finally, staring into her cup. "I'd rather you left than stuck around and have Trunks grow up thinking you hate him."

"I don't-"

"Whether you do or not is irrelevant." She flicked her gaze towards him then, her eyes devoid of any emotion at all. "You act like hate him and he's young now and won't remember, but it won't be long before he picks up on it. If you don't want to be a part of his life - a proper part, not just a figure who is merely lurking in the background - then please, Vegeta... you need to go."

It was then he realised that she wasn't emotionless - quite the opposite. But she'd built a damn around her feelings, put up her walls. Despite being human, she was more like him than he'd realised. Vegeta broke eye contact, struggling to find the right words to appease her, and stared into the steam of the coffee cup in the hope an answer would appear from it.

"Do you want me to go?" He asked, nervous of her answer but needing to stall.

Bulma sighed and took a sip of her coffee before answering. "Kami, Vegeta, if it is going to be like this forever, then yes, I'd prefer you left."

His hands stiffened around his mug and he held his breath and his heart lurched in his throat. When Bulma's hand reached out and touched his wrist he flinched, but slowly met her gaze.

"Why have you stayed?" she asked, her tone surprisingly free of accusation or resentment.

Vegeta sucked in air through his teeth, steadying himself. "I know what is out there." He pointed above them to illustrate his point.

"In space?"

He nodded, the took a long drink of his coffee. It scalded his tongue, but he needed the time to think, to assess his next words. "I do not want to leave you and the boy unprotected."

"You are here on the off chance some alien will land on Earth and kill us?" Bulma raised her eyebrows incredulously, amusement quirking her mouth.

"No. Maybe. I don't know..." He crinkled his nose in frustration. "I have a dream occasionally. Frieza is torturing me, which isn't an uncommon nightmare, but sometimes instead of just tormenting me, you and the boy appear and he..." Vegeta closed his eyes as her smile dropped and horror widened her eyes. "The universe holds so much evil. Frieza was not the only one, I am sure. The universe is much too large." He opened his eyes again, meeting her gaze. "I failed to protect my people. I failed to protect my planet. I will not..." He let go of his mug and placed his left hand on the soft hand still covering his right wrist. "I will not leave you and the boy unprotected."

"Okay," she replied, her eyebrows creasing into a frown. "But why treat Trunks like you do?"

"I am one of the evil things in the universe. I need to protect him from myself. I can't get to close to him. What if he..." He closed his eyes again, unable to bear the sorrow in her eyes. "What if he turns out like me?"

Her hand caressed his cheek and he leaned into it instinctively, letting out a shuddering breath. He let her turn his face to the side and when her warm lips met his it took every molecule of willpower stay put, although he wasn't sure what he wanted to do more - run away, or pull her closer.
When she pulled back he opened his eyes, meeting her serious gaze.

"If he turns out half as brave, committed and strong as you, I will be the proudest mother in the world." She cupped his face in her hands. "I've told you this before. You are not evil. There is nothing bad that you can pass onto your son other than your terrible manners."

"You can't begin to imagine the darkness inside me," he whispered, choking on the words. "Even if I am not evil, as you seem to believe, I have nothing to offer the boy."

"You have time," Bulma said. "Your time is the best gift you could give him. Start training him."

"You want me to train him?" Vegeta pulled back, shocked. Even though he was the right age to start for a Saiyan, Vegeta hadn't thought she'd have agreed to that at the boy's young age considering his half human genes.

"He's getting too strong for me to handle," Bulma admitted with a wry smile. "Teach him how to manage his own strength. And we can go from there."

Vegeta stayed silent for a moment, rolling the idea around in his head, already mapping out the training techniques suitable for a child his age. "That is acceptable," he said finally. "I will... do my best."

When Bulma smiled, the expression lighting up her face, he knew that she'd understood his meaning. He would do his best, both to train the boy and to be more of a father. "I wouldn't expect any less from the Prince of all Saiyans," she said before sliding her arms around his neck and pulling him into a kiss that this time he couldn't help but return.

"I printed out all the information I could find about the androids on the phone," Bulma said as she finished putting the last plate into the dishwasher. To her relief everyone else had left the table quickly after dinner, even Trunks who had spent the entire meal watching her every interaction with his father. The boy had certainly made her rethink how she was acting around future Vegeta, but Kami it was impossible to stay away from him. It wasn't her fault that the man was so damn good looking and kept giving her those smouldering looks that turned her insides into goo.

"Anything interesting?" Vegeta asked, scaping his chair back to stand up from the dining table.

"Nothing yet. Is there anything else you can tell me about them? I know that no one else wants to use the dragon balls but I figure doing some research in advance to try find a way to beat these guys while we still have the element of surprise can't hurt."

"I'll tell you everything I know as long as I can have a coffee," Vegeta replied, coming into the kitchen to start the coffee machine. "I swear that park was more tiring than a day's work out in the gravity room. Go get the notes."

Bulma did as he said, all but skipping down the stairs to her lab, thrilled at being able to spend the evening with the prince. When she came back, the kitchen was empty. When she heard Vegeta call out to her, she went to the living room where he sat on the end of one of the three seat couches, leaning his head back on the cushion.

Bulma took a seat on the other end of the couch and placed her notes on the coffee table. Assuming the milky coffee on the table was hers, Bulma picked it up and had a sip before leaning back on the couch with a sigh.

She tilted her head to the side and noticed that Vegeta's eyes were closed. He still looked weary -
he had all day. The man somehow managed to look incredible though. He'd had a shower after the park and smelt faintly of bergamot, the scent tempting her to shuffle closer, but it was the human clothes he wore that made him irresistible. He had changed into slacks and a simple white t-shirt that stuck to his muscles like a second skin. Bulma sat up then shuffled a little closer to him as subtly as she could, before placing her drink down and spreading her notes out on the coffee table. He opened his eyes at the movement and she met his dark eyes with a smile. He didn't smile back, just kept staring solemnly at her, so she turned her attention back to the notes in front of her.

"The androids don't emit ki," she said to cover the awkwardness of the gaze she could still feel on her. "Do you think they can sense it?"

"They don't appear to." Vegeta sat up, resting his elbows on his knees as he peered at her notes. "They are impressive trackers though. Well informed, too. They had information on everyone. They knew where we lived, who to take out and how to do it. Their original attacks were calculated, brutal and efficient." He laughed suddenly, a harsh sound that made his lips curve but didn't reach his eyes. "The coordination reminded me of something I would have come up with on a planet purge."

Bulma frowned, knowing she should be more disturbed than she was with that comment. "But they didn't purge it, right? There are still people left."

Vegeta hummed his confirmation. "They grew bored, I think. Gohan and I survived, but truthfully, we fought them plenty of times after the original attacks and they could have killed us at any moment. They kept us around as... as playthings." His face grew hard as he dropped his gaze to the table. "They could have finished us off. I don't know why they didn't, and I don't know what made them decide to attack our home and kill Gohan and..." His fists balled and he sucked in a deep breath. "And kill you. Nothing they did made sense. They are wildly unpredictable and that is what makes them dangerous."

"A machine's programming always has patterns, even if they seem unpredictable at first," Bulma said. "There has to be a pattern, unless... are you sure they are androids?"

Vegeta shrugged. "That's what they called themselves. I've managed to hurt them before and there is most certainly machinery under their skin. Although... I assumed it was oil or something, replicated to give the appearance of blood but the smell..." His forehead crinkled as he closed his eyes. When he opened them, his eyes held a vague note of excitement. "Maybe we kept thinking about them wrong. Maybe they aren't androids. Maybe they're-"

"Cyborgs," Bulma finished.

"Given their power and ability to keep fighting without tiring if they are cyborgs then the machine to organic matter ratio must be highly tipped towards machine." Vegeta tapped his fingers against his chin. "It would explain a few things."

"If they are made of organic matter, there must be a way to kill them." Bulma grinned at Vegeta and shuffled closer to him. "Look at this." She pointed to a sketch of one of the androids on the table. "Future me suspected they had reinforced metal bone structure, but chances are they have human brains, perhaps enhanced in some way, but still human. I'm assuming my future self didn't have access to the tech required, but with the right equipment I could hack into their systems and short circuit them."

"We tried an EMP," Vegeta said. "It didn't slow them down."

Bulma frowned at that. "Their power source must be organic then. Maybe a virus could work? Not
a computer one. A real one, like Goku's."

Vegeta's sharp eyes met hers and he breathed in with a hissing sound. "That virus was almost undetectable because it manipulated its state to match the host."

Bulma found herself caught in his gaze as admiration shone in his dark irises. "It wouldn't kill them," she said. "Their machinery will probably prevent that. But we could adjust it so it limits their powers, so it stops their limitless energy and makes them more human."

"Then it would truly be a fair fight. This could actually work," he said in his husky voice. He stared at her, unblinking, and edged slightly closer to her. "It's brilliant, actually."

"Well, I am a genius, you know," Bulma said leaning in towards him as well.

"As if you'd ever let me forget it." Vegeta reached out and touched a stray blue ringlet, pausing for a moment before tucking it behind her ear. He was so close their breaths mingled, getting slightly more ragged with each one. "I've missed you so much," he whispered.

Bulma swallowed hard under his gaze, which she knew he used as a weapon to freeze people out, but in this moment burned just for her. Oh, she knew it wasn't her he wanted, she knew he was vulnerable, missing the woman he loved, and the words of a little purple-haired boy echoed in her mind, but her insides had already melted and she honestly didn't care about her future self, she didn't care that this was messing with fate.

"Vegeta," she murmured, closing the gap between them with the intention of pressing her lips to his.

But before she could, Vegeta wrenched himself back and scrambled to his feet, gasping. "Gods, you… I… I'm sorry. I can't. It's not right."

He stood up and fled the room, disappearing in a gust of wind that sent the notes on the androids flying around the room. The front door slammed shut in the distance, and Bulma sat in place on the couch, clutching her trembling hands together, disappointment heating the pinpricks of tears in her eyes.

Vegeta frowned as he heard his bedroom door swing open, hitting the wall behind it with a thud. He quickly wrapped a towel around his waist then stomped out of the steaming bathroom to poke his head around the doorway and glare at the intruder.

Trunks glared right back at him. "Get dressed," he demanded. "The plan goes into motion now."

Vegeta's scowl deepened but he went and opened his drawers to pull out clothes. "I thought you didn't have a plan."

"Not that one," Trunks said, ripping the black shirt out of his hands and throwing it to the floor before rummaging in the drawer himself. He tossed a white t-shirt to Vegeta who caught it with one hand then pulled it on. "And I'm improvising. It's an important part of a strategic skill set," he recited with a grin. "You taught me that."

Vegeta grabbed a pair of pants out of another drawer and raised his eyebrows at the boy. "Are these acceptable or would you like to dictate my entire wardrobe choice?"

Trunks tilted his head critically. "They'll do."
"As valuable as my older self's strategic advice sounds, I'm not convinced that you know what you are doing," Vegeta said as he grabbed a pair of boxers as well then returned to the bathroom to finish changing. "You're only eight. What could you possibly know about this?"

"More than you," Trunks retorted. "Or you wouldn't need my help. But don't worry, this is simple. Even Kakarot could manage. All you need to do is go downstairs, find young Mama, and tell her you changed your mind."

Vegeta returned to the bedroom fully dressed and stared at the kid, failing to see how this would accomplish anything. "Changed my mind about what?"

"You didn't eat dinner," Trunks said.

Vegeta narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "I suppose a second dinner wouldn't hurt." The wild pig he'd killed and cooked with ki had been satisfying but not particularly tasty.

"Exactly." Trunks shoed him out of the bedroom, practically shoving him out the door. "Now go!"

"I can't believe I'm taking advice from an eight year old," Vegeta muttered under his breath as he navigated the halls towards Bulma's ki.

He arrived in the living room doorway as she was leaving and awkwardly blocked her exit. She wiped tracks of tears from her face and parted her lips as if she wanted to say something, and as Vegeta opened his mouth too, struggling to remember why he was supposed to say, he wondered if she was as tongue tied as him.

"You came back," she said, her voice croaky.

"I changed my mind," he said, recalling Trunks' suggestion.

Bulma's eyes lit up and she reached out and touched his bicep. "Really?"

Something in her voice made him hesitate as he became sure that he was missing something, something that they boy had in all likelihood missed out purposefully. "Yes..." He searched her eyes for a clue but found none. "I'm hun--"

His words were cut off as she moved suddenly and something warm pressed against his mouth. It took him a moment to realise that her arms were circled around his neck, and her breasts were pressed firmly against his chest, and her mouth had met his in the most intimate gesture anyone had ever had the audacity to try with him.

He'd seen her do this with the scar faced weakling, and had some idea of what it was. A kiss they called it, and it was some sort of sign of affection, possibly a precursor to sex. Vegeta had never seen it in other cultures, and had never experienced it before, or even had an urge to, but as the warmth of her mouth enveloped his and her soft curves pressed tightly against him, he started to realise why humans liked it so much.

He tensed at first, the defined muscles pressing against her like rocks. Even his lips, which were comparatively soft, didn't move. Just as she was about to pull back, terrified that she'd misread the situation again, his hands were on her hips and his lips parted slightly and Kami he was kissing her back with reckless abandon.

He was a little clumsy, but Bulma supposed it had been two and a half years since he'd kissed anyone, and when his hands slid up her body to bury themselves in her hair and pull her even closer
to him, it felt so powerful and so right and she couldn't help the little moan that escaped her.

At the sound, Vegeta stepped forward, forcing her backwards, then swung them around and to the side before stepping forward again so her back hit the wall beside the door. She let out a gasp as he slid his leg in between hers, pinning her against the wall and crushing his body against hers. Bulma grabbed fistfuls of his hair and clung to him, desperate for more of him.

"Vegeta..." She groaned his name as they came up for air, writhing against his hands as they slid up her shirt, the friction of his rough skin making her shiver.

He pulled back at the sound and dropped his hands, his face flushed and breaths coming out in small, uneven gasps. "That was..." Vegeta cleared his throat and licked his lips before curling his mouth into a smirk. "Entertaining. But more dessert than dinner, wouldn't you say?"

The blood drained from Bulma's face and she pressed her hands against the wall behind her to steady herself.

"What is it?" Vegeta asked, a thread of genuine concern in his voice.

When he reached out and touched her arm Bulma's traitorous body leaned into it slightly, even as she stared at his forearm, noting the still-fading scar that striped its length.

She closed her eyes, groaning internally. Shit.
Bulma remained pressed against the wall, her eyes wide like a cornered animal. She licked her lips, which were bruised pink from his enthusiastic attentions, and dropped her gaze to his arm again. Vegeta frowned and glanced at his arm himself, confused at first, then all at once realising that her stare was fixed on the pale line running down his forearm.

As a wave of mortification flooded through him and his face prickedled with the tell-tale signs of him turning red, Vegeta clenched his teeth, cursing that lavender-haired brat internally in every language he knew. That little menace knew *exactly* what he was doing, ensuring Vegeta had dressed like his older counterpart to purposefully confuse Bulma. In hindsight, it was obvious what the boy was doing, but at the time Vegeta had rather naively assumed that the boy had discovered that Bulma had a penchant for white. How could he have been so *stupid*?

Recovering quickly, Vegeta forced his lips into the shape of his trademark smirk. It might have been the brat's fault for putting him in her path like this, but she was the one who'd kissed him, making him feel these… *feelings*. Feelings that were so cliché he wanted to gag at his own behaviour. No, she was just as much to blame, and there was no way in any of the realms of the universe that he was going to let her know just how affected he'd been.

"If you think accosting me like that will distract me from needing my evening meal, you are gravely mistaken," he said, drawing out each word as casually as he could. "I'm still hungry, woman. Go make me some food."

The fear in her eyes vanished instantly, replaced by a fury that gave him the urge to pin her against the wall and crush his mouth to hers again. "You're a big boy, Vegeta," she spat out. "If you wanted your food cooked for you, you should have eaten with the rest of us. Make your own dinner."

With that, she pushed past him and rushed from the room, her hurried steps turning Vegeta's forced smirk into a real smile. He let out a low chuckle. Whether she wanted to admit or not, it was obvious that she'd been just as affected by their kiss as he had.

As he felt her ki disappear to the other side of the compound, Vegeta let out a sigh, glad that he'd worn loose pants. Forget a second dinner. What he needed was a cold shower.
Bulma buried her face in her pillow and let out a scream. When that didn't make her feel better, she picked it up and threw it across the room with a huff. It didn't even make the armchair she'd been aiming at, and landed on the floor looking deflated.

She fell back on her bed with a groan, replaying that humiliating moment when she realised she'd kissed the wrong man. How could she be so stupid?

But really, the worst part wasn't that she'd thrown herself at the wrong guy. It wasn't even that she'd kissed him so passionately, with more fervour than she'd ever kissed Yamcha. No, the worst thing about this whole mess was that when he kissed her back, and when he ran his hands through her hair and held her almost desperately, pressing himself against her so they almost melted together, she liked it.

Kami, it had left her with a deep longing in her core, so hot and powerful that she couldn't get to sleep.

Had Vegeta been affected at all? He'd been enthusiastic enough during the kiss, so she assumed he'd at least enjoyed it, but ugh, the man had been so calm afterwards, acting like his usual jerk self and demanding she get him food. How dare he! She was Bulma freaking Briefs. Men fell over themselves to be with her and he acted like they'd done nothing more interesting than play chess together after he'd given her the best kiss of her life.

Bulma let out a moan and rolled over to bury her face in the mattress. How was it possible that someone that arrogant, and that narcissistic could ignite such a fire in her?

Giving up, Bulma realised there was no way she was getting to sleep like this and reluctantly climbed out of bed and dragged herself into her bathroom. She needed a cold shower.

He stood outside the cottage, watching figures move around the kitchen, silhouetted by warm light as they bustled about. The murmur of voices reached his ears, and although he couldn't make out the words, the tone was clear enough. The woman spoke with irritation, to which Kakarot responded with something lighthearted, making the woman give up her pretence of anger and laugh as well as Kakarot picked her up and spun her around the kitchen.

Vegeta raised his ki to let other Saiyan know he was there, sick of watching the disgusting display of domesticity. Even when he and Bulma had been at their happiest they had never acted like that. He'd never thought to, and certainly never had the urge to, but couldn't help but wonder if Bulma had ever wanted a partner that did embarrassing things like sweep her off her feet. If it meant having her back, he'd consider doing it, his pride be damned.

Kakarot must have got his subtle ki message, because a minute later the front door opened and he walked out, carrying two mugs.

He gave his usual wide grin to Vegeta, but for once kept his mouth shut, and merely handed Vegeta one of the mugs, then indicated with a nod of his head towards a fallen log. Kakarot walked over to it and sat down, so Vegeta did the same. They both stared up at the stars until Vegeta glanced at Kakarot, wondering how the man who normally couldn't shut up was remaining so quiet.

Deciding to make the most of the silence, Vegeta took a sip of his steaming drink. He gagged on the sweetness and put the mug on the ground next to him. "What is that?" he asked, sticking his tongue out to try use the air to get rid of the taste.
Kakarot laughed and took a sip of his own drink. "It's hot chocolate. You don't like it?"

"Too sweet."

"Who doesn't like sweet things?" Kakarot asked with a gasp.

"Me, obviously." Vegeta rolled his eyes at the other man’s horror. Apparently, the idea of disliking any type of food was atrocious to the younger Saiyan. "Cupcakes are not awful," Vegeta added after some consideration. "They are acceptable for consumption."

"I'm guessing you didn't come all the way out here to compare food preferences," Kakarot said, amusement obvious in his voice.

Vegeta shrugged and went back to staring at the stars. "I suppose not."

He expected the other Saiyan to question his actual reason for being there, but they remained in silence for a while, much to Vegeta's relief. He didn't know why he'd ventured out to a place he hadn't been in nearly a decade. It's not like he and Kakarot ever became close. Even now, after so many years, Vegeta still found him irritating most of the time. Even so, Vegeta didn't exactly have anywhere else to go. He'd been adrift since the day the androids attacked and turned his world, which had only just begun to feel steady, inside out. He only knew that he'd had a desire to leave Capsule Corp and escape the memories that haunted him there, but a strong need to go somewhere familiar, and this was really his only option.

"Can you see it from here?" Kakarot asked, breaking the silence as he tilted his head back to look up as well.

Vegeta understood the question immediately, and lifted his arm and pointed to a southwest region of the sky. "Not the planet, but the sun it orbited around."

"I find it hard to imagine you travelling around space for your whole life, seeing the stars. I never thought about what was out there until Raditz turned up."

"I probably saw more metal walls than stars," Vegeta admitted. "I was in stasis most of the time in the pods, and the rest was spent in the bowels of Frieza's ship. I thought I was free when he died. I thought…" He clicked his tongue in disgust at his ramblings.

"And then you found yourself trying to survive the androids," Kakarot finished. "That can't have been easy."

"Nothing is my life has been easy except for my ability to destroy. I damage everything I touch and now…I worry that I have influenced this timeline beyond repair."

"You don't think Trunks will be born."

Vegeta let out a deep sigh. "It seems improbable. I also worry for my past self. So many years of living under Frieza's command left me…" He glanced at the man next to him, who kept looking at the sky. "Well, you know."

"Yeah." Kakarot met his gaze, wearing a rare solemn expression. "I know."

"The longer I stay, the less likely it is for my younger self to find what he needs."

Kakarot grinned at that and chuckled quietly. "I'm guessing what he needs has a loud mouth and blue hair."
Vegeta huffed in annoyance, but didn't deny it. There was only one person with the power to pull him out of the darkness, and without her he feared for his younger self.

"You're leaving," Kakarot said.

Vegeta nodded. He'd come to his decision quickly. It was the only choice he'd felt confident about since the androids set upon their path of destruction. "As soon as the time machine can be repaired."

"Like this." Vegeta curled his son's fingers into his palm and readjusted his thumb to make the child form a proper fist. "Keep your thumb here, otherwise if you throw a punch you'll break it."

The small boy nodded solemnly, then continued his simple kata, keeping his hand balled correctly. Since beginning his training a mere month ago, Trunks' mobility had improved dramatically, and he'd gone from taking stumbling steps to striding with confidence across the gravity room floor. Vegeta had just moved him past basic footwork to introduce the combination of stepping and punching, and as the child executed a perfect kata, Vegeta couldn't help the swell of pride that formed in his chest.

"Good," Vegeta said, that one word eliciting a wide smile from Trunks, who had learnt that he wasn't likely to get any higher praise than that. "Again."

Trunks did as instructed and began crossing the gravity room floor. Vegeta watched impassively with his arms folded. When Trunks finished his kata, Vegeta glanced at the gravity room dash and wondered when would be a suitable time to increase the gravity from one to two. He'd have to speak to Bulma about it, and maybe check if she could install a half setting to bring up the gravity in smaller increments. The last thing he wanted to do was crush his son to death. Dragon balls or not, he'd never hear the end of it.

"That's enough for today," Vegeta said to Trunks.

The boy stopped obediently, a grin lighting his features. "Lunch?"

"Yes. Let's go see what your Nana has cooked up."

Vegeta opened the gravity room door and headed for the house. He heard little footsteps scampering behind him and paused at the front door to hold it open for Trunks. Once in the house, the boy took off with a flash towards the kitchen.

"Wash your hands!" Vegeta roared after him, smirking when he heard the boy skid to a stop and change directions to head to the bathroom.

He took in a deep breath, attempting to decipher what was cooking. His nose wrinkled in disgust when the scent of charcoal hit his nostrils. When he entered the kitchen to see smoke seeping out from the oven's glass door, he cursed and turned the oven off, picking up a drying cloth to wave the smoke away.

"What the hell..." He reached out for Mrs Briefs ki, which was always hard to locate since it was so low, but felt her in the next room. He stomped out of the kitchen and into the living room. "Are you trying to burn down the house? What are you-"

He broke off when Mrs Briefs turned from the television to face him, her face pale. "Vegeta, it's awful."
Frowning, Vegeta came closer to the television and took the remote from her, turning the sound up.

"Blossom City is under attack by two unknown foes," a reporter on the screen yelled over a series of loud bangs. "Thousands have been confirmed dead, with many more wounded."

Vegeta closed his eyes and felt around for dramatic ki changes. He felt lives in the distance plummeting, but couldn't feel any ki's high enough to be noteworthy. Humans killed each other all the time. Maybe one country had declared war on this one.

"It's only two cities over," Mrs Briefs said. "What if they come here?"

The television focussed on a building as it exploded and Vegeta peered at the screen. As the dust cleared, two figures could be seen hovering in the air. From their hands, golden light erupted, and hit another nearby building, making it groan and then crumble.

"That's impossible," Vegeta muttered aloud. "I can't feel their ki, but I've never heard of anyone who can suppress ki and use it at the same time."

"Papa, lunch?" Trunks trotted in and tugged at his father's leg.

Vegeta pressed his lips together, sensing the Z fighters heading in the direction of the chaos. "Stay with Nana, Trunks," he instructed before turning to Mrs Briefs and handing her back the remote. "Inform Bulma of what is happening. I'm going to take care of it."

He turned to go but Mrs Briefs caught his arm. "Vegeta…" Her brow crinkled in worry. "Be careful."

"I'll be back soon," Vegeta replied, shaking her off and waving his hand dismissively. "Save me some lunch."

He felt two high ki signatures vanish before he even arrived at the city-turned-battleground. One was Yamcha - he'd learnt to detect that ki to either avoid it or plot a way to torment the man, depending on his mood - but he wasn't sure who the other was until he landed in the rubble beside Gohan and saw the three-eyed man's prone form. Piccolo and Krillen stood to the other side of Gohan, scanning the sky, but looking as lost and concerned as the boy.

"We can't sense their ki," Krillen said, turning to Vegeta and looking at him hopefully, as if he had all the answers. "Can you?"

Vegeta shrugged nonchalantly. "No, but I never used to rely on reading ki signatures." He cracked his knuckles with a smirk. "It's been too long since I had a good challenge. I'll take care of them."

"You used to have a scouter. Now is not the time to be cocky." Piccolo's frown deepened further. "When Yamcha and Tien engaged them, it was over in seconds."

"They slaughtered them like they were nothing," Gohan said in a choked voice, wiping tears away and smearing the dirt on his face into streaky lines. "And I could barely land a hit on them."

Vegeta snorted. "Weaklings. Stop your blubbering brat, this is what the dragon balls are for, right? Now stop fussing, I've got this."

"Vegeta," Piccolo growled out. "Don't underestimate them. These guys are stronger than anyone I've ever seen and you aren't even Super Saiyan."
Vegeta snarled at that and took to the air, spotting two dots of ki light in the distance. Super Saiyan or not, he was going to destroy them.

So much for destroying them. No matter how hard he hit, how clever his tactics, these two teenage metal freaks hit harder, and even when he managed to land a solid blow, they didn't tire one bit.

Vegeta hit a building and crumpled with it into the rubble, groaning. He clutched his side, hissing in pain as he recognised the feeling of a broken rib digging too close to a lung, and leaned to the side to spit out blood.

"Give up, shorty?" The black-haired boy teased, his teeth bared into the parody of a grin.

With a sinking of his stomach, Vegeta realised that this must have been how all his victims felt when he purged their planet. Helpless. Desperate. And fucking angry.

"Never," Vegeta choked out as he climbed to his feet. He lifted his hands, ready to blast the teenager with his ki, but something hit him from behind and he went flying.

He lay on the ground, broken and bloody, each breath coming out in a gurgle, but managed to focus his vision on the two figures before him. That bitch. Getting him from behind. Not that he'd expected them to fight fair – hell, he never had – but still. He should have seen it coming. He should have-

"That's enough!" Gohan landed in front of him, blocking his view of the twins that called themselves androids. The idiot half-breed clenched his fists and dropped into a fighting stance.

"You have to go through me to get to him."

"What the... get out of here your moron," Vegeta gasped out. Why the fuck was Kakarot's spawn defending him? Didn't he realise how humiliating that was?

Gohan didn't move, keeping his gaze fixed on the twins.

"Listen, boy. Let us finish this cocky bastard off and we'll let you live and kill you tomorrow, okay?" the blonde girl asked sweetly.

Gohan let out a yell and charged at her, getting in an impressive hit, even to Vegeta's admittedly blurry vision. Regardless, it didn't take long, especially once the brother stepped in, for Gohan to start having his ass handed to him. Vegeta's vision blurred and he rested his head back on the rocks beneath him, cursing his own stupidity.

"Hey, man." Krillen's hushed voice made him wrench open his eyes. The bald man knelt beside Vegeta and opened his palm, revealing a senzu bean.

Vegeta had never liked taking them, feeling as though they were cheating after all the pain he put himself through while training, but he'd honestly never been so glad to see anything in his life.

He gingerly lifted his hand, ready to take it, when a bright light exploded around him and the short man and the senzu bean were gone, nothing but ash in their place.

Vegeta moaned in pain at the charring of his arm – he'd only just missed being killed by the android's blast himself – and dragged himself up and threw himself behind a wall as another blast sailed towards him.

When he managed to get the strength up to peek around the corner, he noticed that the androids
seemed too preoccupied to be worried about him. Gohan lay on the ground and Piccolo levitated in between him and the two androids, looking calm as always.

Vegeta.

The prince jumped at the intrusion of Piccolo's voice in his mind. He must have been drained if his mental walls were low enough for the Namekian to break through.

What? He replied irritably. I'm not in any state to assist.

Can you get to Gohan and hide if I distract these two for long enough? I don't think they can read ki.

Vegeta assessed the distance. It would likely take the last of his energy – a plus if the androids could read ki because he wouldn't have any left to sense – but it was possible. Yes.

Good, Piccolo replied.

What about you? Without you, there's no dragon balls, idiot!

Just keep Gohan safe. Even through a psychic connection Piccolo's voice sounded testy.

Vegeta started cursing the Namekian in a multitude of languages, even though he could feel that the green man had closed his mental walls. When Piccolo started fighting the androids, Vegeta hauled himself to his feet and began limping through the debris of broken concrete, twisted metal and mangled bodies to get to Gohan. When he reached the unconscious boy, he scooped him up, surprised at how heavy he was for someone so young. Glancing at the fight going on above him, he checked that they were still distracted then found a manhole, wrenching up the cover and dropping them both into it before letting the cover clang over them and submerge them in darkness.

"The Prince of all Saiyans, reduced to hiding in shit," Vegeta muttered to himself as he collapsed with Gohan on the stinking, damp ground, letting the dancing lights in front of his eyes take over until even the stench didn't bother him anymore.

A jolting motion drew him out of the depths of his unconsciousness, and he peeled his eyelids open groggily. He was still underground, and if not for his heightened Saiyan senses, he would have been blind. As it was, he could only just make out the features of the boy kneeling next to him.

"Wake up, Vegeta," Gohan sobbed and continued shaking his burnt arm which thankfully didn't have much feeling in it at all. "Wake up."

"Get off me," Vegeta said, gagging as the forming of words also reintroduced him to the stink of the sewer. He pushed at Gohan weakly, but when he realised he didn't have the strength to budge to boy, he reluctantly allowed the Demi-Saiyan to help him sit up.

"I can't feel Piccolo's ki," Gohan said, propping Vegeta up against his shoulder and making the prince wince as Gohan's shoulders trembled with silent tears, jostling Vegeta's wounds. "He's dead, isn't he."

"Probably," Vegeta grunted out. No sense in giving the boy false hope. "But pull it together. We are still alive, and as helpless as it seems right now, we are the last line of defence."

"Some line." Gohan laughed bitterly as he dragged Vegeta to his feet. "You can hardly move, and I
barely lasted a minute against those androids."

Vegeta didn't disagree. He'd been in worse situations before, but this was up there on his scale of desperation, and all the other times he hadn't actually cared if he lived or died. Now he had something to live for. Or rather, someone… two someones in fact.

"We need to get to Capsule Corp," Vegeta said draping his good arm around Gohan's shoulder to remain standing while letting his burnt arm droop uselessly. "I have some senzu beans there."

"I don't think I have the strength to fly."

"We'll just have to walk then." Vegeta smothered a shudder as they began trekking through the sewer, shoes squelching on gunk he didn't want to think about.

It took them hours to get to West City, where Capsule Corp was located. They remained in the sewer lines, popping up every so often to get their bearings and ensure they remained in the right direction. When the finally emerged in the centre of West City and crawled out of a man hole, Vegeta gripped a large rock beside him to stay standing. The city was in ruins, with smoking half crumbled buildings surrounding him.

Ignoring Gohan's cries to stay hidden, Vegeta took off at a limping run, gripping his injured side and struggling to breathe. Gohan gave up yelling and met his pace, running his hands through his hair.

As Capsule Corp's once dome-like buildings came into view, revealing craterous holes in most roofs and walls, Vegeta stumbled straight towards the living quarters that he'd last seen his son and Mrs Briefs in.

"No." He sank to his knees when he saw that the building that he'd spent the last three years living in had been flattened. A frantic panic bubbled in his chest and he gasped for air as he tried to detect the ki of the house's occupants, even knowing that there was no way a human could survive under all that rubble.

With trembling hands, he began picking up rocks and tossing them to the side as he dug through the rubble searching for anyone still alive. His hands bled with the effort, but he pushed past the pain, determined to find Bulma and Trunks.

"Vegeta." Gohan laid a hand on his shoulder. "I can't feel anyone's ki."

Vegeta swing his fist around and up, hitting the boy in the stomach and sending him stumbling backwards. "Shut the fuck up and help me dig."

When he picked up a rock, revealing a delicate hand, fingernails painted red, Vegeta froze, his throat closing up. Carefully, he extracted the rubble from around the body, then took in the limp form of the blonde woman. Bulma's mother's lips were blue, with a small smile curled onto them, as if laughing at a joke only she knew the punchline for.

Vegeta released a shuddering gasp and buried his head in his hands. "They're all dead." He'd been kidding himself, thinking anyone could survive. Even if Trunks was a half Saiyan, he was still a baby. There was no chance any of them lived and the lack of ki in the area should have made him come to terms with it sooner.

Tears lashed his cheeks as Vegeta lifted his head, letting out a keening wail. It wasn't supposed to end like this. He was supposed to protect them, supposed to be there to save them.
Something hot boiled inside him and his cry turned to a scream as his skin began to itch unbearably. His eyes remained open but he couldn't see anything, blinded by the white-hot rage filling him, stretching and writhing within his veins. Vegeta tilted his head back to the sky as the scream ripping from his throat exploded the world around him in a golden fire until...

Silence.

It took a moment to realise all the noise blasting Vegeta's eardrums has been coming from himself, and that it had only stopped because he'd ceased screaming. He looked down at his hands, glowing with a yellow aura, and began to laugh. He'd done it. He'd become the legendary.

And it had only taken him losing everything to achieve it.

His laughter felt foreign, as if it came from another being, but he couldn't stop, delirious from the pain he was still in and the addictive energy swirling around him.

When a peculiar ringing sound finally brought him back to reality, he stopped laughing and glanced around, looking for its source.

Gohan stood before him, pale and wide eyed. When he lifted a finger and pointed at him, Vegeta glanced down at his pants, then patted his pockets, finding the cellphone Bulma had given him a few months ago and pulling it out.

Incoming Call, the phone read. Bulma Briefs.
Fight or flight?

Chapter Summary

The two Vegeta's have fisticuffs.

Chapter Notes

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

His shaking finger hit the answer icon, smearing blood over the screen. Closing his eyes, he held the phone up to his ear too afraid to hope, to believe that maybe she was still-

"Vegeta?"

Her voice was the most beautiful sound he'd heard in his life. "Bulma?" He croaked back at her, letting out a shuddering breath. "Where are you?"

"Oh, thank Kami! I've tried you so many times but this stupid phone wasn't connecting. I had to build a reception booster to get this to work. I'm in the main lab, but I can't get the door open." She sounded harried and tearful, but her voice was clear and articulate enough for Vegeta to be convinced that she was uninjured.

"Is Trunks…"

"He's with me."

Vegeta hung his head and rubbed his face, the overwhelming relief flowing through him powering him down to his base form.

"The air filtration system isn't working so the lab has limited oxygen," Bulma said, sounding more annoyed than frightened. "Can you find us and get us out?"

"I'm on my way." He hesitated before hanging up, wanting to say more, but unable to get his mouth to work. "Bulma, I…"

"Yes?"

While he wanted to say something, Vegeta was still unsure exactly what words to use. As usual his brain and his mouth seemed to operate on different planes. What could he to say? I'm glad you're not dead and crushed under a pile of rubble like your mother? "I… I'll see you soon," he said finally, feeling more inadequate than ever.

He hung up to see Gohan standing in front of him, bouncing on his feet.

"They're alive?" Gohan asked. Vegeta nodded and Gohan broke into a grin. "Thank Kami."
"Kami no longer exists," Vegeta pointed out. "Come on, they are on the other side of the compound."

Vegeta stood up and took a step, but staggered unsteadily, falling against Gohan as the boy rushed forwards to help him. Together they struggled their way to where the Briefs' underground lab was situated.

Gohan let go of him and they both started clearing away debris. In his current state, especially with his burnt arm, Vegeta found that he could barely assist, but kept clearing away rocks while Gohan used his ki to move the bigger piles of rubble.

"They are under here," Gohan said, looking at the cleared ground. "I can feel their ki. Can you call Bulma?"

Vegeta pulled out his phone again.

"Hurry up," Bulma said the moment she answered. "Oxygen's getting thin."

"I need you to get to the side of the room and take cover," Vegeta said, trying to recall the layout of the lab. "Maybe under the largest desk. We are going to blast in."

After some scuffling sounds, Bulma confirmed she and Trunks were in place, so Vegeta nodded to Gohan. The boy powered up his ki, then sent a narrow beam through the ground.

Vegeta hung up and pocketed his phone before rushing over to the hole and peering in. "Bulma?"

"We're okay," she called back before coming into view below him, a wide smile on her face. She held Trunks in her arms who appeared a little sleepy, but unharmed.

Vegeta jumped through the opening, landing roughly as his knees buckled.

"Vegeta! What happened? You look half dead." Bulma placed Trunks on the ground and launched herself at him, inspecting his injured arm. She looked up as Gohan jumped in too. "Gohan, you look awful too! What in Kami's name has been going on up there?"

Vegeta curled himself around her, breathing her in as he wrapped his good arm around her waist, pulling her into a hug. Bulma stiffened at first, probably from shock – he was rarely the one to initiate affection - but then she leaned her head on his shoulder and hugged him back.

"We can explain later," Vegeta mumbled into the curls of her hair. "Do you have any senzu beans hidden down here?"

Bulma nodded then extracted herself from his embrace to go search.

Trunks tugged on his leg, so Vegeta scooped up the boy with his good arm. When Trunks patted Vegeta's cheek with his small hand before snuggling into his father's chest, Vegeta couldn't help the smile that spread over his face. He never really held the boy, insisting he didn't want to coddle him, but after thinking Trunks was dead… he didn't ever want to let go.

Bulma returned with a small bag and tipped out a senzu bean. She gave them one each and Vegeta tossed it in his mouth, sighing with relief as his wounds began to heal.

Gohan stretched his arms out to the roof and cracked his neck. "Thanks Bulma, I'm glad you had some. Getting here from Blossom City like this was a nightmare."
“Thanks for the rescue,” Bulma said, smiling back at him. She turned back to Vegeta and threw her arms around him, nearly crushing Trunks between them. “I’m so glad you're okay.” Suddenly, she pulled back, wrinkling her nose. "Ugh, Vegeta you smell disgusting. What, did you go for a swim in a toilet on your way home?"

Vegeta glanced at Gohan who started laughing. "Something like that," he muttered.

Bulma plucked Trunks from his arm with a frown. "Have you seen my parents? They were supposed to join me in the lab, but..."

Vegeta's stomach dropped and a shiver ran through him that was similar to the feeling he used to get before having to tell Frieza when they'd lost someone of rank. The human phrase 'don't blame the messenger' had certainly not been Frieza's philosophy. How would Bulma react to the death of her parents? Would she blame him?

Swallowing hard, he decided to get it over with. "I haven't seen your father, but your mother... she didn't... I found her body."

Bulma said nothing for a moment, her face frozen stoically. Then her eyes grew shiny and she worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "It's okay," she choked out. "We just need to collect the dragon balls."

There was silence for a moment as Vegeta opened his mouth but couldn't form any words.

"Piccolo's dead," Gohan said become Vegeta could, his voice cracking. "The dragon balls are gone."

"But... what about New Namek? We could travel there and-"

"Bulma." Vegeta placed a careful hand on her shoulder. "Kami is gone and the coordinates to New Namek with him. Even if we could somehow find it, the ship is destroyed. Everything on that side of the compound has been flattened."

"I could build a new one. I could..." Bulma let out a shuddering gasp as her tears spilled over, then fell back into Vegeta's chest,balling herself and Trunks against him with a small wail. Vegeta pulled them close, swearing on the gods of Vegeta-sai that he would avenge the deaths caused by those androids for Bulma.

Now that he was Super Saiyan, they would pay.

Vegeta made his way to Bulma's lab, feeling out her ki to locate her. He paused outside the door for a moment, clenching his fists. He hadn't seen her since he'd run out on her last night, and given Bulma's legendary temper he suspected he could be in for an earful. After all, he'd led her on and then escaped at the last possible moment. His Bulma would have cuffed him around the ear for behaving like that, even if his intentions in the end were honourable.

But she wasn't his Bulma, he reminded himself as he opened the lab's door. That was the whole problem.

She swivelled in her chair, and towards him as he entered, a pencil hanging out of her mouth and an odd expression of embarrassment and annoyance crossing her face as she looked him up and down.

She didn't know which version of himself he was, Vegeta realised. Deciding to clear it up quickly, he strode in and started inspecting the time machine. "I need my machine fixed as soon as
possible," he said, growling in frustration as he noticed the state of the panels. Everything would need reinforcement before the machine was used again.

"Why?" Bulma asked, remove the pencil from her lips and tapping it on her desk as he turned to face her. "Running away again?"

Vegeta winced under her glare. "We both know that me leaving was - and is - necessary."

Bulma narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth, but after a pregnant pause, closed it again and swivelled back towards her death. "Whatever," she muttered, twirling her pencil in her hand before using it to write notes on whatever she was working on.

Vegeta let out an irritated rumble and stamped over to her, grabbing the back of her chair and turning her back around. "Will you help me fix the machine or not?"

Bulma stood up so she was eye level with him, shoving her chair away so it wheeled into the desk. Her finger prodded his chest furiously. "Even if I fixed the machine, your highness, you would not be going anywhere. It's nearly out of fuel and whatever compound it uses doesn't exist… or rather, I assume it doesn't exist yet."

"What? There's enough fuel to analyse." He grabbed her wrist to stop her jabbing him. "Can't you replicate it?"

"No, I can't," Bulma hissed, wrenching her arm out of his grip. "The fuel is mostly synthetic, but there is a natural fuel source in there that I've never seen before. Synthesising it could be possible, but getting it exact is unlikely and I don't want to be responsible for you and Trunks getting stuck in a weird time void or something!"

Vegeta turned away from her, running his hands through his hair and cursed under his breath. "She used Salokrah fuel." He blew out a breath then turned back to her. "I went into space for a few months while you - she - was pregnant."

Bulma's face reddened considerably. "You left me while I was pregnant with your child?"

"Ah… yes. I was… it was a lapse of judgement, okay?" Vegeta scowled back at her. She had no idea what had been going through his head at the time.

"Looks like running away is your thing," Bulma said, crossing her arms.

"Do not presume to know me," Vegeta snapped. "You have no idea what my life has been like. You have no clue what the thought of bringing a child into a universe that has done nothing but cause me pain felt like. I needed space, I took it, then I came back and did my best to be what you needed."

Bulma's expression melted and she reached out tentatively to touch his arm. "I'm sorry. You're right, I don't know you. It's not even you I'm mad at. It's your other self." She gave a sharp laugh and shook her head. "No, I'm just mad at myself." Sighing deeply, she dropped her hand. "If you want to use the machine again you are going to need to get me that fuel… and it just so happens that I have a spaceship."

"Could you capsulise the ship?" Vegeta asked, finally allowing an idea he'd buried in the back of his head since Bulma had died to resurface.

"It might take a week, but yes."
"I'd like to take the spaceship back to my time once the androids are defeated here."

Bulma raised her eyebrows and cocked her head. "You want to capsulise my multimillion dollar ship and travel across time with it?"

"If it's an issue of money I can bring you back enough technology from space to keep Capsule Corp profitable for generations." He grinned at Bulma, suddenly excited about the idea of venturing back into space. "Why do you think you forgave me for leaving for space in my time?"

Bulma laughed loudly, throwing her head back and crinkling her eyes. "You sneaky devil! Yamcha always tried flowers and wondered why they didn't work. But alien tech?" Bulma placed her hand over her heart and fluttered her eyelashes. "You really do know me."

Vegeta couldn't help but smirk back at her. "I just have a healthy sense of self preservation. Now get the ship capsulisable and upgrade the gravity to five hundred by the end of next week."

"What? Are you crazy? I can't do both of those that fast!" Bulma slapped the side of his arm but kept grinning.

"Of course you can," Vegeta said, unable to resist leaning in to whisper in her ear. "You're Bulma freaking Briefs."

Vegeta stomped back into Capsule Corp, a towel draped around his neck from a vigorous workout session in the space ship's gravity chamber. He checked the compound for the location of everyone's ki with the intention of avoiding everyone on his way to the kitchen, but the feeling of his future counterpart's ki so close to Bulma's made him clench his teeth. So, his future self was once again moving in on the woman, attempting to take what was rightfully his? Not that he wanted her – he most certainly did not – but his pride demanded retribution. Vegeta might not have been a Super Saiyan like his older self, but he couldn't let this stand any longer.

Abruptly, he changed direction and headed across the compound and down to Bulma's lab, barely able to contain the trembling in his balled fists. He let out a hissing breath as he reached the doorway, pausing as he took them in, unable to tear his gaze away from the sight of Bulma and his older self interacting. She kept touching him, either with a gentle brushing of her hand or a mocking slap, and it wasn't as if the future Vegeta was doing anything to stop it.

When future him leaned forward to whisper something unintelligible in the woman's ear, a peculiar ringing hit Vegeta's ears and his skin tingled with rage. He ducked back into the hallway, waiting for his older self to exit.

Future Vegeta strolled out of the room, a vague smile on his face that was sickening. As soon as he'd closed the door, Vegeta launched himself at the older man, getting in a perfect blow to his jaw that sent the man from the future stumbling back.

"You. Me. Outside, now," Vegeta ground out before storming down the hall and back towards the staircase that led to the upper level and the front door.

He felt his older self's ki following him, and when they got back out into the bright morning sunlight, Vegeta turned to him, looking the time traveller up and down, crossing his arms. "This ends now," he snarled out at future Vegeta's impassive expression.

The corner of future Vegeta's mouth twitched. "What ends now?"

Vegeta dropped into his traditional fighting stance, bending his knees as if about to pounce and
bringing his arms and hands up. "You know exactly what I'm talking about."

Future Vegeta raised his eyebrows. "You really want to do this? Fine. But not here." He took off into the air, blasting out and away from the city.

Grumbling under his breath, Vegeta did the same, knowing his future self was right. He didn't want to accidentally blow up his training facilities.

They flew out to a rocky, unpopulated expanse, landing on the dusty ground and sizing each other up. Vegeta made the first move, knowing his future self wouldn't, but this time future Vegeta wasn't caught off-guard, blocking the blow with his forearm before bringing up a knee to ram into Vegeta's side.

The move was quick and decisive, and Vegeta realised that even without his Super Saiyan strength, this man had ten years of honing his technique on him. Not one to give up, Vegeta went in for seconds with a flurry of mad blows, hoping his future counterpart couldn't block them all. When he managed to get a hit in, swiping future Vegeta's shoulder, Vegeta used the opportunity to strike again, aiming for a punch to the face.

Future Vegeta blocked it, then sent his own fist back into Vegeta's gut before phasing behind him and following it up with a shark kick to his back, slamming him into a rocky face.

Vegeta groaned in the rubble, but pulled himself up before flying towards him again, this time sending a ki blast out in front of him. For a moment, he was sure he'd achieve a solid hit, but future Vegeta not only blocked it, but reflected it straight back at Vegeta. Realising he was now too close to the ricocheting ki, Vegeta put his arms up to block, and felt himself skid back on the ground to land in the broken pile of rubble again.

Vegeta blinked as the dust cleared to see his future self standing in front of him, his arms crossed and a frown on his face.

"Even if I never leave my base form, you can't win," future Vegeta said. "Why don't you tell me what has you so riled up before you end up too broken to move?"

Vegeta gnashed his teeth as he dragged himself to his feet. "You know exactly what I'm angry about! You had your chance with Bulma and you lost her because you were too weak to protect her."

Future Vegeta blanched, then his face hardened into stone and he rushed forward so fast Vegeta didn't realise he had moved until he felt the sharp pressure of a fist connecting to his jaw and landed on his back on the ground.

"You know nothing," future Vegeta hissed, towering over Vegeta, one arm pulled back, ready for another blow.

"She's not yours!" Vegeta choked out, rolling on his side to spit out blood. "Everything in my life has been taken from me. My family, my people, my crown. I thought there was nothing left to take, but here you are, trying to snatch away something that isn't even mine yet."

Future Vegeta slowly straightened and dropped his arm. "I do not recall my feelings for Bulma being that strong at this point in time."

Vegeta hauled himself to his feet again, breathing heavily with the effort. "I don't care about her. It's... it's the principle of it!" He sucked in air through his teeth, both from pain and from the fury still radiating through him.
"Stop acting like an infant," future Vegeta said. "She's not a toy that I've stolen. If you don't have feelings for her then you-"

*That patronising…* Vegeta screamed and launched himself back at his future counterpart. "Fuck you," he cried out, raining down blows on the man. "She. Kissed. Me!" Vegeta matched each word with a furious punch to his older self's stomach, forcing the time traveller to fly back in a hurry to avoid another hit.

"Who… Bulma?" Future Vegeta grabbed Vegeta's arm and twisted it behind his back, forcing the Saiyan to the ground with a cry.

"Yes, Bulma!" A wave of dizziness washed over him as he heard the popping of his shoulder. The bastard had dislocated it.

Future Vegeta dropped him, and when Vegeta twisted his head to look at him he saw an odd expression of pain crossing the man's face before confusion set in.

"Isn't that a good thing?" future Vegeta asked.

Vegeta opened and shut his mouth a few times before getting out his reply. "No! She shouldn't have… I didn't…" He struggled to sit up, using his good arm for support. "She thought I was you!"

Future Vegeta blinked, recognition smoothing his face. "But she's always so careful to figure out which one of us she's talking to."

"I've noticed." Vegeta growled grabbing his shoulder with his hand and wrenching it back into place. "Ow! Son of a… Your little demon spawn was to blame!"

Future Vegeta recoiled at that. Pursing his lips, he sat down on a rock hitting out of the ground. "What does Trunks have to do with this?"

"Like you don't know," Vegeta sneered, but even as he spoke the words he realised that his future self had in fact been unaware of his son's antics. "That brat set the whole thing up. Got me to dress like you and then go to see her to tell her I'd changed my mind. I thought he was talking about dinner, but Bulma thought I was referring to kissing her." Vegeta gave his older self a sharp glare. "Which means you must have given her a reason to think she should kiss you!"

Future Vegeta sucked in a breath, his eyes wide. "Trunks did what?"

Vegeta scowled at his older self. "Your son could do with a good beating, but I have to admit, he's clever."

A sharp laugh came from future Vegeta's throat. "He is that."

The pride in the older man's voice was obvious, and Vegeta got the feeling that Trunks wouldn't be getting any kind of thrashing. He supposed it wasn't really Trunks' meddling that he was mad about anyway, but the thought of his future self and the woman together. He wrinkled his nose, bracing himself to ask the question he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer to. "Why did Bulma want to kiss me - I mean you? Are you two…"

"What?" Future Vegeta blinked quickly as he cheeks brightened to red. "No! But I do think it is a good idea that I leave."

A wave of relief ran over him at the knowledge his older self would depart. "When do you go?"
"In a week. I'm taking the spaceship, but Bulma will build you a new gravity room. Before I go we should work on your defence. You're sloppy."

Vegeta laughed, then flinched as it shook his bruised ribs. "Defence was the last thing on my mind. Just you wait, when you return, I'll be stronger than you."

"You can try," Future Vegeta said with a chuckle.

Trunks found his father sitting on the roof, watching the sun slip behind the horizon and the stars begin to appear, splattering across the sky one by one. Vegeta had always been a star gazer. He knew his father had hated having to live in hiding, often underground and away from the open sky. Vegeta had even admitted aloud once that being unable to see the sky reminded him of living on Frieza's ship, where most of his time spent in his windowless quarters.

The moment Vegeta slid his gaze sideways, his eyes hardening and the crease of his mouth turning down, Trunks knew he'd figured out what his son had done.

Swallowing down the lump of nerves in his throat, Trunks sat down next to his father, tilting his own head back to look at the sky. "How much trouble am I in?" he asked when his father didn't say anything.

Vegeta laughed lightly and lifted his shoulders into a shrug. "Let's just say that I won't be going easy on you in our next training session."

Trunks winced visibly, but inside felt a wash of relief. His father can't have been that angry. When he was truly mad, he gave Trunks the silent treatment, sometimes for days, which despite having no pain involved, was far worse. Not only because Trunks liked to talk and his already uncommunicative father was usually his only company, but because it meant that Vegeta was so angry he was worried he wouldn't be able to hold back in training.

"We're leaving," Vegeta said. "In a week."

"Are we going back to our time?"

"No." Vegeta turned to Trunks, an excited light behind his eyes that was odd on the perpetually serious man. "We are going into space to track down the right fuel for our machine."

"And I can come?" Trunks almost vibrated with excitement as his ki jumped. "Papa that's so cool! How many planets will we go to? Am I going to meet alien races? This is going to be the best holiday ever!"

Vegeta snorted and shook his head. "Calm down brat. Our main mission is to get the fuel and to use the time to train for the androids. There will be no 'holidaying'."

"Can we at least stop at Trolothi?" Trunks asked. It was one of the few planets Vegeta had described to Trunks in detail. Apparently the food was almost as good as Earth's.

"I suppose it's on the way…" Vegeta let out an exasperated sigh. "If we can get around without me being arrested. I'm a wanted man in that part of the universe."

"You could go Super Saiyan as a disguise," Trunks suggested. "They won't be looking for a blonde."

Vegeta chuckled at that. "You're too clever for your own good, you know that?"
"I know," Trunks said with a smirk. "So… we'll go?"

Rolling his eyes, Vegeta reached out and ruffled Trunks' hair. "If you do well in your training."

"Yes!" Trunks fist pumped the air. "You're the best, Papa."

Vegeta smirked back at him. "I know."
Bulma insisted on hunting through the debris for her father, determined to give both her parents a proper burial. Being out in the open set Vegeta on edge, so he scanned the sky constantly, sweeping it for signs of the androids, something that was difficult, even with his superior eyesight, due to the thickening storm cloud coating the atmosphere. It wouldn't be hard for the metal warriors to hide up there, and having no ki signature would make them tricky to spot until it was too late.

Despite his anxiousness, he didn't have the heart to refuse her pleas, and set about digging through the rubble with Gohan as quickly as they could. When Vegeta finally found Dr Briefs under part of a wall about ten metres from his Mrs Briefs, he hauled out the broken body with Gohan's help. Kakarot's son seemed to be in shock, with his skin pale and eyes darting about more than Vegeta's, but even Vegeta had to admit that the boy had been more than reliable so far.

Bulma started crying at the recovery of the body, and ran over to kneel by her father, her shoulders shaking inconsolably. Vegeta moved awkwardly to the side, unsure what to say or do. In the end, it was Trunks who calmed Bulma down, simply by walking over to her, plonking himself into her lap, and cuddling up.

Bulma let out a watery laugh and wiped her eyes, then looked up at Vegeta. "Can you move them? I'd like to take them to be buried." She glanced at Gohan. "Maybe we can take them to your house. The androids won't find us there, it's too remote, and then we can check on your mother."

Gohan nodded in agreement, his shoulders relaxing at the suggestion.

"Carry Bulma and Trunks," Vegeta instructed the boy. "I'll-"

A loud bang exploded near Vegeta's ears and a bright light sent him reeling backwards into the ground. Cursing to himself, Vegeta realised he'd forgotten to keep an eye out for the androids since the discovery of the scientist's body. When the lights stopped blurring his vision, he saw the two androids hovering in the air above them.

Vegeta looked around wildly, hunting for Bulma and Trunks, but all he could see were clouds of dust.

"Vegeta!" Gohan called out.
Vegeta turned to see Gohan holding a squirming Trunks, but with no sign of Bulma, quickly kept searching.

The androids laughed from above. "I think we killed her," the black-haired teenager said.

Vegeta felt as though the ground had fallen out from under him for a moment, but pulled it together for long enough to concentrate on sensing Bulma's ki. It was weak and he finally spotted her not far from Gohan, partially covered in rubble, her hair sprawled around her in a blue halo. Her lower half was trapped by a concrete block, but as he rushed over, he saw her arm twitch.

"I'm sorry!" Gohan said. "She threw me Trunks and I couldn't..."

As the two androids landed, Vegeta yanked the block off. "Get them out of here," he barked at Gohan.

The half Saiyan gathered up Bulma's limp form, and flew off with her and Trunks. When the female android sent a ki blast after them, Vegeta blocked it, turning Super Saiyan with an outraged cry.

"Now you deal with me," he growled, relieved to feel that Bulma's ki was steady, if low, as Gohan made his escape with her and Trunks.

"Nice hair," the female said, cocking her head to the side. "I've always wanted that shade of blonde. Care to lend me your hairdresser?"

"You rock blonde way better than this idiot," said the male. "Let's take care of him so we can get some food. I'm starving."

They both grinned in sync, with twisted matching smirks that reminded Vegeta of a look Zarbon gave him before a particularly brutal beating. They attacked Vegeta head on, and for a while he found he could meet them blow for blow. The power running through his veins was incredible, and he estimated that each of his hits were at least three times stronger than his base form, but to his growing horror, he realised that he still wasn't having any long-lasting impact on them. They didn't tire, and while his energy was draining after fifteen minutes, they seemed like they could go for days.

"Eighteen!" the teenage boy yelled. "Merry go round?"

The girl let out a laugh and nodded, flying towards Vegeta.

Vegeta tried to block her, but her strong hands gripped his arm and spun him around before he knew she was doing. She spun him towards her brother, who caught Vegeta with a kick to his back and sent him spiralling back towards Eighteen. With a roar of fury, Vegeta released a blast of ki towards his left and his right at the same time to stop his tailspin, then dropped to the ground and launched off it, towards Eighteen, firing ki blasts at her.

She appeared out of the ki, completely unhurt (if you didn't count her now ripped denim vest) and grabbed his wrist, then slammed her arm down on his. Vegeta couldn't help cry out at the sickening snap, but he retaliated with his unbroken arm, sending his fist into her solar plexus to escape.

He knew he was done for when the boy - Seventeen, his sister called him - dropkicked Vegeta in the head, sending him towards his sister who punched him hard enough in the face to make everything turn black for a split second. Vegeta hit the ground in a crumpled heap, and barely managed to get up enough energy to send a ki blast their way before they could attack again.

When the energy cleared and the two androids hovered there, laughing to themselves, Vegeta
closed his eyes and returned to his base form, his energy spent. This was it. He was about to return to hell.

At least Bulma and Trunks were safe for now... assuming Bulma pulled through with the injuries she'd sustained.

But the finishing blow never came. Instead, he found himself lifted by the front of his shirt, and when he opened his eyes he was dangling in front of the girl.

"You're much more fun now that you can turn blonde," she said, baring her teeth into the parody of a smile. "We'll let you live so we can have more fun tomorrow." Eighteen dropped him and he gasped as the air was shoved from his lungs by the impact.

The boy draped his arm around his sister as they walked off, then threw his head over his shoulder to look at Vegeta. "See you round, loser," he said, waving at him with a wiggle of his fingers.

When they disappeared, Vegeta curled into a ball, trying to maintain what energy he had left. They'd let him live like he was some kind of toy. How fucking humiliating. Reaching Super Saiyan hadn't helped. He was going to have to be a hundred times stronger still to even make an impact on these freaks. Even beating Frieza hadn't seemed this hopeless.

When he gathered enough energy to stand, Vegeta dragged himself to his feet and limped back towards the bodies of Bulma's parents. Pausing at the spot where Bulma had been struck by the concrete, he spotted a small brown bag on the ground. The senzu beans. He scooped it up eagerly, then tipped the contents into his hand. Only one bean fell out. Cursing his luck, Vegeta contemplated eating a small portion of the bean to kickstart his body's healing process. Deciding against it, he carefully pocketed the bean, then, ignoring his own injuries and pushing past the pain, he scooped up Bulma's parents, balancing them carefully to avoid making his broken arm worse, then flew straight for Gohan's ki.

With his stuttering energy and the extra weight of the bodies, Vegeta flew low to the ground, dipping up and down unsteadily. He was relieved when he felt Gohan's ki change direction and fly back towards him after a couple of minutes of flying, knowing it meant he wouldn't have to fly as far. The boy must have sensed his ki and decided to turn around.

They met at the outskirts of a destroyed city, in a small park that had a little cover in the form of trees.

"Tell me you have the senzu beans," Gohan said as he landed on the grass. "She's holding on, but..."

He didn't have to finish as Vegeta knew both from her ki and from the sight of her torn and mangled leg that it was bad.

"Only one." Vegeta dropped the bodies in his arms unceremoniously and rushed to her side as Gohan set her down. "She's lucky it wasn't higher," he muttered, looking at a deep wound on her thigh. She would have bled out if that had hit an artery. As it was she appeared to have serious internal bleeding in her abdomen, and her leg had bone poking through in two places.

Trunks tried to escape from Gohan's arms, but the boy managed to hold him back from jumping on his mother and father. Ignoring both Gohan and Trunks, Vegeta patted Bulma's face to see how responsive she was, and when she didn't stir, he popped the bean into his mouth and chewed it.

"What are you doing?" Gohan shouted, grabbing Vegeta's arm. "You said you only had one bean.
She'll die without it!"

Vegeta scowled at the boy, then carefully opened Bulma's mouth before spitting out the bean into his fingers and pressing it onto her tongue. He tilted her head back and gently stroked her throat, encouraging her to swallow.

When she did, the effects were instantaneous. Her bone straightened, wounds closed, and she opened her blue eyes and met his gaze with a smile. Despite everything, despite the fact he was useless against the androids, that the only place he'd been able to call home since he was a child was likely going to be destroyed... Vegeta allowed her a small smile back.

Bulma scowled at an echoing knock on the metal spaceship door. "I'm busy!" she shouted from under the console panel, focussing her attention on tightening a troublesome bolt. Upgrading the gravity simulator to five hundred had been more challenging than she'd originally thought. It required not only work on the console, but on the ship itself to ensure it was reinforced enough to handle it. She'd been working on the project non-stop for the past week, and finally only had a little console work to finish for the upgrade. Bulma did not want any interruptions to impact her Vegeta-imposed deadline. He'd set her a challenge and she was going to meet it, damn it.

Bulma had barely seen any of the Saiyans all week. Her time's Vegeta had disappeared into the wilderness to train, presumably irritated that his training equipment was being absconded with, but given his lack of protestation, Bulma could only assume he was happy to see his older self go. Trunks had been suspiciously absent, and future Vegeta had made himself scarce as well, leaving only ghostly traces of eaten food, dirty laundry, and the odd sensation of being watched in his wake.

Maybe future Vegeta had become annoyed with the time the work was taking, because the knocking came again. Before she could tell her visitor to leave once more, Bulma heard the door swish open and felt a cool breeze on her legs come in from outside. Muttering under her breath about impatient Saiyans, she wheeled herself on her mechanic's creeper out from under the console, blinking and shading her eyes from the sun blearing in.

The silhouetted figure in the doorway stepped to the side and her face hardened even more.

"Yamcha," Bulma said, sitting up, his name sour on her lips. "What do you want?"

He flushed awkwardly - it was strange how on Vegeta blushing was adorable but on him she found it unappealing - and brandished a bouquet of flowers. The floral arrangement was a beautiful mix of sunflowers and irises. She had to admit, he'd gone to more effort than the wilting bunches he'd presented her in the past.

Bulma sighed and stood up, grabbing a rag to wipe grease off her hands. "They are beautiful…"

Yamcha's face lit up like a young child's.

"…but flowers won't work this time."

His face fell again. "Come on, B. I know I behaved like an ass, but can you really blame me for being jealous? I mean, of all people in the world for you to end up with, that monster is my worst nightmare."

Bulma stiffened and threw the rag on top of the console, narrowing her eyes at her on and off again lover of ten years. "Vegeta is not a monster."
Yamcha rolled his eyes and moved forward to set the flowers down on the console beside her dirty rag. "Oh, please. Bulma, I know you like to see the best in everyone, but don't be naïve." He placed a hand on her arm with a concerned frown on his face. "You were right to be mad at me for insinuating that you were sleeping with him. I know you would never do that. It's obvious what happens in the future."

"Is it?" Bulma clenched her teeth, asking Kami for the patience to deal with this. "And what, pray tell, are you so certain that the future holds?"

"Bulma..." Yamcha reached up and touched her cheek, rubbing his rough thumb across as he peered gently into her eyes. "It's obvious that he forced himself on you. He probably killed you too."

Bulma wrenched herself away and stepped back, feeling as though she'd been slapped. "What?"

"I'm not saying the android threat isn't real." Yamcha lifted his hands defensively, looking surprised at her reaction. "I'll admit, the boy seems genuine. But you can't honestly think that Vegeta... cares about you." He raised his eyebrows incredulously, scanning her up and down. "He's a murderer. A psychopath. That monster raped you, then killed you the moment you were no longer useful, I guarantee it."

Bulma's mouth hung open as she processed his words. Of all the vile, nasty things to say... But she could see on his face that he sincerely believed them.

"Leave," she gasped out, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she struggled to calm her rising fury.

Yamcha moved closer, trapping her between himself and the console. "Don't be like that." He touched a loose curl that had fallen in front of her face and pressed even closer. "You know I'm right."

"Leave!" Bulma shrieked, shoving his chest with all her might.

Even her full force didn't budge him. He might not have been a Saiyan, but Yamcha was still one of the strongest humans alive. A flash of panic swept over his face and he grabbed her wrists as she tried to shove him away again.

"You have to believe me." Desperation rang in each word. "I'm sorry it took me so long to realise it, but you are in danger with him - them - around. He will hurt you in unimaginable ways."

"You're the one hurting me!" Bulma hissed out, tears pricking her eyes from the bruising grip on her wrists.

Yamcha gasped and dropped her hands quickly. "B, I'm sorry-"

"Vegeta is not a monster." Bulma grit her teeth, throwing all her anger behind her glare, watching as her on and off again boyfriend shrank before her. "He is dedicated, and clever, and he might be one of the biggest jerks I have ever met, but he would never, ever purposely hurt me. He would never force himself on me." She swallowed hard before her next words, knowing they would push Yamcha away forever. "He doesn't need to."

All the colour drained from the scar-faced warrior's face, and he finally stepped back, giving Bulma much needed breathing room. "You mean, you..."

"I kissed him," she said shortly. "Nothing else happened, but Yamcha..." Her face softened at his devastated expression. "You and I haven't been good for a long while. It says something that I've
bably thought about you since the time machine turned up in my lab."

"You cheated." His face had gone from a light flush to bright red. "After all the crap you've given me about looking at other girls, you cheated on me with the man who killed me."

"Technically it was the saibamen-"

Yamcha roared and launched himself forward so both hands landed on the console behind her and he pressed his chest against hers, coming nose to nose with her. "You stupid, idiotic, moron! He's going to hurt you, and you are too blind to see it!" Spittle flew from his mouth, and for the first time, Bulma felt genuinely frightened of him.

"Let me go." She kept her voice as steady as she could, but couldn't help the waver at the end.

"Not until you listen to reason!"

Deciding there was only one way to end this, Bulma used a technique that Yamcha himself had taught her. She swiftly drew up a knee, jabbing it as sharply as she could in between his legs. At his gasp of pain, she ducked under his arm and ran for the door.

"Bulma!" Yamcha cried out and grabbed her hand, squeezing it hard and preventing her escape.

Bulma pulled frantically, but he didn't let go, even as he remained bent slightly at the waist from pain.

"You need to listen to me," he said, reaching out with his other hand.

"Let her go!"

At the young but authoritative voice, Bulma nearly sank to her knees with relief. She glanced at the doorway to see Trunks storming inside. He hit out at Yamcha with a blur of motion, and the man yelped and finally let her go, dropping to the floor while clutching his ribs.

Trunks looked at her sideways. "Are you okay?"

Bulma nodded, not trusting herself to speak lest the heavy tears threatening to fall finally broke their dam.

Yamcha struggled to his feet, looking at Trunks with terror in his eyes. "I didn't mean to hurt her. I-"

Trunks leapt forward and hit the warrior with a well-placed blow to his neck, and Yamcha slumped the ground, unmoving.

Bulma covered her mouth with her hand and let out a whimper.

"He's not dead." Trunks sneered disdainfully at the man in a scarily Vegeta-like expression. "Just unconscious."

"I…" Bulma swallowed hard to clear her throat. "I know. Thank you. For saving me. I… I know you don't like me."

Trunks cocked his head, crossing his eyes in puzzlement. "I don't dislike you. I just…" He straightened with a sigh, sounding both incredibly young and wearily old at the same time. "I thought you'd be like my Mama, but I feel like I don't know you at all." He scuffed his shoe on the tiled floor and looked at the ground, dropping his voice to a mumble. "And just because I don't
want you to be with my Papa, doesn't mean I don't like you. I just want you to be with who you 
are meant to be with."

"This time's Vegeta," Bulma said as the cogs of her brain started whirring. "You wouldn't have had 
anything to do with the younger Vegeta coming downstairs the other night, would you?"

Trunks blinked innocently up at her. "Who, me? Of course not."

Bulma looked at him suspiciously. "You sneaky… I don't know how you did it, but you're a clever 
one, aren't you?"

Trunks grinned at her. "I have amazing genes." His smile turned to a frown as took her hand, 
inspecting the forming bruises. "He hurt you."

"He didn't mean to," Bulma said quickly. "I'm fine, really. I've been hanging around people with 
super-human strength since I was a teenager. A few bruises are nothing to worry about."

Trunks pressed his lips together, but gave her a sharp nod and dropped her hand. He dug into his 
pocket and handed something to her. "I came to give you this. It's Papa's but he won't miss it 
straight away."

Bulma stared at the paper in her hand. It was a photograph, one that looked as though it had been 
handled frequently. Its corners were bent, and the ink had begun to fade. In the photo was herself - 
herself future self - holding a baby. She was looking down at the child with a tired but joyful smile, 
and she had one finger touching the infant's cheek. Bulma flipped the photo over and saw Trunks 
Vegeta Briefs written on the back, with a birthdate and the comment eleven days late.

Trunks looked up at her with a serious stare. "Just in case."

"Trunks…" Bulma chewed her bottom lip. He'd given her everything she needed to ensure he was 
born. "I can't guarantee anything."

"I know," Trunks said. "But I have to do everything I can." He touched the hand holding the photo. 
"It's not just for me. It's for Papa. He's never hid anything from me. I know he's sugar-coated it, but 
he has told me what he was like. Without you, without me… he won't become who he is supposed 
to be."

"Who is he supposed to be, Trunks?"

Trunks smiled up at her, his blue eyes shining. "He wasn't supposed to be a slave, or a murderer. 
He was meant to be a king. A hero to his people." He drew his hand back and put them both in his 
pockets, then gave her a shrug. "We are his people now."

He left the ship then, not even glancing over his shoulder to see if she followed. Bulma's gaze fell 
to the still unconscious Yamcha, and she was struck by just how different Trunks opinion of 
Vegeta was to Yamcha's.

"I can't believe he's only eight," Bulma muttered to herself as she followed Trunks outside.

The first thing he noticed was that he couldn't feel anything. Normally when he awoke after a 
confrontation with the androids, it was to overwhelming pain, but this time… nothing.

Was he dead?
No, his memories of hell were clear enough. Blissful nothingness was not what awaited his doomed soul.

Slowly, forcing the movement, Vegeta cracked open his eyes, peeling them apart to see vague shadows through his gunky eyelashes. He tried to lift a hand to wipe his eyes, but couldn't even twitch a finger.

The shadows became more solid as he concentrated, and he realised he was in the makeshift medical bay Bulma had set up in their latest place of residence - a basement in an old library. Another bed sat across the room, and Vegeta could just make out the motionless figure of twelve-year-old Gohan.

It all came flooding back to him. Vegeta shut his eyes again, fighting back a groan. The pre-teen's mother had been caught in the crossfire of the androids playing Jenga with some buildings, and her death had spurred Gohan's transformation. Unfortunately, it also robbed the boy of all reason and he'd gone in after the androids with no strategy, no exit plan, and no backup. Vegeta had felt Gohan's dramatically lowering ki and attempted a rescue.

He couldn't recall what had happened during the fight, or how it had ended, but given that he still couldn't feel anything, it couldn't have been pretty.

The door to the med bay opened and Vegeta opened his eyes to see Bulma walk in. She appeared tired, with even the darkened room unable to hide the deep circles under her eyes. Her long hair had been pulled into an unkempt pony tail, and the baggy lab jacket she wore had begun to wear at the elbows, but when she smiled, noticing he was awake, the room felt lighter.

Sitting down in a chair next to his bed, Bulma reached out and took his hand, causing a sinking in Vegeta's stomach as he realised he couldn't feel her touch.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, placing her other hand on his forehead.

Vegeta breathed out slowly in relief when he felt the coolness of her palm. "How much did you drug me?" His tongue felt thick and his words came out slurred, but Bulma seemed to understand.

"I gave you most of what I had," she replied, the spot between her eyebrows creasing. "They broke your back."

"I can't feel anything below my neck."

"I know," Bulma said softly, beginning to stroke his forehead in gentle sweeping motions. "I did some tests and your limbs were unresponsive. I'm hoping your Saiyan healing genes will kick in as the drugs wear off."

"Is Gohan…"

"He's okay, thanks to you." Bulma sighed, and Vegeta opened his eyes again just in time to see her glance in the boy's direction. "He's woken up a few times and is well on the mend. He told me what happened. You saved his life."

Vegeta grunted in response. Had he really saved Gohan's life, or had he just extended out the boy's misery?

A rustle of movement came from the other bed and Gohan sat up, rubbing his face with his hands. Upon seeing Bulma and Vegeta, he swung his legs over and padded across the room in his bare
feet to stand by Vegeta’s bed.

"I'm so sorry," he choked out, brushing away tears that had begun to fall. "If I hadn't been so reckless, you-

"-Stop blubbering, I'm fine," Vegeta snapped.

"Fine? Vegeta, you look like shit and even Hercule Satan could kill you right now."

"Watch your mouth, brat." Vegeta glared at the boy with all the force he had left. "I will get better, we will train, and we will defeat those rust buckets. Got it?"

Gohan gave Vegeta a wavering smile. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now until I'm better, no stupid stunts. I need you to..." Vegeta gasped for breath suddenly as his chest felt like it was caving in. "Protect... them."

"The pain meds are wearing off," Bulma said, continuing her light ministrations to his head.

"Yeah," Vegeta hissed through gritted teeth. "I can tell. Where is Trunks?"

"Playing in the next room." Bulma chewed on her bottom lip. "I didn't want him to see you like this."

"Good." Vegeta looked to Gohan, forcing the pain off his face. "If you are well enough, go watch Trunks."

Gohan hesitated, then gave Vegeta a small nod before leaving the room, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Alone with Bulma, Vegeta let out a shuddering breath and allowed the smallest of moans to escape from his lips as his arms began to tingle with a pain a thousand times worse than the pins and needles he got after Bulma slept on his arm at night.

When Bulma squeezed his hand and he felt it, Vegeta let out a gasp and turned his face towards her.

"You felt that?"

Vegeta nodded, afraid he'd be unable to speak without whimpering like a pathetic child.

"That's good," Bulma whispered. "You're going to be okay."

As Vegeta felt his eyes roll back in his head and the darkness swept in, Bulma leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

"I can't stand by and watch you and Gohan nearly kill yourselves any longer," she said, her voice low and urgent. "I'm going to build something that will fix all this. Something that will save us all."

Heavy clouds billowed in the sky above, shrouding Capsule Corp's front yard in shade and filling the atmosphere with a suffocating humidity that Trunks couldn't wait to escape.

The Briefs family, Kakarot, Gohan, and even young Vegeta had gathered in the yard to see him and his father off, and while Trunks knew he should enjoy the company while he still had it, he couldn't wait to leave on their space adventure.
Vegeta hadn't read Trunks' traditional bedtime stories. Instead, on the nights when they both found it hard to sleep, he'd regaled Trunks with tales of his own interplanetary exploration, talking about different planets and people with more animation than he did about anything else. Now, finally, Trunks was going to experience it firsthand.

"How long will you be gone?" Kakarot asked, admiring the outside of the ship as Trunks' father opened the door.

"As long as it takes," Vegeta said, scowling at the man.

Trunks grinned, knowing his father was being purposefully vague in front of the young Vegeta and Bulma. Their plan was to stay away at least until Trunks should have been created, to give him the best chance at being born.

"I wish I could come," Gohan said glumly. "My mother wants me to study all the time, but I'd rather go back into space."

"You've already been to space," Kakarot said. "I wouldn't have thought you'd want to go back after Namek!"

"It wasn't all bad." Gohan looked at Bulma with a grin. "Right?"

Bulma shuddered and shook her head. "Nuh uh. If I remain on Earth for the rest of my life I'll be happy."

"Come on, brat. Time to go." Vegeta stood in the ship's doorway, his arms crossed and fingers tapping his bicep impatiently.

"Coming, Papa." Trunks started to move towards the ship, but found himself pulled into the arms of his nana, in a surprising strong embrace for a mere human. He stiffened uncomfortably, but returned the hug, awkwardly patting the woman's back.

"I'm going to miss you," Mrs Briefs said with a sniff. "My kitchen just won't be the same only cooking for one Saiyan."

"I bet we'll be hungry when we get back," Trunks said as he pulled back and managed to escape the hug. "I could send you my return to Earth food requests before we get back into the solar system?"

"Oh yes." Mrs Briefs clapped her hands together. "Please do. And make sure you and your father eat well while you're travelling. I've given you plenty of capsulised food so there's no excuse. I don't want to see you come back half starved."

"Now, dear, Vegeta has travelled around space all his life. He'll know where to get food if they run out," Dr Briefs mumbled from behind his cigarette.

"Yes, stop fussing," Bulma said, rolling her eyes. "They'll be okay." Then she pulled Trunks into a quick hug of her own. "Stay safe. Don't let your father train too much."

"Yes young Mama," Trunks said with a grin. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Don't forget about me."

Bulma smiled back. "As if I ever could."

"Hurry up!" Trunks' papa barked.
Trunks started towards the ship, but when he got to the door, paused and turned to the young Vegeta, who stood under the shade of an oak tree, his arms crossed and face expressionless. Trunks raised his hand in a quick farewell, not expecting a response back, so was surprised when the Saiyan uncrossed his arms enough to lift his hand in a two fingered salute.

Beaming hard, Trunks waved wildly to everyone else. "Bye, Earth!" He shouted before Vegeta yanked him inside and shut the door, before firing up the engines to begin their trip to outer space.

As Bulma explained her idea, Vegeta remained silent, sitting on the couch with Trunks on his lap, wishing he could stand for longer than two minutes at a time. Hell, just getting from his bed to the living room had been a painful process of slow steps, supported by Gohan the whole way. It was humiliating, needing help even to take a piss.

The androids had very nearly killed him, and the time it was taking him to recover worried even him, so he shouldn't have been surprised that Bulma wanted to another plan to cling to - one that didn't involve him arriving back to their hideout with more and more injuries each time.

It didn't make her lack of faith in him hurt any less. "You don't think I can do it," he said, staring at the blue-haired woman in front of him. It was frustrating how much her low opinion of his abilities hurt, despite the fact that over the last two years he had proven over and over again that he was too weak to defeat the androids.

"I'm not willing to pay the price of waiting for you and Gohan to get stronger anymore," Bulma replied, her clever skirting around his accusation doing nothing to relieve the sting. "My plan will take a few years as well, and if you manage to destroy the androids before then, that's okay. But we need a plan b. I can't sit around and do nothing but pray that you don't die today."

Gohan, who had remained silent until now, finally chose to offer an opinion. "Even if we go back in time, no one will use the dragon balls to wish the androids destroyed before they're even made," he pointed out. "Half of them won't do it because it's morally wrong, and the other half would never run from a challenge."

"We have to try!" Bulma slammed her palm down on the chipped side table, causing a slapping sound that made Trunks jump.

The three-year-old frowned at his mother, but apparently deciding nothing was wrong, wriggled out of Vegeta's lap and started playing with the toy car Gohan had scavenged for him on their last hunt for food.

Bulma took in a deep breath and lowered her voice. "You two don't have any training equipment, and aren't getting enough food. You are never going to reach your potential like this. If we warn everyone, they will be able to train properly, and even if they don't use the dragon balls, at least they will have a fighting chance."

"If you want to build a time machine, build a time machine." Vegeta leaned his head back on the couch as weariness flooded through him. "But I'm not going to stop trying to beat them."

"You need to stop, unless attacked directly." Bulma's lips drew into a white slash across her face as she clearly struggled to maintain her composure around Trunks. "You are going to die and leave us here to fend for ourselves if you keep this up."

"You want us to leave the androids to it?" Gohan asked, his eyes wide with disbelief. "They'll destroy the planet."
“No, they won’t. They have to live here too.”

“What do you expect me to do?” Vegeta asked, dragging his head back up to stop himself falling asleep. “Play house while you spend your time building a machine that is probably impossible to create?”

“Nothing is impossible,” Bulma said firmly. She let out a sigh and sat on the sofa next to Vegeta, leaning slightly against him. “We need to start thinking strategically. You need to train, not rely on the fact that you get a power boost every time the androids beat the daylight out of you. Stop fighting the androids, and let’s find a new hideout that is big enough for me to create training equipment for you both, then I’ll start designing the machine. I need you to watch Trunks while I work, but you can train him too. If my plan doesn’t work, he’s going to need to know how to defend himself.”

Vegeta met Gohan’s gaze. The boy gave a slight shrug. “Training properly again could help. We still need to go out and hunt regularly for food, but we can do that without engaging them most of the time…”

“I don’t like it.” Vegeta crossed his arms with a scowl. “It’s giving up.”

“It’s not. It’s conceding the battle to win the war.” Bulma nudged him with her elbow. “You taught me that.”

“Whatever,” Vegeta muttered, letting his head loll back again into the softness of the couch and against her shoulder. He didn’t think a time machine was possible, but had to admit the idea of taking time out to train properly had some validity. “This training equipment had better be good.”
With two less Saiyans around, Capsule Corp was both quieter and lonelier. While the rest of the Z fighters concentrated on their training in various parts of the world, Bulma found herself left to her own devices, so threw herself into creating the new gravity room for Vegeta. Not that he'd thank her for it, of course, but at least building the machine made her feel as though she was contributing to the prevention of the foretold apocalyptic future, and whether he said it or not she knew he was the only one of the Z fighters to truly appreciate her talent.

The Saiyan Prince seemed to have settled into a routine similar to his time at Capsule Corp after Namek, rising early, going to bed late, but always at the same time, and training all day with only specific allotted times for meals that Bulma's mother was only too happy to cater for, making Vegeta as much food as she had been when there were three Saiyans in the house. And for the past couple of weeks, at the same time each day, just before his afternoon snack, Vegeta would make his was down to Bulma's lab and see how she was progressing on the room.

Bulma was tinkering with a new circuit board she'd created especially for the gravity room when Vegeta strode into her lab, an unusual thirty minutes earlier than usual, bare chested and glistening with sweat from his latest training session, wearing only his tight training shorts and a white towel draped around his broad shoulders, as if he'd deemed the visit important enough to schedule before his pre-snack shower.

Vegeta's mouth drew a hard slash across his mouth, his eyebrows furrowed together, and although it wasn't discernible to her naked eye, she could feel the air tremble around him as he shook with rage or frustration - which, she couldn't tell.

"I want it ready tomorrow," he demanded without preamble, coming to her side to peer at the structural diagrams pinned to the wall behind her desk.

Bulma stared at him for a moment, slack jawed as she took him in. A lone bead of sweat trickled between the curve of his broad shoulder blades and she fought an odd urge to reach out and touch it like she might rain on a window pane. Kami it was unfair that someone with such a dreadful personality was that good looking.

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coiled like a panther about to strike down its prey.

"Do you want to die?" Vegeta asked, his voice soft but dangerous as he placed a hand on her desk and leaned in close enough for his musk, which oddly reminded her more of damp earth and mown grass than human sweat, to invade her nostrils.

"You won't hurt me," Bulma replied with more confidence than she felt, turning back to tinker with the circuit board in front of her.

Vegeta's hand fell on her shoulder and she jumped involuntarily at the grip, dropping the small screwdriver in her hand. "If I don't train and ascend, there is a good chance this mudball is done for and it won't be me killing you," he hissed out, his words curling around her like smoke. "Or did you forget that in the future you are dead?"

Bulma inhaled sharply, an image from a dream she'd had recently about dying at the hands of faceless monsters coming to mind. "Of course I didn't forget. It's all I can think about! He never told me the details of how I died, and I'm not sure I want to know but I... I keep imagining it." She shuddered and Vegeta removed his hand, eyebrows raised in surprise at her admission.

"There is no need to fret," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "Finish the gravity chamber and I will ascend and beat the androids until they are nothing but scrap metal and cannot harm you."

Bulma grinned, and placed her elbow on the table and leaned on her hand as she batted her eyelashes at him. "Why Vegeta, that is the sweetest thing you have ever said to me."

Vegeta's golden skin brightened to a deep red. "What? But I... I didn't... Just finish the chamber," he stammered out before rushing to the door and escaping, leaving a chuckling Bulma behind.

Vegeta couldn't say that he enjoyed having a set order to his day, but after so many years of the military scheduling of his life, he now found it difficult to operate without it, to the point that changes to it set him on edge. Bulma teased relentlessly about his need to go to bed at the same time every night, and to wake up at the same time each morning. Not to mention the way he needed to brush his teeth before breakfast despite the minty taste it left, and how he had to finish his morning coffee before he started breakfast, or insisted on making the bed in a particular way before climbing into it at the end of the day.

More and more though, Vegeta found his routine slipping. Over the year since Bulma had embarked on her ridiculous notion of building a time machine (no matter how many times he argued time paradoxes with her), his methodical schedule had become a little more disrupted each day.

Standing in the kitchen at the beginning of his day, Vegeta stared into the empty jar that once contained coffee granules, and attempted to shove down the rising panic in his throat. How had he not noticed yesterday that they were nearly out? It was only instant, which was truly vile to drink, but it was still coffee. Vegeta clenched his fists and took a few long, deep breaths. He hadn't gone a morning or an evening without coffee since Bulma had introduced it to him. He refused to admit that he could be addicted to the substance itself like many humans were, but it the lack of coffee was yet another example of how the order he so carefully crafted in his life was falling apart.

Gohan stepped into the kitchen, yawning and scratching the back of his head in an annoyingly Kakarot-like motion. He took one look at Vegeta's face and paused, eyes darting back towards to exit in search of escape.
“There's no coffee,” Vegeta said, his tone laced with more threat than he'd intended.

"Uh…” Gohan took a step back, no doubt aware of the consequences of any disruption to Vegeta's life. "It wasn't me. I don't drink it."

Vegeta let out a growl and returned his glare to the jar, cursing the androids internally. How was he expected to continue doing nothing, knowing they were out there destroying Earth and forcing him to have to scavenge for his coffee? This was it. The last straw!

Vegeta's ki erupted around him and he stomped past Gohan with the intention of exiting their hideout and go above ground to attack those freaks.

"Wait!” Gohan cried out in a panic. "Bulma might have some in her lab."

Vegeta paused, lowering his ki slightly, then forced himself to turn back to look at Gohan instead of continuing on his way.

"I've seen her make herself a cup in there,” the demi-Saiyan said quickly.

Vegeta clicked his tongue in irritation, but dropped his ki completely. Giving Gohan a sharp nod, he stamped off towards the room Bulma had set up as her lab, leaving quickly to avoid revealing how embarrassed he was at losing his cool over something so small.

Unlike Capsule Corp, which meant traversing a maze of corridors to find a particular room, their latest makeshift home in the underground floor of a now crumbled office building was small enough to consist of only one hallway. He made his way down it, popping his head into Trunks' room to check on the still sleeping boy.

The four year old (four and three quarters the boy kept insisting) snored lightly, and Vegeta would have normally dragged him out of bed by now, but the kid had pushed himself hard the day before, so decided against it. Not only was Trunks training well, and performing his katas with an almost elegant execution, but he'd been absorbing the reading, mathematics and science lessons Gohan had been giving him with voracious enthusiasm. Vegeta had been pleased when Gohan had taken to teaching Trunks the school work he'd been forced to learn as a child since it kept both boys out of his hair, but it had gotten to the point recently where Gohan had admitted to Vegeta that Trunks was grasping scientific concepts at a frighteningly intelligent level. Gohan and had asked Vegeta if Bulma could help, but knowing Bulma's concentration was on other things, Vegeta had reluctantly adjusted his own schedule to help both boys learn more about physics and basic engineering - the only topics other than war that Vegeta excelled in. As frustrating as it was having his own time taken up with it, Vegeta couldn't help but feel proud that his son not only had his physical strength, but his mother's gift of intelligence too.

Deciding the boy could sleep in this once – they day's schedule was shot anyway - Vegeta slipped back out of Trunks' room, shutting the door behind him, then headed to the lab room.

Bulma looked up as he entered. She looked tired, even more so than usual, and he suspected the late nights and early mornings - the ones disturbing his own sleep - were catching up on her.

"You look like crap," he said, wandering in to rifle through the piles of junk on the desk against the back wall. "Take a day off."

Bulma snorted and shook her head. "That's rich coming from you, Mr Train-yourself-to-death."

"Take your own advice." Where was the damn coffee? He was going to murder someone, android or human, if he didn't get a cup in the next five minutes. "We've barely seen you all week. Have
breakfast with Trunks."

"I can't."

"What about dinner?" Vegeta suggested as casually as he could.

"Maybe," Bulma replied, to her credit looking a little guilty when he glanced up to frown at her. "I'm struggling with an equation and want to finish it. If I stop I'll get myself muddled."

"I could assist-" Vegeta started to say.

Bulma cut him off with a shake of her head. "This is way above your comprehension."

"I'm not an imbecile, Bulma." Vegeta bristled at the insinuation, his already high level of irritation fast turning to anger.

"I know." Bulma let out a growl, then sighed and began massaging her temples. "But this is above my level of comprehension too, and if I'm going to be locked in here until this is done I'd rather one of us was with our son."

Vegeta bit back a nasty retort, knowing it would only make things worse. Living in such close quarters for the last year had taught Vegeta to pick his battles with the woman, and he was far too tired and lacking in caffeine to win this one. He turned his attention back to the desk he'd been rifling through.

"What are you looking for?" Bulma asked.

"Coffee. Please tell me you have some or I'm going to revert to my old murderous ways."

"Here." Bulma chuckled and opened a cabinet under the desk she sat at.

Vegeta snatched the coffee tin out of his hands, fighting not to cradle the thing to his chest in joy. He shook it, disappointed to hear that there was only a few cups left. "Do you need anything? I'm venturing out to get more." He scowled at Bulma's glare. "Don't look at me like that, I won't do anything stupid and we need more food as well."

Bulma hesitated, then started writing things on a piece of paper. "I want to create a prototype that transports an object to the future but don't get yourself killed over the parts. I still have calculations to work on."

"Why the future? I thought the point was to go back in time, not forwards."

"If the multiverse theory is correct, there's only a fifty percent chance of the object arriving in our timeline. By travelling it forward, it won't create a new timeline and I can at least be sure that I'm on the right track."

Vegeta glanced at the list in his hand, surprised at the range of parts.

"Gohan can explain what they are," Bulma added, turning back to her work.

"I'll figure it out," he snapped, irritated at her assumption that he lacked the knowledge to know what everything was. He knew it was because he still didn't know the names of every Earth object, as opposed to a dig at his intelligence, but it didn't sting any less. Bulma didn't notice, her attention focused back on her work. Vegeta cleared his throat, boring holes into the back of her head until she finally turned around. "You'll be coming to dinner."
"Yes, yes." Bulma waved her hand in a fluttering gesture. "See you tonight."

Space travel was not the exciting adventure Trunks' thought it would be. So far, there had been no meteor fields to navigate through, no planets to stop at and explore, and worst of all, he wasn't even allowed to spar with his father. Punishment for meddling in the lives of his past parents was apparently repeating the same kata in gradually increasing gravity. It was challenging each time Papa raised the gravity level, to the point that every time the gravity went up he didn't think he could handle it, but each time his body adjusted and the kata soon became as boring as it had been on the lowest setting.

Trunks finished his kata and threw himself on the floor, letting the weight of a hundred times gravity press onto him as he let out a dramatic groan. "Please, Papa. Can't we do something else? This sucks."

Vegeta merely turned up the gravity to one hundred and ten and folded his arms. "Again."

Trunks rolled his eyes back into his head to play dead. "You're killing me."

"I told you I wouldn't go easy on you." Vegeta sighed at Trunks' mock choking sounds. "We can stop off at Fardarna in a few days and you can consider your punishment over and stretch your legs."

"Yes!" Trunks leapt up, surprised at how easy it was despite being ten levels higher than he'd ever trained in before. "Will there be food? What are the people like? Can we stay a while?"

"Slow down brat, and start your kata."

Trunks did as he was told, pushing against the burning in all his muscles, knowing he would be sore tomorrow, but confident that it would be worth it. His Papa knew more about training than everyone, and while he was sure he was keeping it dull as punishment, it was probably still the best was to get his strength up.

"Fardarna's gravity is fifteen times Earth's, so you will have no problem adjusting. They are a port planet, one used by the World Trade Organisation for refuelling."

"That's the company you used to work for?" Trunks asked, executing a turn then a sharp kick to an imaginary foe.

"Keep your knee bent. Yes, they are who I worked for, although 'work' and 'company' are loose terms." Vegeta began his own kata, his movements effortless in this level of gravity. "'Enslaved' and 'dictatorship' would be more accurate."

Trunks frowned at that. Even after knowing much of his father's past he struggled to imagine his strong-willed father as a slave to another being.

"They probably won't have the fuel we need, but it will break up the trip and we are in no rush."

"Will we need to go in disguise?" Trunks asked, his imagination whirling. "We can be like interstellar spies, sneaking onto the planet! But if they capture you, don't worry. I'll rescue you, Papa."

Vegeta snorted and shook his head. "A disguise won't be necessary. I came here recently in this time and destroyed the WTO base, effectively freeing the planet's inhabitants. I double checked the local news reports. They won't be hostile and the couple of ex-WTO soldiers remaining are ones
that I let live, knowing they'd stop anyone else from being able to take over the planet."

"Wow, Papa, I thought you said you didn't ever do anything nice?"

His father looked genuinely surprised at that. "Nice? I was simply ensuring I had safe ports to stop at when I left Earth. Before you came along it was my intention to leave Earth the moment I ascended."

Trunks snorted and shook his head as he finished his kata. "Whatever you say, Papa."

Vegeta sat at the dining table, wolfing down his large plate of sandwiches, preparing for another verbal sparring session with the woman as he planned to once more enter her lab and command her to finish the gravity room the moment he'd filled his stomach. She'd promised it would be ready tomorrow, and he knew arguing would do nothing but rile them both up, but for whatever reason his daily trip to her lab was really the only entertainment he had, so he wasn't going to let that prevent him from visiting.

To his surprise and irritation, Bulma entered the kitchen before he'd even finished eating, wearing a ridiculously impractical red dress and matching red heels that drew his eyes to her long, smooth legs automatically.

Vegeta dragged his gaze up to meet her face as she leaned against the counter, the wide grin on her face revealing that she knew exactly what he'd been looking at.

"Do you want to test out the bots?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow questioningly, but continued his steady demolishment of the sandwiches.

"I have a few prototypes that I need tested, and who better to test their strength and skills but you? Unless you're scared that my machines will kick your butt?" Bulma gave him a daring smirk that unfortunately also made him want to leap over the table and pin her down against the counter. Why did her audacity have to be so damn attractive?

Vegeta chomped back the last sandwich, then stood, scraping his chair back noisily.

Bulma straightened, the brilliant sparking in her eyes making it clear that she interpreted his action as an agreement. She began heading to the front door, motioning for him to follow her. "We'll need to go to the company labs since they are better set up for testing. They are on the west side of the compound-" She let out a shriek of surprise the moment they were outside as Vegeta scooped her up so her legs dangled in his arms and her hands automatically clung to his neck. He blasted into the air and had them touching down in the west part of Capsule Corp within seconds.

Bulma had curled into him in fright. Vegeta let himself enjoy the warm press of her body against his, and the feel of the soft skin of her legs against his arms before extracting her limbs from his person.

"You jerk!" Regaining her balance on the ground, she tugged on her short dress to make it marginally more respectable, then smoothed her hair frantically. "Give me a little warning next time."

Vegeta couldn't hide his smirk at her frantic attempts to tidy herself. "Stop fussing, woman, you look as you always do."

Bulma glanced at him in surprise before curling the left side of her mouth up. "Really…" She
sauntered closer to him, until mere inches separated them and he wondered if she was recalling their kiss as he was. "And how's that?"

Vegeta met her daring gaze and caught an errant lock of hair. He leaned in as he tucked it behind her ear, then let himself get close enough so he could be sure she'd feel the heat of his breath on her skin. "Revolting as always."

He laughed at her indignant scream and ducked out of the way of the hand that came flying towards him. When her other hand jolted forward the slap him, he caught her wrist and tugged her close, so her breasts, already straining against her tight dress, pressed against his chest. "You're playing with fire, little human," he warned, rubbing her wrist with his thumb while enjoying the flush in her cheeks rise. Gods she was too easy. "And as fun as this is, I don't have time to waste. Show me the bots."

He let her go then, allowing himself a satisfied smirk at hearing her sped up heartbeat and seeing her chest rise and fall faster than usual, fast enough for him to be sure that he had an effect on her, and not just because he looked like his future counterpart.

If only she didn't have an effect on him too.

Listening to the radio to get the android's location, Vegeta had specifically gone to a city far away from them to ensure he got everything they needed. When he arrived back from his excursion, both Gohan and Trunks ran to the door to greet him, pouring over the load of food and technical parts in his arms before he'd even managed to step a foot inside.

"Out of my way, brats," Vegeta growled, shoving his way past them to place his loot on the dining table. He glanced around for Bulma, but wasn't surprised not to see her. For once, he wasn't bothered. He didn't want her to see the excess of supplies he'd scavenged and yell at him for spending too long looking for things. Plus, he wanted what he'd planned to be a surprise.

"Carrots!" Gohan exclaimed, pulling out a bunch and dangling them by their green leaves. "How did you find fresh vegetables?"

Vegeta shrugged nonchalantly, unwilling to admit that it had taken a lot of hunting through overgrown farmers' fields to find anything worth eating.

"And is this cocoa? And flour?" Gohan grinned and looked at Trunks. "We can make a cake."

"Do you think Mama will like it?" Trunks asked, his eyes wide and eager.

"She will appreciate anything you give," Vegeta replied. "The present you have for her will be enough, but your mother does love her sweet food."

"Come on, let's get to work." Gohan grinned, looking more like a young boy than the awkward teenager he now was. He took Trunks to the kitchen and washed their hands, before looking at Vegeta, his face stricken with concern. "Uh... Vegeta... I don't suppose you have a recipe that can tell us how to make a cake?"

"No," Vegeta said, hiding a smirk at the boys' crestfallen expressions. "But I know how to make one without a recipe," he added, and the elation on their faces was almost enough to stop any regret over revealing his secret abilities as a baker.

A crackling transmission came in over the ship's comms system, demanding authentication. Vegeta
contemplated giving a false name, but decided against it, knowing only his name would get the right people there when he landed.

"Prince Vegeta requesting permission to land. Dock 224B preferred," he said in the local language.

There was a lengthy pause and Trunks chewed on his thumb. "What did you tell them? Will they let us land?"

Vegeta shushed his son, and waited for the response.

"State your reason and length of visit," the transmission finally replied.

"Fuel and supplies," Vegeta said while converting Earth time to Fardarna's longer day night cycles in his head. "And we will only require the dock for two days."

There was another pause, then another clearer, and obviously female voice came over the speaker. "Permission to land approved, Sir. I'll be there to greet you upon arrival."

Vegeta grinned at the familiar voice. It had been years for him, although for her it would have been mere months since he last arrived on the planet. "I look forward to it Captain Ara," he replied.

"Well?" Trunks asked impatiently the moment Vegeta cut the transmission. "Can we land."

"Yes." Vegeta frowned at his son. "Your appearance might be confusing for someone there though."

"Should we… should we pretend I'm not your son?" Trunks asked, although the twist of his mouth showed that he didn't like the idea.

"No. Ara has the uncanny ability to tell when I'm lying. She will figure it out."

"She?" Trunks broke into a cheeky grin. "Were you and her…?"

"That is none of your business, brat," Vegeta grumbled as he prepared the spaceship for landing. Unfortunately, like Ara, Trunks also had the skill of digging out the truth and gave Vegeta a knowing look. "Ugh, briefly," Vegeta admitted when his son wouldn't stop grinning at him. "But it was years ago now, so drop it."

"Maybe for you," Trunks pointed out. "But what about her?"

Vegeta gave his son a sideways look. "Drop it."

Bulma led Vegeta into the largest of the equipment testing rooms, both because of its size and the fact that this one had been fortified up to test weapons so he was less likely to blow the entire room up. The room was large, with white walls, roof and floor, and empty save for a large window of bulletproof glass on the far wall which looked through to the adjoining observation room.

Bulma turned to Vegeta to start explaining the tests, but paused when she saw the flash of abject horror on his face. His bronze skin had paled dramatically, and although none of his facial features had physically moved, it was the way he stiffened and the strange dull look in his eyes that gave it away.

"Hey…" Bulma touched his forearm, making his muscle twitch under her palm. "Are you okay."

"I'm fine," Vegeta snapped, stepping back and breaking contact with her. "Get on with it."
Bulma sighed, but began explaining the five bots she had for him to test. "They all use ki, and I've tested the physics of them working in simulated gravity levels, but now I want to test their tactics and durability. They learn as they go, so their tactics and overall strategy should get better each time you fight them, but I want to see how they stand up now."

Vegeta dropped his crossed arms, but his eyes kept flickering all over the room as if looking for an unknown foe. "Is this room a simulator too? What gravity will we start in?"

"Standard gravity. It's the best way to test if their tactics are up to your standard." She couldn't help but smirk with her next words. "I know you get sloppier the higher the gravity."

Vegeta's eyes flashed, and he immediately went from looking concerned to pure anger. "You truly think one of your mediocre inventions could injure me in Earth's pathetic gravity?" He sneaked at her with a low growl. "You may be considered a genius on this planet, but I've faced enemies stronger than me countless times and come out on top. A robot isn't going to cut it."

Bulma let out a huff of air and placed her hands on her hips. "Excuse me, Prince of all two Saiyans, but I am a genius, and I can guarantee that at least one of these bots will kick your arrogant ass."

Vegeta snorted and rolled his eyes. "We'll see."

Bulma went over to the window and tapped on the glass. "I'll be through here. The bots will use ki blasts, but if you could refrain from using them, it will prevent this room from blowing up."

"How is that a proper fight?"

"What are you scared my pathetic bots will be able to hurt you if you use ki?" Bulma teased.

Vegeta scowled back at her. "Of course not. Ki or no ki, your bots won't touch me."

"Alright then." Bulma gave him a wide grin, barely able to contain her excitement. "Let's begin."

Vegeta bounced on his toes, waiting for the first bot to enter. He was confident that he could defeat anything that she threw at him, but the style of the room set him on edge, reminding him of the death chamber back on Frieza's ship where he'd been tortured half to death more times than he could count. He kept imagining Frieza through the other side of the glass, a cruel smile painted onto his face as he watched Zarbon 'tame his pet'.

Trying to get expel his nervous energy, he stretched a few times, then yelled at the woman behind the glass. "I don't have all day. Hurry it up, would you?"

"Yeah, yeah." Her voice came through clearly via a speaker in the bottom right of the window. "Bot One, enter."

Part of the wall slid up, and a spherical robot hovered into the room, a red light in its centre blinking. "Bot One, engage," Bulma said.

The bot shot a blast at Vegeta, who despite being surprised at the speed of the attack, dodged easily. He jumped to the side, then slid underneath the bot and threw a punch straight up, crumpling the metal. The light on the bot flickered, and the metal ball fell to the floor with a loud clang.

Vegeta stood back up and glared at Bulma. "Is that it?"
Bulma let out a humming noise then pressed a few buttons. "Bot Two, enter."

An identical looking robot entered and Vegeta clicked his tongue in irritation. This was a waste of time.

"Bot Two, engage."

The robot zipped around the room, firing a blast at Vegeta's left side to force him to move to the right. But the moment he stepped sideways, the bot was already there, firing another shot. Startled, Vegeta barely managed to avoid the second blast, and fought back with a series of punches and kicks. The attack style of the bot seemed familiar, and it wasn't until he'd managed to put it down into a smoking heap of metal that he realised why.

"You've been observing me," he accused Bulma.

She just shrugged. "Not personally. But I had a program analyse your training in the gravity room and wrote another program to counter attack."

Vegeta stared at her, dumbfounded but unwilling to admit he was impressed.

"Bot Three, enter. Bot Three, engage," she said before he had time to react.

The next bot seemed to have a wider array of moves, but it wasn't until number four came out that he realised what she'd meant about them learning. Bot Four took lessons from the others' failures and took a good ten minutes for Vegeta to take down. By the time number five came out, Vegeta was had to admit (although not aloud) that she'd created some worthwhile training equipment.

Flipping to avoid a blast, Vegeta positioned himself just under the bot where the ki gun couldn't aim, ready to kick up at the hunk of metal, but the bot twisted and shot down at him, creating a loud bang as the ki hit his side. Furious that the bot had got a hit in, Vegeta fires a retaliatory ki blast, hitting the bot's next ki blast head on.

The two ki beams exploded around him, making the room flash a brilliant white, before his vision faded into darkness.

"Vegeta!" Bulma gasped at the explosion, and pressed herself against the glass to search for him amongst the dust. She stared at his unmoving form as the cloud of broken tiles and ki energy cleared. He faced away from her, but to her relief started to sit up, his shoulders shaking from pain. She ran to the door separating them, and slammed her hand on the panel to open it.

Bulma rushed in, skidding to a stop on her knees next to him before grabbing his shoulder to make him face her so she could to check his injuries. "Vegeta, are you-"

It was then than she realised his trembling wasn't from pain. He was laughing. The asshole was laughing! It wasn't his usual chuckle, laced with a tinge of madness, like when he knew he'd succeeded in driving her crazy, but a genuine, honest-to-Kami laugh, that bubbled with joy.

Bulma couldn't help but grin back at him at the infectious sound. She gave him a once over, and once satisfied that he only had a burn on his side, and that it wasn't anything too serious, she stood up, embarrassed at how concerned she'd been.

Vegeta clambered to his feet, not smiling like a human would, but his eyes sparkled with a fire Bulma hadn't seen before.
"That one," he said simply. "Make more of that one."

Bulma knew that was likely the extent of his praise she was going to get, but as Vegeta strode out of the room without so much as glancing back, she couldn't help but smile.

Making the cake wasn't the problem. He'd baked enough treats with Mrs Briefs to know the recipe off by heart. No, the cake wasn't the issue, even if Trunks did get more ingredients on himself than in the mixing bowl. The real issue was getting Bulma to come out of her lab to even see the cake.

After cooking dinner and instructing the boys to set the table, Vegeta made his way to Bulma's lab. "Dinner is ready," he said as he entered.

"I'll have mine later," Bulma mumbled distractedly.

"The boys are waiting for you." Vegeta crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway, throwing her a glare that would have had grown men shaking in their boots not too many years ago. The look didn't do any good now, as Bulma didn't so much as glance up from the piece of paper she was scribbling on.

"Eat without me."

"This isn't up for negotiation." Vegeta pushed off the wall then shut the door to block as much noise from the argument he knew was coming. He crossed the room towards Bulma, then spun her chair around, forcing her to face him. "The boys want to see you. Get your lazy ass off that chair and get into the dining room or I will pick you up and drag you there myself."

Bulma's cheeks flushed pink and she stood up, jabbing Vegeta's chest. "How dare you! I've been working myself to death and you call me lazy? I'm in the middle of a breakthrough here."

"No, you're in the middle of an obsession." He lightly pressed his hand against her mouth to stop the stream of accusations pouring from her mouth. "I'm well aware that it hypocritical coming from me. Being obsessive is a problem for both of us. But this must stop. Get your head out of the past, Bulma. You're so focussed on it that you've forgotten that the present even exists."

Bulma bit down on his hand and he yanked it back, even though it only felt like a small pinch.

"Nothing is more important than this!" Her chest rose and fell with each furious intake of breath, and her blue eyes bore into him. "I can't sit around and let everyone I love stay dead. I have to do something."

"We are still alive!" The anger bubbling up inside Vegeta's chest finally burst, and as his voice rose, so did his ki, swirling around him and sending papers flying. "We aren't all dead, but you act like the only thing that matters is warning the past. When was the last time you spent more than fifteen minutes with Trunks? When was the last time you had a meal with anyone that didn't involve you working on equations at the table?"

"I..." Bulma opened and closed her mouth, the pink fading from her cheeks as she dropped her gaze to the ground. "I know I've been distant. I just..."

"We both know that even if you create a time machine, it is more than likely that it won't rewrite history for us. It will merely create an alternative universe. All this work you are doing won't reset things." Vegeta reached out and took her hand. "You'll end up saving another timeline, and having a son in this time who doesn't know you." When she stiffened before him, he tugged on her hand, pulling her closer. "Come to dinner."
Bulma finally nodded her assent, and Vegeta sighed in relief, feeling only mildly guilty at deliberately manipulating her, before guiding her out the door, down the hall, then practically shoving her through the door into the small kitchen dining area to where he knew Trunks waited eagerly for his mother.

"Happy birthday!" Trunks and Gohan called out. Trunks grinned ear to ear while Gohan’s smile was forced, probably having overheard the effort it took to get Bulma here at all.

Bulma placed her hand on her chest and froze, her eyes wide as she took in the room. All the parts she had requested sat on the side table, and the dining table was laden with the biggest meal they’d had since the androids arrived. A large cake, covered in chocolate frosting, sat in the centre of the table.

"It's not my…” Bulma blinked in confusion until she glanced at the date on her watch and began to tear up. "I didn't know what date it was," she said with a sniff as she opened her arms to Trunks for a hug. "This is lovely."

"I made the cake, Mama," Trunks said, wriggling in her arms. "Gohan and Papa helped."

Bulma laughed and tousled Trunks' hair, sending a puff of white flour into the air around him. "It looks incredible." She turned to Vegeta, her blue eyes bright. "Did you…?"

Vegeta shrugged. "It was the boys' idea."

Gohan stepped forward as Trunks escaped and gave Bulma a big as well. "Don't listen to him," Gohan said in a mock whisper. "He's been fussing over this surprise for days."

"Shut your mouth or you can sleep outside," Vegeta snarled, taking a seat at the dinner table. "Sit your ass down and eat, woman. I didn't cook this food to let it go cold."

Bulma rolled her eyes, but sat down at the table with everyone else.

"Oh!" Trunks leapt up from the table, and ran to the sideboard to fetch a package wrapped in newspaper. He came back and pressed it into Bulma's hands, glancing nervously at Vegeta, who nodded. "I made you this, Mama."

Bulma slowly unwrapped it, making a show of shaking it and trying to guess what was inside. When she took the paper off, her mouth dropped open and she turned it over in her hands, genuine surprise on her face. "You made this?"

Trunks nodded, glancing at the floor shyly.

"By himself," Vegeta added for his son.

Trunks had made her a small remote-control tool holder that he'd cobbled together from a broken remote control car, rewiring and reconstructing it completely to hold the weight of tools. Even for a Saiyan the boy's genius was incredible. His training had made him more dexterous than a child nearing five, but Vegeta knew he couldn't credit is Saiyan genes for the boy's mechanical abilities.

"This is incredible. " Bulma tried it out, laughing as it moved across the floor. Then she turned to stare at Trunks, wide eyed. "I knew you were playing around with my gear, but I didn't realise…” She brushed away a falling tear quickly before Trunks could notice. "Thank you," she said to Trunks, pulling him back into her arms for a hug, but her eyes were locked on Vegeta, not her son as she mouthed the words again.
With the gravity room installed and a continuous supply of ever-improving weaponised robots at his disposal, Vegeta’s training should have had him on the brink of achieving Super Saiyan. And he was certain nearly there, on the cusp of greatness, so close he felt as though he could reach out and grasp it if he stretched a little further… but every time he tried, the sensation went from solid and real to slipping through his fingers.

The training itself wasn’t the problem - he could no longer blame it on inferior equipment. No, he sensed it was a mental block. A barrier within him that he couldn’t break down. Perhaps it was because he couldn’t concentrate long enough on his goal without a certain blue haired witch coming to mind, Vegeta contemplated moodily as he stabbed the leftover noodles on the plate in front of him.

Thoughts of her entered his mind like tendrils of smoke, curling and weaving their way in without him noticing until it was too late and she was all he could picture. Bulma, throwing him a smile as if he had any right to catch it. Bulma, reaching out and touching him in a manner so casual to her, but with a lightness that set his skin on fire. It did not help that she had taken to wearing shorter dresses and skimpier tops and he while he knew it was probably the summer heat causing her clothing changes, a part of him couldn’t help but suspect she was trying to get a reaction out of him.

Vegeta set down his chopsticks and ran a calloused hand over his face. Gods, if that was her intention it was certainly working. Giving up on his lunch, Vegeta headed back to the gravity room, but as he crossed the lawn to the gravity room, thoughts of her collided with the real thing as he noticed Bulma chattering to her mother as she weeded the garden, never once glancing in Vegeta’s direction, but aware of him nonetheless. He could see it in the stiffening of her shoulders and the way she stood to accentuate her curves. Yes, he wasn’t imagining it. She wanted him, or at least a version of him, and despite how ludicrous it seemed that someone as innocent as her could be attracted to someone who radiated evil from their pores like him, Bulma certainly wasn’t being subtle about it.

He knew he should stay away, knew that he would never ascend in his current state of mind. But thinking of her was addictive, like the harshest drug, and he felt as though he were in a daze half the time, holding out for the ten minutes he allocated himself to stop merely imagining her and actually see her during the day.
Vegeta knew he should not allow himself to sleep with her. The consequences were far too grave. He did not want to be tied down to this backwater planet. He had a legend to fulfil and the universe to conquer. Playing happy families was not on his agenda. But there was something so alluring about the way she looked at him through her lashes when they argued. He wanted her too, he could admit that now. But even if he didn’t mind being tied to Earth forever, he did not want to get himself tied up with someone who only had feelings for him because she liked another universe’s version of him. He had far too much pride for that.

Gritting his teeth, Vegeta swept past them both, ignoring the blonde woman’s calls of greeting, and stomped into the gravity room. Frustrated in every way, he turned the setting up high enough for his knees to buckle under the weight of it.

He didn’t visit her in the afternoon. She noticed at 3:35, exactly five minutes after his usual arrival. While it was unusual, she didn’t think much of it. Vegeta might have been a creature of habit, but she knew that if anything could cause him to break his routine it was his obsessive training.

Bulma shrugged to herself and continued working. She’d decided to build another spaceship since the future Vegeta and Trunks would be taking her only other one with them when they returned to the future. He hadn’t told her what he needed it for, but she had a good suspicion since the request was then followed by him taking a quick trip to Kami’s tower, and she wanted to make sure that they had one in this time as well in case the androids proved to be too much of a challenge for the Z fighters.

It wasn’t until much later that night that Bulma realised the gravity room was still on. Had Vegeta taken a break at all? Pulling out her phone, she ran a quick diagnostic test on the room. Ignoring her strict instructions to let the room cool for fifteen minutes every six hours, he’d locked himself in there with the gravity at its highest setting for eleven hours straight. The cooling system was struggling and if he didn’t stop the machine would probably blow him to pieces.

Shaking with anger and frustration, Bulma rushed outside, stomped across the grass and ripped off a panel on the side before yanking down the emergency lever that shut the machine down.

A furious yell came from inside, but Bulma stormed up the steps and pulled open the door, meeting the snarling Saiyan eye to eye and he met her at the doorway.

“Turn it back on,” he growled between his teeth.

“Six hours. The machine needs to reboot every six hours.” Bulma stepped forward and jabbed his chest. “What the hell do you think you are doing? You’ll blow yourself up, you moron!” She pushed past him and made her way to the console to turn on the cooling system.

Vegeta grabbed her shoulder and spun her around so her back hit the console. His dark eyes flashed dangerously and he placed one hand either side on her, trapping her between his arms. His muscly, glistening arms that she now couldn’t stop staring at.

“Bulma…” As he leaned in close and lowered his voice to a whisper, her name on his hot breath tickling her ear, Bulma closed her eyes, not from fear of him, but from fear of what she might do to him as the memory of the one kiss they’d shared came flooding back. “Turn this machine on right now or this will be the last thing you ever do.”

“Oh, please.” Bulma’s eyes shot open and she placed her hand on his bare chest and shoved him
back. Despite not having the strength to budge him, he stood up straight, dropping his arms and freeing her. “You won’t hurt me,” she continued, proud of how steady her voice was despite her elevated heart rate. “We had an agreement. I’ll keep maintaining this machine if you use it as instructed. And running it to the ground and killing yourself is not as instructed!”

“What the hell do you care what I do?” Vegeta hissed, his fists clenching tightly and his anger obvious, but his expression revealing just how genuinely puzzled he was by her concern.

“I don’t want to see you die!” Bulma admitted, clenching her own fists until her nails dig into her palms. “And even if I didn’t give a shit about you killing yourself, the explosion could destroy half of Capsule Corp and kill innocent people. Including me!”

He paled slightly at that, his anger twisting into something else… something she hadn’t seen on him before. Guilt maybe? Although the idea of the mighty Saiyan Prince feeling anything of the sort was absurd.

“Hey,” she said, lowering her voice to a gentler tone as she reached out and touched his arm. He stiffened under her touch, his gaze falling to her hand, but he didn’t pull away so she kept it there. “I’m not trying to disrupt your training. I know how important this is. We need you to help defeat the androids. But if I have to configure an emergency shut down, I will. It’s for your own safety, as well as mine.”

Vegeta clicked his tongue against his teeth, then opened his mouth as if her were going to argue. Instead he took in a deep breath, before dragging his gaze up to look at her. “That won’t be necessary,” he said through clenched teeth.

Bulma let go of his arm slowly. “Every six hours, okay?”

He pursed his lips tightly, but nodded.

“What had you deciding a long training session was necessary anyway?” She asked, unable to prevent herself from voicing her curiosity. As he stared unblinkingly back at her, she gave him a playful wink. “I missed you today.”

He flushed at that before schooling his features into his usual stony expression. “I needed to focus,” he said finally. “Earth has too many… distractions.”

And as he looked her up and down at the last word, narrowing his eyes into a heated look that made her insides melt, it was Bulma’s turn to blush.

She opened her mouth to reply, but he pulled his arm away then slipped noiselessly out of the room. Bulma leaned back onto the console with a sigh, fanning her face. “Damn,” she whispered to herself.

True to his word, Vegeta turned off the gravity machine every six hours, but also stopped going to visit the woman in her lab unless something broke. Instead he created a new routine that involved him training for twice as many hours, and while it made Bulma nag him even more than before, it was the only thing he could come up with to stop thinking about her.

Only, weeks later, he still couldn’t stop. Even in the middle of a training session, where he’d pushed himself to the brink, where death was a true possibility if he got one thing wrong, she cropped up in his mind’s eye.

Vegeta dodged a ki blast from a bot, telling himself to concentrate, but finding it impossible.
Maybe he should just sleep with her to try and rid himself of what was fast becoming as much an obsession as becoming a Super Saiyan. He knew humans had forms of contraception, and there were ways he could lower the risk getting her with child.

_Gods_, it would be so easy to just give in and sink into her, let her take away all his frustration and anguish…

Realising that if he didn’t focus the bots would injure him at this level of gravity, Vegeta forced himself to clear his mind of thoughts of her. He dropkicked one of the three bots he was currently fighting, sending it careening to the other side of the room. But the moment he was unbalanced, another bot shot under him and launched itself upward, ramming into his other leg and sending him stumbling back into the third bot’s line of fire.

The ki blast scraped the top of his shoulder in a mere flesh wound, but it also sent his hand automatically to the burn, tipping his balance once more in this extreme gravity. The bots were quick learners, taking his own skills and combining them with something Vegeta had never excelled at - teamwork. That had to be Bulma’s doing, although how she’d got the knowledge to program them with those moves, he didn’t know.

He fought with the bots for a solid half hour without major incident, but in the end, a quick glance at the console was all it took. Vegeta realised it was three thirty in the afternoon, and for a split second contemplated going to see the woman like he used to. The bots took full advantage, and knocked him off his feet and pinned him against the wall on the opposite side of the console.

As Vegeta struggled to free himself from the long metal arms entangling him, one of the bots hovered near the console, a silver limb paused above the gravity controls. Bulma had upgraded it from five hundred to eight hundred two days before, but Vegeta had yet to increase it past its current level of five hundred and fifty.

The eerie red light on the bot blinked once, then pushed down on the increase gravity button.

Vegeta couldn’t even cry out as the air from his lungs was pushed from his body. He let his ki explode around him, freeing himself from one of the bots, but the other lifted him up and, using the higher gravity to increase the impact, flung him head first into the reinforced steel door.

Vegeta slumped to the ground, heaving for breath and choking on the blood pouring from the deep gash in his head, down his face and into his mouth. Rolling over, Vegeta spat out red liquid on the floor, then tried to get up. He peered through sticky eyelashes at the bots, and was surprised to note that they had all shut down. He recalled Bulma telling him that they would automatically turn off if his vitals got to low. Realising that had to mean he wasn’t in great shape, Vegeta crawled towards the console, dragging himself across the floor to reach up for the emergency shut down button.

Fumbling for the button, he finally found the strength to push it and gasped for air as the gravity turned off. He lay on the floor for a while, watching the roof spin above him. When it slowed and he finally managed to stand, using the walls for support, he brought his hand to his head, swearing to himself at the amount of blood. It would require stitches and therefore a visit to the one person he was currently avoiding.

Grumbling to himself, Vegeta staggered outside, barely making it to the house before collapsing against the wall. “Move,” he instructed himself firmly, using the corridor walls to keep him upright, smearing handprints on the paint as he went.

“What have you broken?” Bulma asked before he’d even made it through the doorway, not even
bothering to turn around to look at him.

Vegeta opened his mouth to reply, but couldn’t get out much more than a grunt.

She spun around in her office chair and frowned at him, her eyes narrowed in annoyance before widening into shock.

“Myself,” Vegeta finally gasped out, grabbing the doorframe for support as a wave of nausea washed over him. The blood seeping from the wound on his head blurred his vision so he shut his eyes, but he could still hear it dripping onto the floor, splashing onto the lab’s tiles like light rain.

“Kami,” Bulma gasped out, and then her soft hands were on his face, inspecting the damage, then guiding him to a chair to sit on. She placed something over his wound and moved his hand to hold it there. “What did you do to yourself?”

“It’s worse than it looks,” Vegeta said, frowning when his words came out slurred. “Head wounds always are.”

“Unless you’re concussed,” Bulma retorted. “Open your eyes.”

Vegeta did as told, and had a bright light shone in his eyes for the effort. He grunted and lifted his hand to block it, but she swatted it away. A vague humming noise entered his eardrums, making the sounds around him fade in and out as if he were underwater. He stared blankly at Bulma, seeing her mouth move but unable to make out exactly what she was saying.

She was pissed. Her lips had tightened and her eyes flashed every time he met her gaze. Gods, she was beautiful when she was angry. He reached out with his free hand to touch a loose blue curl, but she was further away than he thought and his hand swiped nothing but air.

“Vegeta!” She slapped him none-to-gently on his cheek and although it didn’t sting, he started. She started talking again and he tried his best to focus on her words. “Can you remember what happened?” she asked, taking his wrist and pressing two fingers against his skin.

“Yes.” Vegeta growled and tugged his arm away. “Stop prodding me like a… like a lab animal.”

Bulma let out an aggravated sigh. “What happened?”

Vegeta found himself slumping in his chair as the dizziness spinning the room around him made his head loll sideways. “You’re always there,” he muttered, knowing he should keep his mouth shut, but unable to look away from her blue eyes. “You’re distracting me. Why? Why can’t you get out… out of my head?”

She looked surprised at that, but it turned to concern as she crouched in front of him and patted his face. “Stay with me, okay? Try not to go to sleep.”

“Okay,” he agreed, but he slipped forward even more and rested his bleeding head on her shoulder, enjoying the warmth of being so close to her even as he let darkness take over.

“Argh!” Bulma threw a circuit board across the room, making Vegeta and the two boys jump from their places on the worn lounge suite they were all sprawled across.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” Trunks asked, leaping up with far more energy than should have been possible for a child nearing six who had just been put through his paces in a training session with Gohan. He crossed the room to the dining table that Bulma sat at and sank into the chair next to
“Don’t worry about it,” Bulma said wearily, ruffling his hair with a smile. “Just another broken resistor.”

“There’s some more that Papa got on his last mission in the lab. Want me to get you another?”

“Thanks, sweetheart,” she replied, and Trunks bounded off. When she laid her head on her arm on the table, both Gohan and Vegeta sat up and looked at her.

“Just a broken resistor?” Vegeta asked.

Bulma groaned and waved her hand feebly in the air before pushing herself upwards and turning to face them. “This is the fourth prototype for the past time travelling machine and I’m certain it’s going to fail as well.”

“It took you seven prototypes to build a time machine that could move an object to the future,” Gohan pointed out.

“The brat’s right.” Vegeta ignored the glare Gohan gave him at still being called a brat and focussed on the miserable expression on his wife’s face. “You will figure it out eventually.”

“You don’t even think time travel is possible,” Bulma said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“I never said that. I said it was more probable that it won’t impact this time in any way.” Vegeta frowned at her, remembering the many arguments they’d had on the matter. “Besides, when you stole my sandwich and transported it to five hours in the future and had it appear just as fresh as it was when I made it, I had to believe you.”

“Travelling to the past is a whole other set of physics.” Bulma sighed again, then stood up to retrieve her circuit board.

“You will do it,” Vegeta insisted.

“Maybe.” Bulma placed the circuit board in the table then walked over to the sofa Vegeta sat on. She plonked herself into the empty cushion beside him then let herself fall against his arms.

Vegeta stretched out and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, resting his chin against her head.

When Trunks bounded back into the room, resistor in hand, Gohan raised his eyebrows at the couple in a knowing look, then jumped up and started talking to Trunks. “Hey, buddy, your Papa told me you’d fixed that toy drone. Can you show me how it works?”

When Trunks nodded eagerly, Gohan took the resistor from him, placed it on the dining table then shuffled the boy out of the room, glancing back at Vegeta briefly with a smirk, mouthing ‘you’re welcome’.

“Subtle,” Bulma said with a chuckle. “He’s a good kid.”

“Eh.” Vegeta shrugged his shoulders, jostling Bulma against him. “He’s not completely useless I suppose.”

“Come with me.” Bulma rose out of the sofa and tugged on Vegeta’s hand. “I want to show you something.”

Disappointed that the likelihood was that she wasn’t trying to drag him to bed with her, Vegeta
stood up and followed her to her lab.

“Have a look at these,” she said, picking up a large piece of paper with schematics on it and handing it to him.

“These are the plans.” He glanced at the paper, scanning the notes in the margins which were written in surprisingly legible handwriting for Bulma.

“There are backups on my phone. I’ve made notations on everything so that someone can continue my work if need be. It’s almost at that point. If I don’t finish I want you to ensure this project doesn’t die.”

“Why wouldn’t you finish?” Vegeta asked, but he knew the answer before the last word had left his lips.

Bulma arched an eyebrow and pressed her lips together. “You know why.”

“You think I would let anything happen to you?” He dropped the schematics back on the desk, a chill running through him.

“We’ve been lucky.” Bulma ran her hands through her hair and sat down on the office chair, looking up at him pleadingly. “You know they could find us, and there would be a big chance that not all of us would make it.”

Vegeta clenched his jaw until his teeth hurt. “I will die before letting them touch you again.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Bulma chewed on her bottom lip. “Please promise me, Vegeta. If anything happens to me, your first priority is Trunks. Your second is building that time machine and warning the past.”

“I will promise nothing of the sort.”

“Yes, you will.” Bulma reached out and took his hand then tugged him forward so he stood in between her legs. “If necessary you will finish the machine and travel to the past and warn them. And you will do everything in your power to prevent this from happening in the first place.”

Vegeta shook his head slowly. “I appreciate your faith in my brainpower but finishing it is beyond me and you know it.”

“When I complete the past prototype it won’t be.”

“Regardless,” Vegeta snapped, wrenching his hand out of her grip. “I will never agree to such a thing.”

“How not?”

“Because you are remaining in this dimension until you are old and wrinkly.” He smirked suddenly, picturing her with grey hair. “And then I’ll swap you out for a younger woman.”

Bulma huffed and kicked out at his leg with her foot. “As if you’d ever find anyone as beautiful as me. You’re punching above your weight with all this.” She motioned to herself with her hands and threw him a wink.

Vegeta stepped forward again and caught her wrists in his hands, bending forward to kiss her jawline, just below her ear. “Of course you are beautiful. There’s only a few thousand woman left
Bulma let out a cry of anger, which he smothered with a kiss, laughing against her lips, relieved that for the time being he’d distracted her away from the thoughts haunting her. Concerns of her death were pointless. He wouldn’t let that happen.

Bulma sat in a comfy arm chair, holding a magazine but not actually reading it. She was too busy watching the sleeping prince who lay in the bed next to her, his chest gently rising and falling to the beat of the beeping machine he was attached to.

He looked so peaceful, his face unmarred by his usual furrowed brow, the only sign of his condition being the gash of his forehead and the fifteen stitches keeping it together. He was fortunate it hadn’t been higher or she would have needed to shave his hair. She didn’t think he’d ever forgive her if she’d had to do that.

His hand twitched in his sleep, and Bulma experimentally placed her palm over his gazed knuckles, letting his warmth seep into her. As she ran her fingers lightly over his hand, his fingers splayed out, stretching languorously like a cat. She grinned, keeping an eye on his face to check if he was awake. No, definitely asleep, even when his hand turned over and caught her fingers between his.

Bulma shuffled her chair closer so her could lean her upper body on the bed next to him. She’d been up for hours watching him, checking his vitals and waking him up every few hours to ensure he hadn’t fallen into a coma. Her parents had suggested they get a nurse, but Bulma didn’t want him to wake up with a stranger next to him.

She had managed to look at the footage from the gravity room in the moments before the accident to find out what had happened. The bots had been learning much faster than she’d anticipated, and while she couldn’t help being impressed by the cleverness of their move to turn up the gravity, she was horrified as well. Her bots had nearly killed Vegeta, and the look of pure fear on his face when he saw the bot turn up the gravity, followed by his expression of pain as the heavy weight proceeded to crush his bones, breaking five ribs and fracturing his left arm – and that was before the bots flung him against the wall causing his head injury - was enough to make her consider destroying the damn machine. If he died because of her…

“I won’t let that happen,” Bulma murmured to herself as she rested her head next to Vegeta’s arm and closed her eyes, letting her own sleep embrace her.

Vegeta sat cross legged under an awning on the roof of their hideout, staring up at the stars. He rarely risked venturing outside without a specific purpose but spending long periods of time indoors reminded him too much of the windowless chambers of Frieza’s ship. He was no longer a slave, but he still needed to bend to another, more powerful being’s will and the lack of stars only served to remind him of that, and of his failure to defeat his enemies. Again.

“Hey.” Bulma came up behind him, kneeling and wrapping her arms around his neck. “What are you brooding about?”

“I’m not brooding.” He placed his hand on her arm then twisted and gave her a quick tug, pulling her into his lap and making her squeak. “I’m thinking. And you shouldn’t be out here.”

Bulma grinned and bopped him on the nose. “Neither should you.”

Vegeta grunted in reply, and pressed his forehead to hers, closing his eyes.
They remained silent for a moment, both listening to the eerily silent city around them, the only sounds that of the wind trailing its way through deteriorating buildings.

Bulma let out a sigh and he knew she wanted to say something, but it took her at least five minutes to spit it out.

“You’re thinking about what I said the other day,” she said finally.

Vegeta’s cracked open his eyes into a glare. “I was enjoying the peace and quiet.”

“You never promised me, you know.” She sank closer against him, burying her head in his shoulder.

Vegeta tilted her chin with a finger, forcing her to look at him. “I cannot.” At her look of disappointment, he sighed and continued. “If I lose you... Bulma you know I am not... I am not a good man. I am selfish. Yes, I will protect Trunks, and even Kakarot’s spawn, but my priority would be figuring out a way to get you back.”

Bulma frowned, her nose wrinkling at the bridge. “If we can’t wish anyone else back how would you hope to bring me back?”

“I hear this genius Earthling is building a time machine,” he said, dragging his fingers around to the back of her neck and trailing them across her shoulder. “And the past has many things the present does not.”

“I don’t think the dragon balls in Earth’s past would allow a wish that impacts this time.”

“I don’t need the past’s dragon balls,” Vegeta replied. “But there is no need to worry about it. I will not let anything happen to you.” He kissed her softly, wrapping his arm around her waist to pull her harder against him.

She hummed under her breath and responded to his kiss by lazily looping her hand through his hair and scraping his scalp with her fingers. “The boys are both asleep,” she mumbled against his lips. “We’re alone up here.”

“It’s dangerous,” Vegeta replied, but he began sliding up her t-shirt, carefully avoiding ripping it since finding wearable clothes was difficult these days.

“We’ll go inside if we hear the sound of screaming and death in the distance,” Bulma said, tackling his buttons and pushing his shirt off his arms before running her hands down his biceps.

Vegeta knew he should probably feel guilt for failing to let this once naïve woman get so desensitised to violence, but a part of him - a big part - appreciated that Bulma understood what his life had been like in a way she never could have had the androids been defeated when they first arrived. With her shirt free, he slid his hand into her hair and pulled her closer, kissing her lips slowly, savouring her taste.

“I love you,” she murmured with a breathy sigh.

Vegeta smirked against her lips. “I know.”

Pulling back, he arranged their shirts behind her and laid her back on them to avoid her getting cold from the concrete below them. The rest of the clothes soon disappeared and he hovered over her taking in the sight below him.
She grinned up at him and winked. “Overwhelmed by my gorgeousness?”

He bared his teeth at her. “More like your hideousness.”

“Liar,” Bulma gasped out as he dove his head to her chest, mouthing his way lower... and lower.

“Yes,” Vegeta admitted, briefly coming up for air to glance at her. Gods she was the most beautiful creature in the universe, her cheeks flushed with lust, ample chest rising and falling. “You think I would ever settle for anything but the best?”

Bulma grinned at that. “Likewise, my prince.” She drew a hand through his hair and sighed as he dove back down, hitting all the right spots with his tongue.

Her soft gasps turned to louder moans, and when she started making too much noise to be considered safe, Vegeta drew himself back up and covered her mouth with his hand, positioning himself at her entrance. “Hush, or I’ll stop,” he warned.

She bit his hand gently so he removed it, but when he entered her slowly, she let out a loud moan that he muffled by pressing his mouth to hers and kissing her. They rocked together languorously, building up speed slowly, merely enjoying the feeling of being connected.

Soon Bulma was panting and she let out a groan of frustration. “Harder,” she commanded, digging her nails into his shoulders.

Vegeta responded accordingly, adjusting their pace until her back arched beneath him and her eyes rolled back as bliss overtook her and she clenched around him in shuddering waves. He let himself fall soon after, as the only real pleasure he ever experienced enveloped him and he let out a groan.

Her hand found his mouth with a giggle and as the gaze from his climax faded, she smiled up at him. “Who’s the loud one now?”

“Shut up,” he muttered, letting himself fall beside her and curl into her body, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her close. He let his eyes close as he rested against her. They weren’t safe up here, but really there was nowhere in the world that they were. But as long as he had this woman to hold next to him, Vegeta decided that, for the time being at least, he didn’t really care.

He was gone. The bed was empty, the IV line strewn on the ground along with bloody bandages.

Bulma set down the tray of food she’d made and swore to herself. He’d woken up earlier that morning claiming to feel fine, and while his injuries were healing well, she’d instructed him to remain in bed for the day. Vegeta had obviously decided to escape the moment she was out of the room. Bulma ran to the gravity room, hearing its humming before she even made it outside. She went directly to the emergency panel and shut the machine down, then rushed inside the room to see him continuing his press ups as if she hadn’t interrupted his training.

“Are you mad?” She shrieked, slamming the door behind her. “You’re not well enough to train!”

“I’m fine,” Vegeta said, switching to sit-ups.

Bulma stamped over to him, bent down and jabbed him in a rib that she knew was broken as hard as she could.

He winced then leapt to his feet like a gymnast, before swinging her around by her arm so her back
slammed against the wall and he pressed against her, pinning her down with one knee between her legs. “Interrupt my training again and you’ll find out exactly how well I am.” He snarled in her face, dragging his hand up her arm and circling it lightly around her neck, not putting any pressure on but letting her know exactly how much strength he had to kill her in an instant.

Bulma glared back at him defiantly. “Drop the act. We both know I’m the only person on this planet who’s willing to help you.” She placed her hand over the one around her neck and pulled it away, twining her fingers into his like she had when he’d been asleep.

Vegeta didn’t fight it or pull away, no longer looking angry, but instead appearing… curious. He brought their linked hands up so they lay against the wall behind her, and pressed his body even closer to her so she could feel the hard outline of his abdominal muscles through her thin t-shirt.

“Hell,” she said, dropping her voice to almost a whisper, lightly dragging the fingernails of her free hand down his side, hiding a grin at his sharp intake of breath. He really was a perfect specimen. “I’d be willing to bet that I’m the only person in the universe willing to help you.”

“You’re playing a dangerous game, little human,” Vegeta replied, his voice husky and his eyes half closing as he watched her. “I only have so much self-control, and you are testing my limits…” He leaned forward and scraped his teeth against her ear. “…in every way.”

Bulma shivered, clenching his hand tighter in hers, and he let out a low chuckle that tickled her neck. She knew that he wasn’t the Vegeta from the future – the one whose sweet words made her realise just how she could fall in love with him, but this, this man right here, was the Vegeta whose kiss had haunted her dreams for weeks afterwards, and damn it if she didn’t want to find out how else he could make her feel.

“You need to stop training,” she managed to choke out, unable to keep the lust from her voice even as she tried to convince herself it was a bad idea. “You need to heal.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Vegeta said. “I only had the gravity set to one hundred and I wasn’t using the bots. Light training now will enable me to train properly sooner.”

Bulma had to admit she was surprised at that. With his Saiyan healing abilities he really didn’t need to be bedridden but she’d been so concerned about him overdoing it that she’d been terrified to let him train at all. “I saw the footage,” Bulma said, fighting to find an excuse to make him stop training. “You got sloppy. If you are injured and get distracted again you really could die.”

Vegeta huffed against her neck, leaning his forehead on the metal wall next to her head. “You are the distraction. You keep… keep appearing in my head and I…” He muttered something in another language, trailing off.

Bulma frowned, concerned that he was rambling again and showing signs of concussion once more, but when she looked into his dark eyes his pupils were no longer dilated and they seemed clear enough.

“I’ve tried everything,” he admitted, growling out the words and lifting his head again. “I’ve tried avoiding you, training until I can’t do anything but sleep, but you’re always there.”

Bulma let out a shaky breath as he pressed even closer to her, a dull ache in her lower stomach increasing as she fought the urge to writhe against his knee, which was firmly positioned against her crotch so she had to stand on tiptoes to avoid sitting on it.

“There’s only one method left,” Vegeta whispered drawing his free hand up and skimming it along
the gap between her skirt and her shirt.

“What’s that?” Bulma asked, swallowing the lump in her throat.

Vegeta drew his lips back and bared his teeth in a feral grin. “I fuck you so hard the entire city hears your screams.”

Bulma drew in a sharp breath and stared at him. His smile faded and he looked almost pensive as he gazed back at her, but when she didn’t push him away he dragged his fingers under her shirt, creeping up and making her breaths come faster. “You wouldn’t be able to walk for a week,” he continued as his fingers met her bra and slid around to her back before trailing back down.

“What about the risk?” she forced herself to ask.

“It’s too early.” He planted a hot kiss on her neck. “And you take preventative medication?”

“Yes,” she breathed, arching her head back to give him better access.

He groaned against her skin. “I want to fuck you so hard I get every thought of you out of my head.”

Bulma let out a small moan. Kami, he was going to make her come and he hadn’t even taken her clothes off. “You really think it will work?” she panted, running her hand over his stomach muscles, tracing the ridged plane. “It might make things worse.”

“Things couldn’t possibly be worse,” Vegeta said, pressing his knee harder against her so her toes lifted off the ground and he was the only thing keeping her upright. He pulled his head back and frowned at her. “If you don’t want this, say so now because there will be no turning back soon.”

Bulma licked her lips and tilted her head, pretending to think about it. She giggled at the expression of self-doubt that flickered over his face then grabbed a handful of his hair in her fingers. “If you stop now I will kill you myself,” she said, then pulled him towards her, crushing his mouth against hers.

He met her kiss roughly, breathing as harshly as her. When he dropped his knee, she let out a gasp of irritation at the lack of pressure, until she felt his hand running up her thigh and grasping her underwear. One quick tug and they were gone and he had his hand under her skirt, skimming her most private area with his fingers while he trailed heated kisses all the way from her neck and along her shoulder.

“I want to make you scream,” he whispered against her skin. “How do I do that, human. Like this?” He scraped his nails along the inside of her thigh, making her shiver and grab his shoulder for support. “Hm, no… not good enough.” He continued to experiment, his fingers surprisingly careful as he explored her folds. When he slid two fingers inside her, Bulma bucked and gasped, but bit down on her tongue to keep from crying out, although she couldn’t stop her traitorous body from moving against him, desperately looking for the release that she knew he could provide.

Vegeta chuckled at her movements and slowly started to move in and out of her, grabbing her hair with his free hand and pressing his hard body against her to hold her more firmly in place. “So stubborn,” he muttered. “I’ll figure it out.” His thumb began exploring too, and when it found the small mound of nerves and scraped across it, Bulma threw her head back and moaned.

He gave a low chuckle and did it again. “Is this it? Are you going to scream, Bulma?”

She moaned again, the sound of her name on his lips driving her over the edge, but gritted her teeth
together and shook her head. “If you want me to scream like a whore,” she gasped out, “you need to worship me like a queen.” And she placed a hand on the top of his head and pushed down.

Vegeta glanced at her, momentary confusion flickering through his eyes before he grinned, his eyes lighting at the challenge. “Then it’s only fair that I see what I’m worshippin’.” He pulled his hand away from her and stepped backwards, making Bulma grab the wall to remain upright on her quivering legs. “Take them off,” he commanded.

The dark look he gave her almost made her dissolve into a puddle then and there. Slowly, Bulma pulled her shirt off, hiding a smile as his hands twitched with an obvious need to touch her. When she released her bra, he let out a soft sound, and as she finally shucked her skirt, any self-consciousness she might have had vanished. She’d been worried he wouldn’t appreciate her curves like human men - after all, any woman he’d been surrounded by would have likely been warriors, and all muscle, but the way he stared at her, like an animal about to attack its prey, made his attraction obvious, even if the bulging in his training shorts hadn’t.

It felt like a lifetime of him staring at her, but in reality it must have been a mere second. He moved forward in a blur of motion, and Bulma found herself back against the wall, but this time with her legs over his shoulders as he dropped to his knees and tasted her. One of his hands rested on her stomach, keeping her upright as she writhed against his mouth, and the other grabbed her buttocks, pulling her so close she felt as though she would melt into him. His tongue flicked out, and she moaned again, jerking forward and then back into the wall. He laughed against her, his warm breath heating her core, then he attacked her with abandon, ignoring her desperate cries until she finally yelled out his name.

“Vegeta!” Her entire body shook and she grabbed his hair tightly, letting out another cry as his tongue slid once more over her, before going limp against him in a shuddering, trembling mess.

He pulled back and lowered her to the floor, flashing her his teeth in the parody of a smile as he ripped off his training shorts then flipped her over onto her stomach. She felt him nudging her entrance and closed her eyes, unsure how he would even fit.

“My turn,” he whispered harshly, and when he plunged inside her she screamed again, pain mixing with pleasure making her vision turn red behind her eyelids. He slammed into her again and again, gripping her hips tightly to hold her in place. She wouldn’t have thought it possible to climax again, but she felt him adjusting his angle every so often and when she let out a moan as he began hitting the perfect spot on her wall, he continued driving into it until the moans she muffled by burying her mouth in her arm increased exponentially and she screamed out again as a second climax took over.

Vegeta let out a cry himself as his pounding grew deeper, more frantic, and a triumphant roar ripped from his throat as he yanked himself out of her and spilled onto the ground under them then bent forward so his head fell onto the small of her back with a shaky gasp.

The remained there for a moment, their ragged breathing almost in time with one another, but then Vegeta let go of her hips, dropping her roughly into the wet pool on the ground.

Bulma groaned and managed to turn her head to look up at him, all her limbs trembling from the aftershocks.

His usual impassive expression had returned and he crossed his arms and stared at her, unblinking in his nakedness. “I’ll be turning on the gravity in three minutes. I suggest you leave.”

She flushed under his glare, both from embarrassment at how cavalier he was about what they’d
just done and in anger at him dismissing her like that. “Excuse me, you jerk.” She started gathering her clothes and pulling them on hurriedly, not willing to call his bluff knowing that even if he didn’t turn on the machine he’d likely throw her out onto the grass butt naked. “That is no way to treat a lady,” she said as she pulled her shirt over her head.

Vegeta grabbed her wrist and leaned in close, locking his eyes with hers. “Who says you are a lady?” He sneered at her and tightened his grip until it was almost painful. “This was a onetime thing. It won’t be happening again.”

Bulma smirked back at him and reached up to pat his cheek condescendingly. “We’ll see.” She pulled her wrist out of his grip and stalked out of the gravity room, slamming the door behind her.

Trunks watched as his father expertly handled the ship’s controls to guide the craft through Fardarna’s atmosphere, towards a city, and then directly into a narrow dock. Vegeta looked as though he’d done it a thousand times before, and Trunks realised that of course his father must have, and that he’d just never truly thought about what travelling in space for a lifetime must have been like. While Vegeta answered all of Trunks’ questions about us past with honesty as far as he knew, the man never been particularly verbose, and had always been sparse with the details.

Once docked, Vegeta shut the machine down then released the door. It opened out into a cloud of smoke and a wave of humid heat and Trunks peered through it eagerly.

“Stay close,” Vegeta said hooking a small backpack that contained a change of clothes for the both of them over his shoulder. “And let me do the talking.”

“I won’t understand anyone anyway,” Trunks replied, practically skipping out of the ship behind his father. Freedom! After weeks of being cramped in that ship, all Trunks wanted to do was take to the red-tinged sky. He refrained though, knowing that his father’s definition of remaining close was probably only an arm’s length away.

Several people - if he could call them that for they looked more like crosses between bipedal panthers and hedgehogs with feline bodies and long spikes covering their skin - milled about the docks, but they all ignored the Saiyans.

All except a petite humanoid woman who was clearly of a different race. She set her sights on Vegeta and strode down the platform towards them.

She was pretty, Trunks supposed, with small, sharp symmetrical features and long bright yellow - not blonde, but actual sunshine yellow - hair tied back in a long braid. Her skin was close to the colour of dying grass, brown with a hint of green, and she wore blue and yellow armour. The woman carried a large gun, and her ki didn’t appear particularly high. The grip on the gun tightened when she saw Trunks, and she darkened slightly before focussing her stare back on Vegeta.

Vegeta lifted his hand beside his head and pointed it upwards before twisting his wrist down so his fingers pointed directly in front of him. It was a salute, Trunks realised as the woman responded in the same manner.

She said something to Vegeta in a melodic tongue, and he responded in kind. She looked pissed, and kept flickering her gaze as she talked, her hand clenching around her gun. Eventually Vegeta snapped something at her and held out his hand. The woman stared at him hesitantly for a moment, then lightly touched her palm against his, her pale eyes rolling back in her head the instant their skin touched.
A moment later she gasped and wrenched her hand out of his. She remained silent for a while, then reached out and touched Vegeta’s arm. It looked sympathetic to Trunks, her eyes wide and sad, and when she looked at Trunks there was no longer any anger there.

“When you said she knew when you were lying, you didn’t tell me she was a mind reader,” Trunks said to his father.

Vegeta shrugged. “Only if she touches you. Let’s go.”

He and Ara began walking towards a large building at the end of the dock. Trunks followed, staring around curiously at the rows of other ship’s in the expansive port.

When they entered the building a blast of cold air hit Trunks face and he paused for a moment, enjoying the cool in comparison to the harsh heat of outside. When his father and the woman didn’t stop walking, Trunks scrambled to keep up, reaching his father’s side just as the man turned to glare at him.

Instead of telling him off for dawdling, Vegeta pushed Trunks towards a small room. The woman joined them, then started opening drawers, pulling out small pieces of machinery no bigger than a fly. She must have found what she was looking for, because she handed it to Vegeta triumphantly.

Trunks’ father frowned at it, turning it over. Then he gave the woman a nod, and handed the piece of tech to Trunks. “Put it in your ear,” Vegeta instructed.

Trunks did as he was told, yelping as the machine seemed to come to life and move of its own accord, suctioning itself to the inside of his eardrum.

“Can you understand me?” Vegeta asked.

“Of course,” Trunks replied, putting a hand over his ear. It didn’t hurt exactly, but it felt uncomfortable.

“What about me?” The woman asked.

Trunks stared at her for a moment, realising that even though she hadn’t changed languages from what she was speaking to his father in, he could understand every word. “It’s a translator!” Trunks broke into a grin and lowered his hand. “Say something else!”

The woman smiled back. “I am Ara, a friend of your father’s.”

“Don’t say that too loud,” Trunks said in a mock whisper. “Papa claims he doesn’t have friends.”

Ara laughed and threw the glaring Vegeta a sideways look before looking back at Trunks. “He also claims not to like sweet food but I once saw him scarf down an entire tub of iced egg.”

The machine in Trunks’ ear crackled at the last two words, indicating that it had struggled with the translation. He looked at his father curiously.

“You will enjoy it. I’ll get you some to try,” Vegeta said before turning to the Captain. “Is there accommodation available for me and my son?”

“You will stay with me and Seria,” she said sharply. “There is plenty of room and the girl will never forgive either of us if you don’t.”

“Who’s Seria?” Trunks asked.
Vegeta and Ara glanced at each other, an odd moment passing between them that Trunks couldn’t read.

“My daughter,” Ara said finally. “This way.”

Trunks gripped the armrests and clenched his teeth, certain that flying had to be safer than this flying metal box that the Captain was currently piloting.

“You’ll need to report into the embassy,” Ara said to Vegeta as she wove through chaotic traffic lanes above a sprawling, dusty city. “We’ve had a couple of attacks - nothing we couldn’t handle, but they could use your advice on how to improve security.”

“Later,” Vegeta said, glancing at Trunks. “We could do with a place to stretch our legs and some food.”

“Food would be great!” Trunks said, leaning forward from the backseat. “I’m so sick of capsulised food. It doesn’t taste the same.” He grinned at his father’s cross expression. “Still beats your mouldy sandwiches though.”

Vegeta snorted and rolled his eyes. “I cut off the mould for you. Spoilt brat.”

“We’re here,” Ara said, swerving left directly towards a dark blue wall that appeared to be made of a material similar to corrugated iron.

Trunks squeaked and covered his eyes as Ara showed no signs of slowing down. But when he peeked through his fingers he saw the wall shimmer in front of them and the vehicle passed through it as if it didn’t exist.

Ara pulled to a sharp stop and Trunks let out a sigh of relief, leaning back into his seat. He glanced out of the windows to see nothing but solid grey walls surrounding them, but since Vegeta didn’t look concerned and just got out of the vehicle, Trunks did the same.

Ara made an odd clicking sound with her tongue and a part of the wall slid up, revealing a narrow, white-walled hallway. The trio made their way down it until it opened up into a large room with floor to ceiling windows and a spectacular view of the bustling city below. A young girl stood up from a table where she’d been sitting drawing. She looked a couple of years older than Trunks and had similar features and skin tone to Ara, but instead of straight blonde hair, hers swept around her face in ragged locks of the deepest black.

Alien or not, she would have been uncommonly pretty if it hadn’t been for the burns down one side of her face.

The girl’s face lit up when she saw Vegeta and she ran over and threw her arms around his waist. “Veggie! I didn’t know you would be back so soon.”

Trunks normally would have giggled at the nickname, but something about the girl had him feeling as though everything around him was spinning slowly as the pieces clicked together.

Vegeta patted the girl’s back awkwardly before prying her off him. “It’s just a short visit. I have someone I’d like you to meet.” He motioned towards Trunks, who couldn’t stop staring at the girl.

“Hello,” she said, offering him a smile. “I’m Seria.”

Trunks opened his mouth to reply, but no words came out, his gut sinking. He turned to Vegeta,
begging him with his eyes to tell him it wasn’t true. “Papa?” He clenched his fists at his father’s expressionless face. He’d known Vegeta hadn’t told him everything, but it had certainly seemed like he’d at least told Trunks the big stuff. How could he have left out this?

The girl had the hair of a Saiyan, looked at Vegeta like he was family, and Trunks knew his father and Ara had been together at one point. The girl even had dark eyes, completely different from her mother’s near translucent ones.

Trunks swallowed hard, then pointed to the girl and asked his father the question he dreaded hearing the answer to. “Is she my sister?”
Chapter Summary

In the future: Bulma gets the time machine working... but is it too late?

In space: Trunks discovers Seria's parentage and some things about his father's past.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vegeta dodged Gohan's flying fist, twisting and grabbing the teenager's arm to throw him across their small, underground training room. Gohan spun into the wall, but Trunks flew at his father before Vegeta could react, sending a ki blast towards him that had Vegeta on the defensive immediately. The force of it had him skidding across the metal floor, but Vegeta ducked down to let the blast sail over his head, then pushed himself back up to throw Trunks into Gohan just as the teenager was standing up.

"Give up?" Vegeta asked, smirking at them both.

"Never!" Trunks crowed, scrambling to his feet.

Gohan pulled a face and groaned. "I'm hungry."

"Lunch in fifteen," Vegeta said, striking a defensive pose.

He was about to attack when the door swung open and the room's gravity returned to normal, knocking everyone inside off balance and sending them toppling into a pile on the floor.

"Bulma!" Vegeta snarled as she entered the room, a grin on her face. "What have I said about interup-"

"-I did it!" She clasped her hands together and bounced on her toes, looking at him eagerly. "It works."

"The time machine?" Gohan asked, standing up hurriedly.

"Yes. Come see." Bulma ran from the room, using her arm to motion them out.

Scowling at his training being stopped early, Vegeta grudgingly followed the others to Bulma's lab.

Once there, Vegeta glanced around the room for the prototype. He'd seen her working on it, and while it was small, about the size of his hand, it should have been front and centre on her desk. "Where is it?" Vegeta asked.
"Oh, it's in yesterday." Bulma gave him a smirk and pointed at the computer screen. "At one seventeen in the afternoon to be precise."

"How do you know?" Trunks asked, peering at the screen.

"Want to find out for sure?" Bulma asked. At Trunks thrilled nod, she started instructing him on the computer. "Now hit enter."

Trunks did as asked, then the room filled with a whirring sound. There was a pop, and before their eyes the machine appeared on the desk, smoking slightly, but still intact.

"Holy shit," Gohan breathed.

"Language," Vegeta snapped, although he'd privately thought the exact same thing and Trunks was too busy staring in awe at the machine to have noticed.

Bulma showed Trunks how to open the hatch, and he pulled out a piece of paper. On it was a line of writing.

"This wasn't written when I sent it back," Bulma said. She took it from Trunks and read it, then handed the paper to Vegeta.

"Your calibration is off by four point five minutes, but it worked," Vegeta read Bulma's scrawled script aloud. He handed the paper back, staring at the woman in front of him. She'd actually done it. Of all the things possible in the universe, she had broken all the barriers and achieved the impossible. "When can you have a full working version?"

Bulma started writing on a piece of paper. "It will take me months at least, and we'll need to do some dry runs to make sure I don't blow you up. Maybe a year total. Here's the parts I need." She handed him the list, and the moment he pocketed it she threw her arms around him. "We did it," she whispered in his ear.

Vegeta curled his arms around her awkwardly, stiffening under the gaze of the boys, who both wore cheeky grins, but not wanting to do anything to take this away from her. "You did it," he corrected.

Vegeta scoured an abandoned shopping mall three cities over for the parts Bulma needed. The woman had been damn near insistent on coming with him to get the exact parts and equipment needed, but he'd convinced her to let him try first. The mall was expansive, a multi-levelled monstrosity with broken ceiling lights dangling, and the first traces of moss beginning to creep up the inside of the walls. It was incredible how fast nature took over.

He found a map in the middle of the mall and wiped the thick layer of dust off it, sneezing as it swirled in the air around him. The map showed three electronics stores and one department store that could have sold tools. He set about finding the stores and searching through them, throwing anything resembling what Bulma might need into a backpack.

He'd just found his way into the large department store when he felt it… A sharp rise of ki, and then nothing.

Vegeta dropped his backpack and froze. Gohan. He felt out, searching for any sign that Gohan was just suppressing it, but there was nothing there.

There was another spike of ki, one from someone with a much lower energy level. An energy that
Vegeta knew intimately. It jolted upwards, sending panic through his veins and making him audible gasp.

Vegeta dropped the backpack, blasted a hole in the roof and flew out of it and headed back towards their hideout, streaking through the air. He concentrated hard on the ki level, perhaps too hard because when it dropped, so did Vegeta, and he tumbled to the ground, falling on his hands and knees on a dusty street. "Bulma," he whispered, and he gasped for air but felt as though he was unable to suck in any oxygen. The sun, high in the sky, had given the city a bright afternoon, but suddenly he couldn't see, the dazzling light reflecting off the building's windows around him combining with an abrupt onset of cloudiness to his vision.

The blood roared in his ears as his heart pounded louder and louder and faster and faster until the speck of ki he'd been concentrating on faded to the smallest thread.

"No!" He let out a guttural cry and dragged himself back to his feet.

He took to the sky again, continuing to focus on her ki. It had to be a mistake. It had to. She was asleep, not dying. She'd be fine. He sped towards the direction of the small house they'd dwelled in for the past few weeks. Get home. Find Bulma. Get home. Find Bulma. He repeated the mantra in his head, knowing it was the only thing holding him together. Since Capsule Corp had been destroyed years ago, they moved from place to place to stay under the android's radar, but each location Bulma insisted on calling home, and because she was really the only home he'd ever known, so did he. Get home. Find Bulma.

He saw the smoke rising in wisps above the city, even before he could see the building. The house they had occupied wasn't completely reduced to dust, but its roof had collapsed inwards, and as he landed in a stumble at the front door, he had to duck under a beam to get inside.

Gohan sat slumped against the wall beside Trunks' bedroom door. Vegeta let out a whimper, seeing Gohan's open and unfocussed eyes, and the door beside him cracked in half, knowing what that had to mean. He couldn't feel the boy's ki, so Vegeta knelt and took his wrist with a shaking hand and felt for a pulse. Nothing, although his fingers trembled so much he didn't think he would have found one even if Gohan had been alive and breathing.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, running his hand down the Gohan's face to close his still, glassy eyes.

He hadn't cared much for Kakarot's brat when he'd first come to live with them, but over the last five years they'd trained together, battled the androids together and saved each other's lives so many times that Vegeta had lost count.

It wasn't supposed to end like this.

Vegeta used the doorway beside Gohan to pull himself to standing, bracing himself on it to stay upright. He pushed the mangled door all the way open and choked back a cry. She lay face down on the carpet, her blue hair swirling around her head, tendrils matted with blood. Her leg twisted at an odd angle, and one of her arms lay under her head, the other outstretched towards the underneath of the bed, as if she'd been trying to crawl away.

"No..." A small wail escaped his lips and he staggered towards her, dropping down to the floor beside her. He rolled her over, and her eyes, fluttered underneath their lids. "Bulma." He touched her face, his large hand caressing her soft skin.

She stirred under his touch, taking in a gargling breath as a trickle of blood seeped from her mouth.
“Bulma,” he whispered her name again, his breaths coming out in harsh, rattling gasps. He buckled forward and rested his forehead on hers, the weight pressing down on his chest overwhelming him. "I should have been here. I should have stopped them."

"Pro...mise..." she managed to choke out a word, her blue eyes opening for the briefest of moments. "Trunks... Future."

Hot tears burned at his eyes, but he blinked them away. "I promise," he said with a hacking sob.

She faded them, the last bit of strength she'd been holding onto fading into nothing. At the sudden vanishing of her ki Vegeta let out a scream, all the rage and fury he'd ever felt in his life coming to a head.

He wanted to explode, to take this entire, miserable planet with him, destroying the androids in the process. Golden ki swirled around him, burning against his skin with the pure power. It would be so easy... one shot to the Earth's core and all of it would be over.

But no... there was something... something he needed to do.

Trunks.

Where was Trunks?

"Is she my sister?" Trunks watched his father's face carefully, looking for any clue that his hunch was correct.

"Wha... what?" His father's left eye twitched but Trunks couldn't tell if it was in anger, fear, or amusement.

Vegeta opened his mouth to say something else, but it was the girl who answered first, her tinkling laugh cut through the air like a bird call.

"I'm not your sister, silly." Seria took a step towards Trunks with a wide smile. "Would you like me to show you?"

A panicked "No!" came from both Vegeta and Ara as Seria reached out her hand - the back of which was covered in burns as well. Vegeta leapt forward to get in between them, but Seria was quicker, and her hand touched Trunks', sending his vision into a dizzying black spin.

Trunks found himself standing in the middle of a corridor with high metal walls and white floors covered in black scuff marks. "Hello?" He called out, his voice echoing around him. There was no response, only an odd, overwhelming silence until a rumble began, followed by a short, sharp bang. A door opened down the hall, sliding up smoothly, and a small man with dark hair stormed out of it.

"Papa?" Trunks formed the word on his lips, but he immediately knew this man wasn't his papa. Not as he knew him anyway. This man was barely a man at all, in his very late teens or early twenties by Earth standards. He was much smaller than his father, leaner to the point of looking half-starved, and covered in bruises and abrasions that would have had a lesser man unable to move.

"Vegeta?" Trunks tried cautiously, but the man kept marching down the hall, only stopping once when he stumbled and caught himself against the wall.
Trunks ran to catch up with him, reaching out to touch the man's shoulder... only to find his hand slip straight through it. Trunks gasped, but kept chasing after his father, following him through a door and down another corridor.

This one had soldiers milling about, and Vegeta staggered through it, shoving soldiers out of his way to get to through faster. When he burst through another door, he entered a large mess hall, and as Trunks entered as well, he found the noise so loud it was impossible to make out individual voices.

"Neat, huh."

A soft voice in Trunks' ear made him jump. Seria smiled at him, her dark eyes oddly captivating. "They can't see us."

"Where are we?" Trunks asked.

"A memory." Seria turned to watch Vegeta who had found a large Saiyan with long ragged hair at a table, and with one glare had the man scrambling to get him a tray of food. "One of Veggie's. Do you want to see more?"

"This is..." Trunks opened his mouth, struggling to explain how incredible yet completely wrong this was.

Seria seemed to take his response as a yes though, because she placed both her hands on Trunks' shoulders and whispered in his ear. "See your papa from his eyes."

The next moment, Trunks felt the world slipping around him. He closed his eyes to stop it spinning, and when he opened them he was sitting where his father had been.

A young, yellow haired woman sat opposite him. "You look like death," she stated over the din, chewing on a nondescript piece of meat. "You should go to the med bay."

"I've been," Trunks found himself saying. Only it wasn't him. It was his father. Trunks tried to yell out, but found he couldn't, completely immobilised by the body and mind he now occupied.

He gripped the edge of the table, sending his furious stare into the back of Raditz's head to get him to hurry it up. He was hungry, Gods-damn-it. "They would only allocate me an hour in the tank."

The girl's face, which was pretty, but not enough for Vegeta to have bothered remembering her name, creased in sympathy. She opened her mouth to say something - probably some sentimental crap - but closed it again as Raditz dropped a tray of food in front of Vegeta.

"Is this it?" Vegeta growled. The amount of food was only a fifth of what he needed.

"You've been put on rations for ten days," Raditz said, his voice wobbling nervously as he sat down. "Frieza's orders." He curled his fists on the table, probably waiting for Vegeta to explode.

Vegeta just began eating though, making his way through the tasteless grey food with enthusiasm on par with how he used to eat meals at the Saiyan palace when he was a child. His body needed sustenance to heal, something that Frieza was well aware of, and Vegeta didn't have energy to waste on a temper tantrum.

"What did you do?" The girl asked.

"Ara!" Raditz hissed under her breath.
So that was her name. Vegeta would have snapped at her insubordination as well, but she accompanied her question with the subtle removal of a bowl of gruel from her tray to his.

He chuckled darkly, sliding the bowl closer to him and digging in. It was disgusting stuff, but high in calories which he desperately needed. "Let's just say I don't think Dallda will be trying to jump anyone in the hallway again." He grinned at both Raditz and Ara even though he felt sick inside remember his initial jolt of fear at Dallda's thick, slimy hands (if you could call them that as his thin fingers which numbered twelve on each hand were more like firm noodles than anything else) coming at him from behind, wrapping around his face so he couldn't breathe, and his left leg so he couldn't run.

"Is he..." Ara trailed off, but the hope in her eyes made Vegeta wonder how eclectic Dallda's tastes had been.

"Dead," Vegeta replied.

Ara grinned and handed him the only piece of food left on Raditz's tray - a dry piece of bread.

"You're lucky you're not dead too!" Raditz had paled, his breathing shallow. "Frieza could have killed you for killing a superior officer."

"I didn't know who it was," Vegeta said, repeating the lie he'd told Frieza as he tore into the bread's crust. "It was dark." It was dark in the storeroom he'd been dragged into, but his Saiyan vision made it easy to pick out who his accoster was. Vegeta hadn't cared - no matter the punishment later, he wasn't going to let himself be violated by that pathetic excuse for a soldier.

It hadn't even been a fair fight. The move had been calculated, timed for when Vegeta was exhausted and weakened from a training spar with Cui. Dallda had slammed Vegeta's head forward into the wall the moment he grabbed him, disorientating the prince for long enough to drag him away, and when Vegeta had finally regained his senses, he'd begun fighting back, not bothering to call for help. Even if someone had heard him, they would have walked in the other direction.

Dallda clearly hadn't been expecting just how strong Vegeta had become in the last couple of years though. All it took was Vegeta pretending to be knocked out when Dallda threw him into a shelving unit. Vegeta blasted the bloated beast through the stomach the moment Dallda relaxed.

"Frieza is pissed, but he knows that if I was able to kill him, the idiot didn't deserve to live anyway." Vegeta pushed his now empty tray back and smirked at Raditz. "Looks like you're on half rations for the next ten days."

Raditz scowled, but nodded, likely aware that if he didn't hand over half his food willingly Vegeta would take it all.

Vegeta stood to leave, but Ara grabbed his gloved hand. "Wait," She said in a hushed whisper.

"Does this look like the best time?" Raditz asked Ara through clenched teeth.
"It's never going to be a good time," Ara replied before turning to Vegeta pleadingly.

Vegeta let out a sigh. "Not here," he said quietly, aware of just how many eyes and ears were in the mess hall. "Our quarters, twenty minutes."

Trunks yelped as he felt himself pulled out of his father's body. He was still on the ship though, but in a different room. A bedroom it looked like - a small one, sparsely furnished with three bunk-style beds, a cupboard and a single chair.

"You see?" Seria said, making him jump again. "Not my papa."

Trunks stared at the girl. Being inside his father's mind like that… seeing what he saw, what he felt… what he'd been through. Trunks suppressed a shudder and tried to catalogue what he'd seen. "That memory only told me that your mother was with that other Saiyan. That doesn't mean her and my papa weren't together later."

"This one will show you." Seria went to touch Trunks again but he lurched back.

"Don't. I don't want to see from his eyes."

"Why not?" Seria seemed genuinely curious, her dark eyes wide.

"It's… wrong," Trunks tried to explain.

"If you say so. Here he comes," Seria said with a shrug, turning to the door.

Vegeta strolled in and picked up what looked a cross between a book and a tablet. He lay on one of the beds and looked like he was reading, but Trunks could just make out that he was fiddling with a small electronic device under the book.

Raditz and Ara walked in, arm in arm, but Vegeta didn't look up. "Sit," he instructed, quietly.

The seat only had room for one, but Raditz sat down, pulling Ara on his lap. Vegeta continued to pretend to read.

When Ara started to complain, both Raditz and Vegeta shushed her. The silence was awkward, and Trunks turned to Seria, but her gaze was focussed on the man in the chair - Raditz, Vegeta had called him in the mess hall. Trunks recognised the name. His father had mentioned the man as the reason he'd come to Earth in the first place. The brief time he'd spent in his father's head had shown him that while his father considered the third-class-Saiyan to be weak, and beneath him, he had an odd sense of duty when it came to protecting the man.

After a few minutes on silent tension, Vegeta spoke. "We have five minutes before the bug disrupter stops working." He remained on the bunk but dropped the book slightly to glare at the couple. "Remember your current positions."

"Well, ah… you see, Vegeta…" Raditz stuttered, his face brightening with each word.

"Spit it out!"

"I'm pregnant," Ara said quickly.


Trunks took in a sharp breath, shocked at his father's callousness.
"No." Ara glared back at him, her stare unwavering.

"Don't tell me you're in love with that idiot." Vegeta frowned right back at her.

"Of course not." Ara either didn't notice or didn't care about Raditz hurt expression because she carried on quickly. "But Frieza has taken everything from me and I will not let him take this baby."

"What do you expect me to do?" Vegeta asked, looking almost amused by her passion. "Frieza owns us and he owns that child. The only escape is death. You'll be lucky if he lets a mongrel Saiyan child live. It's an abomination."

"It's a baby," Ara snapped. She turned to Raditz. "Say something!"

"He's my prince," Raditz mumbled. "If he says we can't keep the child, we can't."

Ara placed a hand over her stomach and glared at Vegeta. "This baby is your subject. It's your duty to protect it, just as you protect Raditz and Nappa.


The moment Vegeta put down the book, Ara leapt to her feet and stormed from the room.

"Please," Raditz said quietly, not moving from the chair.

Vegeta sat up, swinging his legs off the bunk. He looked at Raditz and something resembling grief flashed over his face, so quick that an observer who didn't know him wouldn't have noticed. "No."

"That's it?" Trunks asked as everyone disappeared from the room in an instant. "He's not going to help them?"

"You wanted to know if your papa was my father," Seria said. "I have shown you that."

"Yes but… he must have helped," Trunks said. "Otherwise you wouldn't be alive."

Seria grinned then, her smile brightening as she stared at him. "You want to see more."

"I…" Trunks hesitated, knowing he shouldn't dig into his father's past like this.

"Let's go," Seria said, slipping her hand in his with a smile.

The ship spun around them, swirling into a blend of silver and blue until Trunks shut his eyes against the dizziness. With a thump, Trunks hit the ground, and when he opened his eyes, he found himself outside on a strange planet with a bruised purple sky and cracked, grey ground.

"Where are we?" Trunks asked Seria, who sat beside him, her palm still in his. When he realised, he yanked his hand away.

"I don't know the name of this planet." Seria stood up and surveyed the area. "Your papa and my mama rarely bothered remembering the names of the planets they purged."

"This is a purged planet?" Trunks clambered to his feet and stared round at the desolate landscape, taking in the gnarled, leafless grey trees and the hollow silence.

"This planet was purged and repopulated many years ago, but in this memory the purge is not complete," Seria said. "They are in the middle of it now." She looked sideways at Trunks, her dark
eyes feeling as though they had absorbed him whole. "Let's begin."

Seria raised her hands, and as she did the silence broke into a howling wind. Or at least that’s what Trunks thought it was as the sharp air hit his face, but as he and Seria began to cross the plain, wails and screams and noises of desperation that Trunks recognised all too well drifted on the wind, as well as an odd, sickening smell, like charred meat.

The dead trees became less numerous, buildings appeared, and Trunks realised that the colour of the sky was supposed to be a brighter purple, but the swirls of smoke arising from the chaos before them had turned it darker. Ahead of them soldiers in Saiyan armour of varying alien races cut down an unarmed race of what looked like men, woman and children. The dying people were tall, thin, with strange rainbow shimmering skin.

Their howls of terror and pain filled the air, and Trunks clenched his fists. "We should help them."

"We can't," Seria said, giving Trunks an amused smile. "What has passed, has passed."

They were now close enough for Trunks to feel the heat of the burning village buildings. If he reached out he could have touched one of the soldiers. "But they're… dying."

"Yes." Seria nodded seriously, not even flinching as a screaming man on fire ran through her. "Everyone who once inhabited this planet is now dead." She nodded at something over Trunks left shoulder. "Your Papa killed most of them."

Trunks spun around to see his father - the young version from the ship - blasting his way through at least one hundred of the shimmering people. At half their height, he looked so small next to them, almost childlike. But his face was drawn tight and serious as he cut them down ruthlessly, barely using his ki and instead ripping off limbs with his bare hands or plunging his fist into chests and ripping out organs.

Trunks covered his mouth with his hand, gagging. He'd seen some horrific atrocities performed by the androids, but this… watching his father so callously slaughter people with such a cool, almost businesslike air, was something else altogether.

"Stop it," he gasped out at Seria. "I can't… I can't watch this."

"What's wrong?" Seria asked, looking genuinely puzzled. "Your papa told you of his past."

"Seeing it is…" Trunks swallowed hard. "Different."

"Look, there's Mama," Seria commented with a smile, as if their parents were on an evening stroll instead of destroying lives while splattered in blood.

Trunks saw Ara, surrounded by ten of the opposing side. She had a large gun in her hands and fired at them, sending three of them flying back. They hit the ground and didn't move.

Vegeta must have spotted Ara too, because he lifted his hand and blasted the rest of the people surrounding her, killing them instantly. He leapt forward and grabbed Ara's arm.

"I had that under control," she snarled at him.

Vegeta rolled his eyes, then yanked her into a crumbling building out of sight of the main battle.

"Come on," Seria said, grabbing Trunks' hand again and tugging him towards their parents.
They slipped into the building and stared at that pair, who were hissing at each other in the dim light.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Ara wrenched herself out of his grip and backed up against the shelves. "We need to get back out there. We only have five more hours to purge this planet and we are already behind."

"I'm aware, and it will be handled in time. But I need to take care of this… problem." Vegeta glanced down at her stomach with a sneer.

Ara placed her hands over her abdomen instinctively. "I will not let you harm my child."

Vegeta looked her over critically. "What are you going to do? Your ki level is pathetic. I have no idea how you managed to secure a position on this mission, let alone Frieza's ship."

Ara threw Vegeta a furious glare and lifted her weapon to point it at his face. "I can look after myself."

Vegeta threw his head back and laughed, the sharp sound echoing off the broken walls. He shook his head slowly, and as Ara tightened her grip on the gun, he merely raised an eyebrow at her. "If you wish for you and your half-breed brat to live, you will do exactly as I say." He dug into his pocket then handed her a piece of paper which she snatched from his hand without loosening her grip on the gun. "The vermin that live here have a stronghold only one click from here. I'm sending in a team, you included, to wipe it out. Those tall freaks have it rigged with explosives, expecting an attack from us, but they don't know that I am already aware of that. The place will detonate, killing most of the team with it." Vegeta leaned close, placing a hand over the end of her gun. "For all intents and purposes, you will be dead."

If Trunks hadn't just seen his father cut down a hundred innocents without blinking, he would have been thrilled. Before he'd entered this memory, he'd been sure that his Papa wouldn't let a baby die - especially not a Saiyan baby - but some of the people Vegeta killed were younger than Trunks.

He stared at his father, trying to understand how a man who killed so many for a living could care about the life of a child not even born yet. It didn't make sense.

"You… you'll sacrifice a group of soldiers to save me?" Ara widened her eyes and gradually lowered her gun.

"Not for you," Vegeta replied, glancing at her stomach. "Frieza has taken everything… everything from me and my people. There are so few of us left. I can't let him get his hands on this child. He would take it, you know. Take it and experiment on it and turn it from a child into a monster, just like he did to me." Vegeta's chest rose and fell raggedly, and for the first time since he'd arrived in this strange memory land Trunks recognised something in the man that reminded him of his father.

"What do I do?" Ara asked, glancing at her abdomen.

"The moment you are inside the tunnels that enter the building, lose the group, get out, but stay just out of range of the bombs. Destroy your scouter and the chip in your arm the moment you hear the explosions, then go to the coordinates on the paper I gave you. You'll find an unmarked, untracked pod. Leave and do not try contact anyone."

"Raditz-"

"Raditz cannot know," Vegeta insisted. "He would cave under torture."
"What about you?" Ara asked.

"This is not my first foray into subterfuge, woman." Vegeta crossed his arms and scoffed. "I will not cave."

"This could all be a trap."

"Yes." He bared his teeth into a smile. "It could be."

Ara holstered her gun, then peeled off her bloodstained glove. She reached out and touched his cheek with her bare hand, making Vegeta stiffen in surprise. Before he could pull away, he seemed to go into a trance. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he stood to attention like he'd been shocked with electricity.

"Do I look like that in the real world?" Trunks asked Seria in a hushed whisper, even though the two in the memory couldn't hear him.

"Worse," Seria said with a giggle. "You're drooling."

"I am not!" Trunks put his hand to his mouth to check if he was drooling inside the memory too, and Seria laughed even harder.

They both went silent again when Ara pulled back from Vegeta. They both appeared pale, breathing heavily in time with one another.

Vegeta staggered backwards, his eyes darting around the building as if looking for a hidden threat. "What… What did you do?"

"I read your mind," Ara said, pulling her glove back on. "It is a particular skill of mine."

"So that's why you are here." Vegeta looked her up and down warily. "You're a spy for Frieza."

Ara scowled at that. "I'm an interrogator actually. Although, I merely feed Frieza enough information to make him believe whatever I tell him. That monster destroyed my home. I will never truly serve him." She took a step forward, and Vegeta didn't quite hide his flinch. "You however, are much more interesting that I suspected. You're Frieza's main information leak, and no one, not even the rebels receiving the intel knows it comes from you."

"Except for you." Vegeta straightened and stepped forward himself, closing the gap between them. "And now you are even more of a liability than before."

"Yes." Ara smoothed down her shirt in front of her still-flat belly. "But if your plan works that won't be an issue."

"And if it doesn't, we are both dead." Vegeta narrowed his eyes at her. "It would be much simpler to kill you and solve both problems at once."

"Perhaps," Ara conceded. "You won't do that though."

"Did your mind reading trick tell you that?" Vegeta loomed closer to her.

"Yes." Ara placed her gloved hand on his chest. They stayed silent for a moment, staring at each other.

The crumbling of stones made them both jump, Trunks along with them. They all spun around to see a large soldier, his plump crimson body bulging out of his armour. "What do we have here?"
He grinned, revealing a large set of triple-layered sharp teeth. "I can't believe it… the monkey prince getting down and dirty in the middle of a battle. Wait until Frieza hears about thi-"

A pinging sound accompanied by a flash of light shut the odd creature up. The soldier looked down at the hole in his chest with a gargle, dark red - almost black - blood seeping from the wound and the corners of his mouth. Vegeta stepped forward, a fierce expression set in marble on his face, then he straightened his arm and sent a ki blast forward.

In that instant, Trunks realised what the smell permeating the crumbling city was... The scent of burning flesh.

The soldier erupted into flames, his blubbery flesh igniting instantly and dripping into flaming pools on the ground around him until there was nothing left but a pile of singed armour.

Trunks grabbed onto the wall beside him and fought the urge to throw up.

Vegeta lowered his hand and both he and Ara looked at the remains dispassionately.

"You should get going," Vegeta said, stepping forward to nudge the armour with his foot. "I'll clean this up."

"You could leave too," Ara suggested.

Vegeta blinked in surprise and looked at her. "I am known throughout the universe as Frieza's most efficient planet purger. The people I've killed in order to reach Frieza's inner circle in the vein hope of eventually taking him down… There is no escape for me." He stepped back and turned to leave, making it to the doorway before Ara caught his wrist.

"Will I see you again?" She asked.

Vegeta paused, keeping his eyes trained on ahead of him instead of looking at Ara. "I sincerely hope not."

They both left then, slipping out in different directions and leaving Seria and Trunks alone. The sounds of the battle halted, and the peculiar silence returned.

"You see?" Seria said. "Your papa saved me and my mama, but he is not my father."

"He saved you, but he…" Trunks placed his hand on his face and realised his cheeks were wet. He wiped the stray tears away angrily. "He killed so many… so many people."

"So did Mama," Seria said with a nod. "They were heroes."

"What?" Trunks stared at the girl in disbelief. She was mad. The memories she'd seen had driven her barmy. "Did you just watch what I did? Frieza's soldiers were murderers, our parents included!"

"There are many ways of looking at things." Seria touched her chin thoughtfully. "You may choose to see things how you wish." Then she reached out and took Trunks hand again, and everything around him swirled into blackness.

_Vegeta sat back up and glanced around the room, descending back into his base form with a gasp. "Get it together," he told himself, his words coming out firmer than he felt inside. "Analyse. Assess. Strategize"_
With his ability to read ki off kilter, Vegeta started with his sense of sight and began looking around the room. It was a mess, with broken furniture strewn everywhere. He glanced down at the woman in his arms. Bulma's outstretched arm pointed to the bed... no towards something under there. Vegeta ducked his head down and saw her phone. The plans for the time machine. He reached out and took it then put it carefully in his pocket.

**Trunks. Find Trunks.**

Sucking in deep breaths, Vegeta continued to take in his surroundings. The window had been blown open. The glass had been smashed from the inside, and the wooden frame had almost disintegrated. Something had gone through there. Or someone.

Vegeta carefully let Bulma rest on the bloodstained carpet then hauled himself to his feet. He ventured towards the window which opened onto the backyard of the property. Through the broken glass, Vegeta saw a small body lying on the grass, crumpled into a ball. Vegeta reached out with his mind, searching for his son's ki. Gods, it was faint, so faint, but there. He leapt through the window and ran to his son, pulling the boy's broken body into his arms. He struggled to breathe again, but began cataloguing the boy's injuries. Broken ribs. Punctured lung. Severe laceration to the side of his torso resulting in blood loss. His ki, fading...

"Trunks. Stay with me." Vegeta commanded as he ripped of the sleeve of his shirt and used it to hold against the boy's wound.

The boy's eyes flickered open. "Papa..."

"Stay with me," Vegeta said again, his voice cracking. "That's an order, son."

"It hurts," Trunks mumbled.

"I know." Vegeta held his son closer, his tears now falling unashamedly as his clung to his son's small body. "I've got you. You're going to be okay."

Vegeta and Ara both jumped towards Seria and ripped her hand off Trunks, but as his son's unconscious body fell to the ground, Vegeta knew he'd reacted too late. One second in time was enough for Seria to show the boy numerous memories, and Vegeta could only hope that the ones she'd revealed were not the ones that he still had nightmares about. The boy battled enough demons at night without having to worry about his father's too.

Trunks opened his eyes almost as soon as he hit the plush carpet. He lay there for a moment, blinking quickly before setting his gaze on Vegeta, who found himself rooted to the spot. Trunks' eyes grew wide as they took in his father, and he sat up but seemed to curl into himself.

Vegeta reached out a hand to his son, but Trunks shrank back. "Don't touch me."

"Trunks..."

"You... you killed those people like they were nothing." Trunks voice came out scratchy, and his eyes were red as if he'd been crying but no tears fell. "You're a murderer."

"I..." Vegeta swallowed hard. "I told you that, son. I told you what I'd done."

Trunks covered his eyes and shook his head, his small body trembling. "I know, but I..."

When he let out a sharp sob, all Vegeta wanted to do was to sweep his son into his arms and take
away whatever he'd seen, whatever he now knew that was causing him so much pain.

But Vegeta couldn't. There was nothing he could do. Nothing he could say to make it right.

Not when he was the cause of the pain.

Chapter End Notes

I'm very sorry for the slow update! The next one will probably be slow as well. I should have gone on an official hiatus over my holiday break but I think I can get another update in over the next few weeks. I struggled with this chapter a bit so I hope it turned out okay... let me know your thoughts. No present B/V this time as we will be doing a little time jump.

Also, for anyone interested I wrote a Christmas themed oneshot called Blue Christmas that you can find on FFic, or if you want the smutty version it's on AO3.

Review Commentary:

Where is the next chapter?
- For anyone after an update on my next chapter, you can check out my profile page where I usually have the status of it.

If that is his daughter I don't think I can read on./ I really freaking hope that's not his sister / My goodness...Kakarrot needs to know about his niece! I'm kinda in denial that Vegeta was slinging dick with no protection across space / Fuck that shit. (sister part, the rest is cool)
- 10 points to the Kakarot's niece guess! And gosh I love how passionate everyone is about Vegeta not having a secret daughter.

The reference to that mouldy sandwich from chapter one is almost too cute, reflecting on how far these two have gone through together to get to where they are at now! - I'm so happy someone picked up on that! :)

I absolutely ADORE the line "if you want to make me scream like a whore, you need to worship me like a queen" available via AO3 That is sheer brilliance and would seriously make Vegeta weak in the knees, especially the more he thinks on that in future, if some women said that, he'd run the other way or just be turned off, but with Bulma...
- Haha thank you I was very proud of that line. And yes, Vegeta really only lets Bulma talk to him with that much insubordination!
Chapter Summary

In space, Vegeta and Trunks struggle to reconnect after Trunks' discovery about Vegeta's time working for Frieza.

In the past, Vegeta deals with the aftermath of Bulma's death by the androids.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vegeta had never felt guilt over his past deeds. While he understood that the atrocities he'd committed - the purges, the torturing for intel, the drawing out of his victims' deaths - were morally wrong, he also accepted that they had all been necessary to survive under Frieza's reign. To show weakness meant death, and the only way to show strength was to lord it over others. No, while he wished the acts hadn't been necessary in the first place, he never regretted them.

Until now.

Seeing his son's distraught expression, with eyes that had come close to revering him to now filled with dismay and disgust, Vegeta felt a sharp pain in his chest that wouldn't subside. He deserved this, he knew that. He deserved hatred. He deserved none of the love and affection his family had given him over the years. But Trunks… the boy did not deserve this. He had done nothing in his life to warrant being stuck with a father with so much blood on his hands.

Vegeta wanted to beg Trunks to understand, to try and forgive him, but if this was his punishment, his karma, so be it.

Dragging his gaze away from his trembling, teary son, Vegeta turned to the girl, who stood beside her mother, an eerily blank expression on her face.

Vegeta sucked in air through his teeth to smother his rage. "What the hell were you thinking?" he asked, managing to stop his voice from rising too far above its usual decibel.

Ara wrapped her hand around Seria's shoulders. "She didn't mean to-"

"No, don't make excuses." Vegeta cut her off with a snarl. "She knew exactly what she was doing."

"I showed Trunks what he needed to see," Seria said, tilting her head to the side. "He was afraid you had withheld the truth."

Vegeta grit his teeth together, pushing down his rage. Seria couldn't help it, he knew. She had always been like this, with no sense of boundaries. Her gift was instinct to her, and trying to stop
her from diving in and out of people's most intimate memories, and dropping others in them was like trying to make a waterfall flow upwards.

He never should have come here in the first place. It was a risk, he'd always known that, and yet once more he'd tried meddling in the past, getting unforeseen consequences.

"I think we should leave you two to talk," Ara said with a sigh. "Come on Seria. Let's go pick up some food for these two. Can you believe Trunks has never tried iced eggs?" She ushered her daughter out the front door, giving Vegeta a slap on the back and a muttered "good luck" on her way out.

As soon as they left and the door had closed behind them, Vegeta sank to his knees beside his son and placed a cautious hand on his shoulder. "Trunks…"

"Don't." Trunks shook him off and shrank backwards. "You were just as bad as the androids. You destroyed lives. Entire planets. And you… you enjoyed it." He stared at Vegeta, his eyes begging for him to refute it.

"Yes." Vegeta choked out the admission. He bit down on his tongue to prevent himself from trying to make excuses. There were none that he could give that would make this right.

"Did Mama know?"

Vegeta started at that, eying his son warily. Trunks had managed to mask his face, hardening his eyes and straightening his mouth in an expression that was painfully familiar because Vegeta had seen it on his own face.

"Yes," he said. "But she wouldn't listen... Bulma would never listen."

"You're not…" Trunks swallowed hard and stared at the floor. "You're not a bad person anymore… right?"

"I would kill again, if that is what you mean."

Trunks winced and looked back up. "Why? You know it is wrong."

"Trunks…" Vegeta ran a hand over his face, breathing out deeply. "If it meant saving you, I would do anything, no matter how wrong."

"But never for no reason?"

"I have never done anything for no reason in my life," Vegeta replied.

Trunks pressed his lips together and frowned, going silent for a moment before speaking. "Those people you killed… You had no choice then."

"There is always a choice." At Trunks falling expression, Vegeta attempted to explain. "I could have refused, and then I would have been killed and another soldier would have taken my place. I could have made all the deaths quick, and I would have been considered weak, and tortured, then killed if I was lucky. I could have only killed those I was ordered to kill and my men would not have feared me, and would have eventually mutinied because out here…" Vegeta gestured upwards. "Out here in the universe, the only thing that matters is power."

"Kill or be killed," Trunks said, chewing on his bottom lip.
Vegeta gave him a silent nod, meeting his wide, unblinking gaze. Suddenly, Trunks flung himself forward into Vegeta's arms, clinging to his neck with a muffled sob.

Vegeta let out a breath that he didn't know he'd been holding, and embraced his son, praying to all the gods in the universe that this meant Trunks forgave him, that he had not destroyed the only good thing in his life.

"It's okay," Vegeta said again, feeling for Trunks' pulse in his wrist. It was weak – so weak that if he didn't get help soon, Trunks wasn't going to make it. Vegeta glanced around the small backyard wildly, peering around for anything that could help, but he found himself at a complete loss for the first time in his life. There were no senzu beans, no regeneration tanks, no hospitals. His only option was to try to tend the wounds himself. At least he'd had plenty of practice on his own wounds over the years.

Vegeta made to stand up and carry Trunks to a safer location, but two pairs of feet landed in front of them, sending grass and dirt flying with the impact of their landing. Vegeta recoiled in horror and clutched his dying son closer.

"How cute." The dry female voice made Vegeta shudder. He looked up to see Android Eighteen's sneer. "The great warrior prince has feelings."

Next to her, Seventeen had a matching smile on his face. "Isn't it adorable, sis? I didn't know monkeys could cry."

Vegeta hissed through his teeth. Gods, they sounded so much like Frieza and his men, throwing taunts designed to rile him up with the superiority of someone who knew he couldn't hurt them. He was desperate to rip these two metal freaks to shreds, but even as all his muscles tensed, Vegeta remained conscious of the small child stirring in his arms.

"Papa." Trunks' small hand gripped his forearm. Vegeta dropped his gaze to see two blue, terror-filled eyes. Eyes that begged Vegeta to save him.

"Everything is going to be fine," he murmured to his son. It was a lie of course. If Vegeta fought the androids now, Trunks would likely die from his injuries. If he didn't fight, the two androids would probably kill them both.

He thought quickly. Maybe he could stall for time and come up with a plan... He needed an exit strategy, and fast. "Why now?" he asked. "We haven't attacked you directly in years."

"Exactly," Seventeen said, his monotonous voice laced with boredom as he inspected what looked like dirt and blood under his nails. "It's been no fun at all."

Eighteen flashed her white teeth as she stepped forward, one hand on her hip, the other sweeping her short blonde hair behind her ear. "Things have been so dull around here. If you weren't going to bring the fight to us, we had to bring it to you."

"I will kill you both," Vegeta said, but his voice lacked its usual bravado, even to his own ears.

Both the androids laughed in response, but Vegeta ignored them and concentrated on his surroundings. They were in a suburb dense with housing. He could sense several low ki signatures in the area - humans probably. Potential casualties. If he survived this he might need their help.

Realising that he had to make the best out of two bad choices, Vegeta carefully laid Trunks on the grass. He gripped the boy's hand tightly. "Hold on, son."
Trunks whimpered in response, his eyes rolling back into his head.

Gritting his teeth, Vegeta let go of the boy's hand, then stood up and stepped in front of his son. "You want a fight?" He clenched his fists, digging his nails into his palms. "You've got one."

"Oh, goodie," Eighteen said, cracking her knuckles. "Finally, some fun."

Vegeta didn't waste time. He responded with a ki blast that had her sliding backwards and blocking, then sent another towards her brother. He had to get them as far away from Trunks as he could.

With a cry of fury, Vegeta powered up to Super Saiyan then launched himself at Seventeen, delivering a sharp uppercut followed by a drop kick that send the android spiralling into a building.

Eighteen growled and pounced forward, kneeling Vegeta in the gut before slamming her knuckles into his face. He fought back, but could do little more than block as her brother recovered and joined in, his foot cracking ribs and making Vegeta double over with a gasp.

Seventeen howled in delight as he grabbed Vegeta by the front of his shirt and tossed him up into the air. Vegeta saw what was going to happen next, but despite knowing it was going to hurt, he lowered his ki enough to let the double kick from both androids send him crashing across the roofs of houses until he dropped through some tiles and landed in a crumpled heap in the middle of a dusty, abandoned bedroom, a good three blocks away from Trunks.

He let out a groan, realising that in his eagerness to draw the fight away from Trunks he may have lowered his ki too much. Everything felt off-kilter, and Bulma's missing ki left a hole in him that made it difficult to focus on anything else. Vegeta coughed, and blood splattered on the floorboards beneath him. His shoulder was dislocated too, he realised as he faded out of his ascended form to save his strength, and lay where he'd fallen against a bed frame. Fighting against dizziness, he focussed on his son's ki. It was still there, if a little weaker than before, but there were several human ki signatures near him as well.

Vegeta let out a sigh of relief as both the androids dropped through the hole in the roof.

"That was pathetic." Eighteen sneered as she brushed some dust off her denim jacket. She then knelt beside Vegeta, placing a hand on his wounded shoulder squeezing so hard it took all his will not to cry out. "Your brat put up more of a fight than you."

"Especially when he turned his hair blonde," Seventeen added. "If we shaved off your hair, would that limit your power?"

"Touch my hair and I'll rip you apart," Vegeta snarled. Then Seventeen's words hit him. "Wait… blonde? Trunks… Trunks turned Super Saiyan?"

"Is that what you call it?" Eighteen rolled her eyes. "Lame. Just like you." She ran her hand down his torso, pausing over a deep cut in his side which also happened to be where his ribs were broken. With a grin, she dug her nails into his wound, scratching the bone underneath.

Vegeta felt the blood drain from his face from the effort it took not to scream out. His breathing came in husky gasps, and he grit his teeth together so hard his jaw ached.

The only thing enabling him to hold it together was his son's ki. It was moving, along with the
humans, and Vegeta could only hope that meant they were helping the boy. But Vegeta knew if he was going to get out of this alive, he had to make his own escape. Running away never sat well with him, chipping away at his pride each time, but the only thing that mattered was his son. Pride be damned.

"Maybe we'll kill you and keep your brat around to play with," Eighteen hissed at him, pressing her palm into his side, further crushing his ribs. "Or maybe we'll go get him now and torture him in front of you."

Seventeen crouched down on the other side of him. "Or you could join us. This is what you used to do, isn't it? Terrorise planets and clear them of sentient life? We could have so much fun together, and we would only beat the shit out of you when we are bored."

"We're always bored," Eighteen pointed out. "That's why we are here."

"True." Seventeen gave a boyish grin. "Gotta be better than dying in a pool of your own blood though, right?"

Vegeta laughed, but the sound turned into a hacking cough. When he'd managed to stop, he gave them a lazy smirk. "I spent a lifetime destroying planets for a psychopath. I'm not going to spend another working for the two of you."

"Torture it is," Eighteen said with a grin. "I'm so glad that's what you chose. I've been looking forward to hearing your screams of pain."

"Go fuck yourself," Vegeta gasped out. Then he gathered the energy he'd been holding back and exploded his ki outwards, flattening the house around them and sending the androids hurtling backwards.

In the dust from the explosion, Vegeta made his escape, staggering out of the blast zone towards the maze of houses to get out of sight of the androids.

As much as he wanted to go to his son, Vegeta headed in the opposite direction, his only plan to lead the androids as far from Trunks as possible. He made it out of the flattened area of earth and began moving through the streets, keeping close to any walls that remained upright.

When he saw the androids flying overhead, Vegeta kicked over a trash can and sent it rolling down the street. As planned, it drew the androids in, and Vegeta continued to weave through, playing cat and mouse.

"Come out, monkey," Seventeen called. "We won't hurt you... much." He laughed, a cackling cry that filled the streets.

"Don't make this harder on yourself," Eighteen said, her voice coming in from another angle. They were closing in on him.

Hoping he'd lured them away far enough, Vegeta powered back up to Super Saiyan, then aimed a ki blast at a four-story building next to Seventeen. With a groan, the building crumpled, falling on the android, but Seventeen merely blasted his way out of the wreckage. He sent a retaliatory blast in Vegeta's direction, but the Saiyan managed to dodge it by ducking down another street. Unfortunately, that other street contained Eighteen, who grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against a wall, pinning him there so his legs dangled in the air.

Fuck, he hated being short.
"Over here," she called out to her brother.

Vegeta clawed at her hands as her grip cut off his oxygen.

"Just kill him," Seventeen said, coming around the corner. He shook building dust from his dark hair. "He's more trouble than he's worth."

Eighteen grinned and powered up a ball of ki in her hand, pressing it to his chest. "Does the mighty prince of Saiyans have any last words?"

As if speaking was an option. She tightened her grip on his throat, laughing at his futile attempts to breathe.

Vegeta kicked out at her, but the black dots dancing in front of his eyes impaired his vision, and his movements felt lethargic, as if his limbs were too heavy for his body.

As the warm ki pressed closer to his chest, right over the spot Frieza had blasted through him, Vegeta let his eyes close. Trunks was safe, he could sense it. That was all that really mattered-

A whistling sound cut through the air, and Vegeta felt himself fall to the ground and he sucked air back into his burning lungs. An explosion to his left made him open his eyes, and he realised the androids were gone.

"Come on!" A small girl, about Gohan's age with dark hair in pigtails, came running forward, a rocket launcher strapped to her back. She grabbed his arm and wrapped it around her shoulders then started hauling him away. "That won't keep the androids down for long. We've got to go."

"What..." Vegeta inhaled a few breaths then swallowed, struggling to talk through his crushed windpipe. "Who..."

"I'm Videl," she said, dragging him inside a building. She leant him against a wall and pulled up a rug. Underneath was a wooden trapdoor that she hauled up. "Your son is safe. I'll take you to him."

Vegeta stared at her for a moment, but realised he had no other choice but to trust her. When she gestured to the hole in the ground, he nodded, then jumped down it, falling for a couple of stories before landing and promptly topping over on the damp ground.

Videl climbed down the ladder, closing the door after her and submerging them in darkness.

"You're lucky," she whispered, her hand finding his arm again. "We have a doctor in our group."

Vegeta nearly collapsed in relief, but managed to get himself to his feet, pulling his arm out of the girl's hand and using the walls for support instead. Trunks was going to be okay.

Vegeta sat in a worn but comfortable brown chair beside Trunks' bed in a small windowless room that looked like a concrete bunker. He held his head in his hands as he concentrated on his son's slowly improving ki. The boy was hooked up to a machine with an oxygen mask over his mouth and Vegeta could hardly bare to look at him. Every time his gaze settled on the mottled bruising on the boy's face and limbs, he felt as though he'd been cut in half.

The door opened and Vegeta looked up to see Videl come in with a tray of food.

She set the tray down on a small side table, then frowned, looking him up and down. "You need to
"I'm fine." Vegeta scowled at her, knowing his raspy voice gave away just how 'not fine' he was.

"Eat," she instructed, pointing to the tray. "The doctor will come see you shortly."

Vegeta contemplated telling her to mind her own business, but a rumbling in his stomach gave him away. Scowling, Vegeta grabbed a bread roll of the tray and tore into it with his teeth, his gaze flickering from her to his son and back again.

"No one will hurt you here," Videl said, raising her palms. "There's about a hundred of us and we work together to survive."

Vegeta swallowed the bread, grimacing as it went down his sore throat. "You run the place?" he asked, eying her carefully. She looked young, but then again, he'd been on solo purging missions at her age.

"My father does." Videl looked amused at his question, but her small smile faded at her next words. "The other boy… the one who can turn blonde like you. Is he…"

"Dead." Vegeta took another bite of bread, fighting the urge to scream or kill something or just completely break down.

"I'm sorry." Videl looked at her lap, curling her hands around each other. "He saved my life once. Saved the whole city really, not that it mattered in the end. Most died eventually. Was he… was he your son?"

"No," Vegeta said instinctively, but frowned when the answer sat wrong on his tongue. "Not by blood," he settled on, his stomach churning even more. "I will destroy them both." He dropped the remaining bread on the tray and fisted his hands. "For killing Gohan. For killing my… my…" He closed his eyes, choking on the mere thought of never seeing the blue-haired woman again.

"My father used to say the same thing," Videl said quietly. "But survival is the best we can hope for."

Vegeta shook his head and opened his eyes again to settle his gaze on his son. "No." He reached out to touch brush the damp hair back from Trunks' forehead. "This will be over eventually. And if I fail, he will not."

Vegeta accepted their food, relieved that they gave him the amount a human would normally eat because he felt so queasy he worried he wouldn't keep it down. He even allowed the humans to send their doctor in and tend to his wounds. But no matter how much they tried to convince him to get some rest, Vegeta refused to leave Trunks' side and remained perched in the chair, monitoring his son's ki as the beeping machines kept him alive.

It wasn't until Trunks' ki improved enough to be sure that he would pull through that Vegeta placed his hand beside Trunks, needing to feel the warmth of life radiating from him, then allowed himself to close his eyes and lean back in the chair, letting a fitful sleep overtake him.

He dreamt of Frieza and the androids, merged together in a grotesque form that tormented him with threats to his family. Threats to rip them apart. To kill them outright. To force Vegeta to kill them himself.

"I'll never let you hurt them," Vegeta growled in his sleep, only to instantly awake with a gasp and
realise that it was too late. The androids had already killed two thirds of his family.

At the feel of something moving beside his fingers, Vegeta snapped his eyes open and looked down at his son.

"Papa," Trunks mumbled from behind the oxygen mask, his free hand reaching to pull it off.

"Trunks." Vegeta couldn't help but smile in relief. He helped the boy take off the mask and sit up. "Careful, boy. Your injuries are not healed yet."

Trunks coughed and waved his hand towards the water jug on the table. Vegeta poured him a glass and helped him tip it back.

"Slowly," he instructed, looping an arm around Trunks' shoulders to keep him upright.

The moment Trunks had drunk enough water, Trunks shook him off with a scowl. "I'm fine, Papa." His gaze inspected Vegeta closely, his blue eyes so like Bulma's as they changed from irritation to concern. "You're hurt." They widened as he glanced wildly around the room. "Where are they?"

Vegeta opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came out. He swallowed hard and shook his head. As desperate as Vegeta had been for his son to wake up, he'd also been dreading this moment… dreading the answers he would have to give to Trunks' inevitable questions.

"Gohan. Mama. Where are they?" Trunks voice rose and broke on the last word and two tears tracked down each side of his face.

"Trunks… I'm sorry… They…" The boy stared blankly as Vegeta stammered, trying and failing to say the words.

"No." Trunks' bottom lip wobbled and he clenched his hands into the sheets.

"I wasn't… I couldn't…"

"No!" Trunks threw himself out of bed and into his father's arms, the boy's small fists beating against Vegeta's chest. "Mama!"

"She's gone," Vegeta croaked out, wrapping his arms around the boy and rocking him back and forth as he writhed in his embrace. "They are both gone."

"You lie!" Trunks screamed and sent a fist into Vegeta's jaw.

The blow didn't hurt, but it was enough of a surprise to make Vegeta drop his arms and Trunks jumped out of them, his ki radiating around him.

"Trunks. Calm down," Vegeta said as firmly as he could manage, standing up with his arm outstretched to his son.

Trunks just yelled louder in response, his ki knocking over anything not secured in the room. The first flickers of blonde began to show and Vegeta stared, open mouthed. It was true then. Trunks had become the legendary at six years old.

The door burst open just as Trunks fully erupted into waves of golden ki, and Videl and a tall, muscular man with a shock of curly black hair and a handlebar moustache came running in.

"Make him stop!" The man yelled over the sound of Trunks' cries and crackling ki.
"He'll give away our position, if he doesn't destroy this entire compound first," Videl added, shielding her face with her arm as the ki snapped in a wider circle.

"Trunks!" Vegeta tried again, stepping into the aura of ki to place his hands on the boy's shoulders. "They are gone, but you and I are here. We will avenge them. Then we will bring them back."

"How?" Trunks wailed, his ki dropping slightly. "Mama is dead. There's no time machine without her."

"We will finish it," Vegeta said, gripping onto Trunks' shoulders tighter. "You and me. I have the plans. Your mother left me instructions in case this happened. We can do it, son, but I need you... I need you to lower your ki now, and I need you to be strong."

"I can't…" Trunks let out a sob, his ki extinguishing with a pop and his hair fading from yellow to purple. "I can't be strong, Papa."

"You can." Vegeta caught the boy as he collapsed forwards, then sank to the concrete ground with him. "You're a Saiyan Prince. And you are my son." He buried his face in Trunks' soft hair and breathed slowly as he held the shuddering boy. "I've got you," he mumbled. "We'll do it together."

After the discovery of the truth behind his father's past a day ago, Trunks had kept to himself, barely talking to his father, and avoiding Ara and Seria at all costs. It wasn't hard - Ara had given Trunks his own bedroom and he hid in there, only coming out for meals. A bedroom to himself was something he hadn't had in years. He didn't normally mind sharing with his father, but he was grateful for the privacy in this case. Things between Trunks and his father were strained - Vegeta kept looking at him like he was going to break, and every time Trunks looked at his father he saw the aliens he'd cut down so brutally, and he knew Papa could see it in his eyes.

At a knock at the door, Trunks glanced up from the book he'd been reading (he'd been amazed to discover that the translator in his ear worked on the written work as well) When he checked the ki signature, he sat up in his bed, cross legged on top of the blankets.

Seria.

"Come in," he said, torn between nervousness and curiosity. He did not want to go back into any memories.

Seria opened the door and stepped inside, leaving the door ajar. "My mother said I should apologise."

She crossed her arms and leaned against the wall beside the door, not looking in the least apologetic as her dark eyes gazed at him without blinking.

"Okay…" Trunks glanced at the door, wondering if he could make a run for it. "Are you... going to?"

Seria frowned and cocked her head. "Going to what?"

"Apologise."

She looked him up and down then took a step forward. "You appear unharmed."

Trunks sat up straighter on his bed, frowning at her. "You don't think you did anything wrong."
"Wrong' is subjective." She took another step. "I have the memories of over fifty people in my head. Showing you your father's past does not come close to any of the wrong I have seen." Another step, and suddenly she was at the foot of Trunks' bed and he had the sudden urge to blast a ki shot at her and bolt. "Showing you that your father saved me and my mother, showing you that even though Veggie had been trained to kill to survive since he was half our age, he still had capacity for good… how is that bad?"

Trunks shut his eyes and shook his head, still unable to escape the memory of watching his father kill innocent lives. "Saving one or two people does not make it right when he's killed thousands in a day."

He felt the bed dip in front of him and opened his eyes to see Seria sitting on the bed.

"Right and wrong is not a list you try to keep balanced. What matters is what you do despite the bad, despite the evil." She held up her hand, showing Trunks the burned skin, then pointed at the scars on her face. "I got these when I was two. One of Frieza's men found my Mama and tried to take us in. Veggie found out and abandoned his mission to come save us. Do you know what Frieza did to people who disobeyed orders?" She leaned in close to Trunks, holding up her hand like a threat. "Showing you those memories… now that would be wrong."

Trunks let out a shuddering breath, remembering the flashes of his father's dreams he'd caught over the years. Yes, he had a good idea of what his father had gone through any time he'd rebelled against Frieza. He gripped the blankets underneath him and squeezed his eyes shut.

"He's still your papa."

"I know," he hissed out.

"I'm not sorry I showed you," Seria said quietly. "But I am sorry you are upset, and that it made you angry at Veggie. I had hoped… I had hoped we might become friends."

Trunks opened his eyes his surprise. Seria stared at him earnestly, a small smile curling her lips.

"I don't have any friends," she said. "Most people are afraid of me. Or think I am… peculiar."

"I can't imagine why," Trunks said sarcastically.

Seria laughed, her dark eyes sparkling and for a moment she looked like the young girl she really was.

"You… you won't ever do that memory thing on me again?" Trunks asked. He supposed he didn't dislike Seria. He couldn't imagine what he'd be like if he had the memories of fifty people haunting him.

"I promise." Seria held up her hand so her fingers pointed to the roof. "No memory sweeping or pushing."

"Okay," Trunks said, copying her hand movement as he sensed it was like Earth's pinkie swearing. "Friends then."

Seria grinned at his copying of her hand movement, then placed her hand back in her lap.

Trunks couldn't help but settle his gaze on her marred hand. "So, how does it work? Do you read the minds of everyone you touch?"
"You mean, did I read your mind?" Seria said with a widening of her eyes that looked suspiciously innocent. "No, I didn't. I can choose whether to sweep for memories, or push them in, or to do nothing at all."

Trunks relaxed slightly next to her. He'd been worried about accidentally touching her and being thrown into another set of memories. "Can your mama push memories as well?"

"No. Just sweep." Seria twisted her fingers around, glancing sideways at Trunks. "And she takes longer too because she needs to sift through a person's memories to find what she's looking for, while I simply absorb everything." Her dark eyes looked at Trunks without blinking, her mouth suddenly a straight line, all humour gone from the corners. "My papa's father - my grandfather - had abilities too. He could see the future. Mama thinks maybe that's why my abilities are so strong."

Trunks stared back at her, wondering what it was like to have the memories of other people rattling round in her brain. Especially if some of those people were bad enough to make Vegeta's deeds look good.

"Do you want to play a holo game?" Seria asked, breaking the sudden silence. "Mama got me a new one."

Trunks nodded even though he had no idea what a holo game was. He was willing to do anything if it meant forgetting about psychic abilities and memories for a while.

Seria leapt off the bed gracefully and tugged on Trunks' hand. He flinched at the touch, but when nothing happened he let her lead him out of his bedroom, down the hall, and into another room.

The room was cavernous, with dim lighting and midnight blue walls. There were several black, plush bench seats pushed against the back wall, but it was otherwise unfurnished. Seria pressed a button was on the wall that Trunks had assumed was a light switch, but instead an orb at the other end of the room began to pulse with a pale blue light, getting faster and faster until it exploded around the room into a three-dimensional painting drawn with blue light. In the room were armoured people of many races, all frozen in a variety of positions, some with weapons mid strike, others with bare hands up defensively.

Trunks stepped into the room and reached out a tentative finger to touch a soldier closest to him. His finger past straight through the blue light.

"Put this on," Seria said, passing him a metal clasp. She put one on herself, snapping it around her wrist, so Trunks did the same. "Now try," she instructed, pointing at the same soldier.

Trunks reached out again, but this time his finger fell against the soldier's arm, hitting something warm and solid. "Freaky," he murmured, pulling his finger back and staring at it.

"No ki," Seria said. "The cuff dampens it, but yours is so strong you could probably break it. This game is about technique only."

"What am I meant to do-"

"Holo. Begin!" Seria called out before Trunks could finish his question, and the room burst into a flurry of sharp ear cries and movement.

The soldier nearest to Trunks brought his fist forward, lodging it into Trunk's shoulder and sending him stumbling backwards. The hit didn't hurt exactly, although he'd definitely felt it, and Trunks couldn't help but grin. Now this was sparring! He leapt into the fray with Seria, attacking and
blocking.

"This is level one," Seria called over the noise. "They only take five hits."

And sure enough, when Trunks managed five solid blows on a soldier, it disappeared with a weird sucking sound, and one of the other soldiers rushed forward.

Seria seemed adept at this game, whirling around the room elegantly, her small fists shooting out with impressive accuracy.

Within ten minutes the two of them had cleared the room, barely out of breath but both laughing.

"It helps me focus," Seria said, tucking her unruly dark hair behind her ears. "It's easy to get lost up here." She tapped her temple and twisted her mouth into a wry smile. "Focusing like this helps me remember that I'm not the people in my head."

"They talk to you?" Trunks asked, taken aback.

"No, but… they are always there. You know?"

Trunks stared at her blankly. No, he had no idea about having people in her head.

Seria laughed at his expression. "It's okay. Did you want to increase the level and try again?"

"Yes!" Trunks said, a little too eager to change the subject, but the game was fun.

"I could take us to level ten. It's what I'm up to so far…” Seria grinned at him, flashing her teeth. "If you think you can handle it."

Trunks smirked back at her and dropped into a fighting stance. "Bring it on."

"We've got four defence ships in orbit, and the city is armed with ki cannons, but invaders have chipped away at our security systems." Ara brought up the city plans on the holographic screen in front of them. "I'm afraid next time we might not be so lucky."

Vegeta stepped forward into the control space and used his hands to zoom in and inspect the diagrams projected in front of him. It had been years since he'd used this technology and he couldn't help but wonder how Bulma would react if she saw it. She'd probably already be pulling it apart to figure out how it worked.

He zoomed back out to look at the orbital defences. When he mentally recalled what it had looked like last time, and the recommendations he'd made, he frowned. "I see the embassy ignored my advice to reposition defensively instead of offensively."

Ara scowled at that. "Yes. They were not convinced of your intentions."

"Even after I saved this miserable planet from its invaders?" Vegeta clicked his tongue in irritation. "And there were five ships last time I was here. I told them to get more, not less."

"We were attacked in the last solstice," Ara said. She stepped next to him and took the controls, swiping back to a historical plan before zooming into the ship in question with a wide sweep of her hands, then pointing at a section of the hull. "They managed to disable the ship's shields using a plasma ray that penetrated here." She glanced up at Vegeta through her pale lashes. "We lost fifteen hundred that day."
Vegeta pressed his lips together and kept scanning through the records. Their weapon systems could do with dramatic improvements. If Bulma were here she probably would have redesigned them from the ground up. He didn't have the knowledge, or the time, to do that, but there were a few things he could do to assist. Rearrange the positioning, create the ability to counter attack…

"I saw what happens to this place in your memories," Ara said, placing a hand on Vegeta's shoulder and making him tense. "In the future, you made a trip into space and stopped by Fardarna."

"Only to discover that this planet was destroyed." He stepped back, forcing Ara to drop her hand. "I don't know when it happened so I can't give you a date to prepare for."

Ara gave him a small smile, and he knew she'd understood what had gone unspoken. He stopped here in this time to try to prevent it.

"You are a good friend, Vegeta."

"That is not what Raditz believed in the end," Vegeta replied, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice as he recalled the devastation on Raditz's face when Vegeta had reported Ara's death. Raditz's grief had quickly turned to fury and suspicion of Vegeta's role in her demise and things had never been the same between the two Saiyans after that.

"I know I didn't believe it at the time, but you did the right thing, not telling him." Ara sank into a chair beside the desk with the hologram projector and drummed her fingers on it. "That man couldn't lie, and even if he'd managed he'd have wanted to join me and his disappearance would have drawn too much attention."

Vegeta turned away, surprised at her admission, which had been the biggest source of contention between them, but unwilling to deal with any more emotional crap. He'd been dealing with enough of that lately.

"I've got some ideas for improvements," he said abruptly, switching back to the diagrams of the current defence set up. "I'll write them up and help you present them to the embassy. Maybe they will listen to me this time."

"Thank you," Ara said, and although Vegeta refused to look at her, he could feel her pale eyes boring into the back of his head.

Vegeta stood at the standing dinner table beside the small kitchen, watching Ara pull food out of a laser-heated oven and serve it onto a large tray. It was some kind of meat, sliced to be eaten without cutlery. On the table was a large pile of knobbly bread that Vegeta recognised and knew had a sweet, syrupy taste.

He'd capsulised their refuelled ship to free up the dock and made the decision to stay on the planet longer than intended, both because Fardarna's defence system needed far more work than he'd realised and because he didn't think trapping him and Trunks together on a ship for a couple of months would do them any good at this point.

Trunks had been quiet over the last couple of days as Vegeta and Ara worked on new defence plans. Normally Trunks chatted away non-stop, but now he rarely said a word, and went to bed early, obviously avoiding his father. Vegeta didn't push it. Trunks was entitled to ignore him for the rest of his life if he so wished, and Vegeta knew that forcing the matter wouldn't help.

Only Seria, oddly enough, had managed to get Trunks to emerge from his bedroom. Vegeta had kept a close watch on his son's ki, which had been too close to Seria's since she'd gone to
'apologise' for his liking, but there hadn't been any dramatic spikes in ki, so Vegeta knew the girl hadn't broken her word not to touch Trunks again.

Instead, they'd been playing a game for the past couple of days, and hearing Trunks' whoops of joy had been enough to let the two of them remain unsupervised. If it meant Trunks was happy, and not dwelling on the things he'd seen, Vegeta would let Trunks process in his own time, and focus on what he'd come to do on this damn planet in the first place.

"Seria, Trunks!" Ara called out as she poured fruit juice into glasses. "Come eat."

The two came barrelling in, racing each other through the doorway to the point where they actually got stuck in it for a moment, and tumbled to the floor as they pushed their way out.

With his face flushed, and lips curled into a genuine smile, Trunks looked like the happy boy he'd been before… before Bulma died. Before he'd had to grow up at too young an age. Trunks met Vegeta's gaze and his smile faded slightly, but he didn't look pained as he had every other time he'd cast eyes on him.

"What is it?" Trunks asked Ara, grabbing a handful of bread and meat and shoving both into his mouth at the same time. "S' delicious."

"Carabound meat." Ara threw Vegeta a quick grin and raised her eyebrows. Clearly, she'd noticed the change in the boy too. "And the bread is made from a few ground vegetables and a sweetener."

"A carabound is a five-legged animal," Seria said between mouthfuls. "It's rather pretty to look at."

"Five legs?" Trunks paused in his eating to stare at the meat as if it would give him all the answers. "Earth creatures usually only have two or four." He glanced at Vegeta suddenly and grinned. "Or none."

Vegeta shuddered, knowing exactly which revolting creature Trunks was referring to, and Trunks laughed, only to cut off suddenly and purse his lips together. The boy looked away quickly and went quiet again, leaving a sick feeling in the pit of Vegeta's stomach.

It's only been a few of days, he reminded himself as he tore a furious chunk out of his own slice of meat. A pity patience wasn't a virtue of his.

He'd actually forgotten, for a moment.

Trunks had forgotten everything he'd seen about his father's past, and only seen the father he'd always known. The father who's cooked him meals out of scraps every night, going hungry so Trunks could eat. The father who picked up old movies on excursions out for time machine parts, then watched them with Trunks while delivering commentary about how awful the special effects were. His papa, who despite not having any knowledge of such things, spent two and half years ignoring his natural instincts to fight and instead spent his time piecing a time machine together from plans so he could keep his son safe.

Trunks stared at the bread in his hand then took a slow bite of it. He hadn't forgiven his papa, he realised, because there was nothing to forgive.

He peeked at his father to see the man scowling at his food. Trunks opened his mouth, wanting to say something, anything to let his father know that it was okay. Nothing came out. Not knowing what to say, Trunks frowned and continued to eat his food without really tasting it.
"I bought iced egg," Ara said, breaking the awkward silence cheerily.

Trunks glanced up to see that everyone had finished eating. Ara went into the kitchen then brought out a large metal bucket and some bowls.

"Your father loves this stuff," Ara said, serving a white, lumpy substance into each of the bowls.

Trunks wrinkled his nose. It didn't look particularly appealing. "What's so good about it?" He looked at his father for the answer and Vegeta froze for a moment, his eyes wide.

"It's hard to explain," Vegeta said. "Just... give it a chance."

Trunks stared back at his father, wondering if he was talking about more than this dessert, and gave him a slow nod.

Ara placed a bowl and something similar to a spoon, but wooden and even more curved, in front of him. Trunks picked up the spoon and scooped some of the food onto it. The iced egg had both crunchy and soft parts, despite appearing all soft to look at.

When Trunks placed some in his mouth, he let it sit on his tongue as it fizzed slightly, and the coldness swept through his mouth. It was sweet, with a light fruity taste that he couldn't place. A little like a cross between ice cream and meringue in texture, he realised, thinking back to the treats his grandmother had made him.

"Good, right?" Seria asked, licking her spoon.

"Yeah." Trunks glanced at his father. "It's good."

Vegeta furrowed his eyebrows, looking at his bowl then back up at him. "Trunks," he started to say. "I-"

A rumble, followed by a deafening boom then a cacophony of screams and sirens outside cut him off. The entire apartment shook with the force of the sound, the table trembling before them.

When the shaking stopped down, everyone ran to the large window to look out. It was chaos. Across the city, buildings had been downed, and in the sky were three black ships that looked a little like warships, with large glowing cannons.

"How the fuck did they break through the shields?" Vegeta yelled, running across the room to grab some sheets of paper.

"That should have been impossible!" Ara snatched her jacket off a hook by the door and shrugged it on. "Go to the basement," she commanded Seria and Trunks. "Don't go outside."

"Where are you going?" Trunks asked, grabbing his father's arm as he tried to rush past him. "I can help!"

"We are under attack," Vegeta replied. "Looks like ex-WTO ships. Keep Seria safe. Let me handle this."

"But I can-"

"Trunks!" Vegeta placed his hand on Trunks' shoulder. "Your job is to stay safe, and to keep Seria safe too."

"I can look after myself," Seria said sulkily.
"We know," Ara said gently. "Look out for each other."

Vegeta lifted his hand and ran it over his face. "But please, both of you do as we say for once?" Then he left without waiting for an answer, disappearing with Ara behind closed doors. Trunks looked out the window again to see his father and Ara flying through the frantic crowds, heading straight for the destruction.

"Are we really going to wait here?" Seria asked, clenching her fists with a scowl.

Trunks stared outside, feeling the pulses of ki dropping off as lives began to perish. "Of course not."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience in waiting for this chapter. I'm back from holiday now, and feeling refreshed, which means I will now be getting back into my regular writing routine. No present BV again but I'm hoping for them in the next chapter.
Vegeta sped over the stampeding crowds of Fardarnans and other civilians, powering up to Super Saiyan as he flew between the city’s buildings, dodging hover cars along the way. He didn’t look back for Ara as he made his way to the centre of destruction, but sensed her take to the air and follow him at a slower speed.

The buildings closest to the blast centre had been disintegrated, and the surroundings ones weren’t faring well either, groaning under the buckled weight of themselves and collapsing one by one, in a row of grey, dusty dominoes.

The metal warship that had caused the original damage inched through the air, an ominous structure that cast a shadow over half the city. Its engine rumbled so loudly it almost drowned out civilian screams.

The ship moved in Vegeta’s direction, and he knew it wouldn’t be long before the cannons took fire at another sector. If he didn’t do something the ship would destroy this entire city, and everyone in it.

Below him he spotted about forty soldiers of the Fardarnan army, their ki guns firing pathetic little pellets of light at the ship. They hit the ship’s shield then dissipated into nothing. What did the soldiers think would happen? Their efforts were futile, they had to know that.

Vegeta dropped down in front of the platoon, searching for whoever looked like they were in charge. His eyes settled on a bipedal man he recognised. He wasn’t Fardarnan, but that wasn’t unusual on this port planet. He was tall and slim, with golden skin, delicate features, and four white eyes wrapping around his head like a bandana - a member of a race whose name Vegeta had never bothered to remember but who were famed for their beauty.

“Lieutenant.” Vegeta lifted his lip into a sneer. “Get your men out of here and let me handle this. You’ll only get in my way.”

The lieutenant scowled back, his white eyes blinking furiously. “Vegeta.” He aimed his ki gun at the Saiyan’s chest. “Is this your doing?”

“Please,” Vegeta scoffed, but couldn’t help but be amused at the man’s courage. The lieutenant
knew just how strong he was and that a ki gun would do nothing. “If I wanted to destroy this city I
wouldn’t need a ship.”

“Han!” Ara landed beside Vegeta, her face flushed from the flight. “This has nothing to do with
Vegeta. He’s been helping me work on plans for the city’s defences, not planning to destroy it.”

“Still fraternising with your old colleagues, Captain?” The lieutenant asked, but despite his harsh
reference to her WTO past, his gaze softened slightly as it settled on Ara.

Vegeta recognised the look and rolled his eyes. The lieutenant had been smitten for Ara since she’d
come to Fardarna.

“If you’d listened to him about our defences in the first place we wouldn’t be in this situation right
now,” Ara snapped back at him. “These weapons aren’t going to do shit against that ship.”

“What do you suggest, Captain?” Lieutenant Han asked, lowering his gun reluctantly as he blinked
up at the ship.

“Take out the cannon,” Vegeta interjected. “Then board the ship and take it by force.”

“I wasn’t asking you,” the lieutenant said.

“He’s right.” Ara stepped forward and placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “We need another ship
since the last attack hit our fleet. If we can commandeer this one we’ll be in a much better position
to defend ourselves from future invaders.”

“They are beginning to power up the cannon again,” Vegeta said, taking in the glowing lights in
the sky. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Vegeta!” Ara grabbed his arm before he could take off, her eyes pooling with concern.

He raised his eyebrows at her, wondering if she was going to spout some sentimental rubbish.

“Contain any explosion,” she said instead. “I want that ship as intact as possible.”

He couldn’t help but smirk back at that, despite her giving him a direct order, then pulled his arm
out of her grip to give her a mock salute. “Meet me at the port bow after the cannon has been
disabled.”

“I’ll come too,” Lieutenant Han said firmly, but at Vegeta’s disdainful sneer his gold skin flushed
to a sunburnt orange. “You need someone to pilot the ship, and I have experience with that model. I
can navigate us to the main controls.”

Vegeta narrowed his eyes, but gave them a sharp nod before blasting into the air towards the
pulsing orange lights of the cannon.

Trunks stepped into the thick clouds of dust rising from the destruction, shielding his eyes and
coughing. The city’s already humid air felt even heavier than normal, with grey particles settling
on his skin.

Seria touched Trunk’s elbow, her gaze flicking from side to side as she took in the wreckage. “This
way.” She led them to a crumbled building where people of a variety of races were pulling blocks
of concrete away from an area and dragging bloodied people out.

Trunks swallowed hard, the scene reminding him of his own time, when the few humans left
would rummage through destroyed cities in search of their dead loved ones. It was ironic how he’d travelled into the past in search of the key to peace, only to find himself on a planet on the brink of destruction once more.

“Trunks!” Seria’s sharp voice brought him back to the destruction. “You can sense ki, right? You can help anyone left alive down there.”

Trunks nodded, attempting to shake himself out of his thoughts. Glad to have something to distract him, he closed his eyes and focussed on any ki signatures he could feel underneath the rubble. There were eight nearby, all with varying strengths. Trunks found the weakest one, knowing they’d need help the soonest. “Down here.” He began tugging at parts of the wall, breaking them into smaller pieces to move them, much to the shock of the people around him.

Seria began helping him, and he realised that her Saiyan blood didn’t only give her the natural talent for battle technique he’d seen in the holo game. She was strong too, hauling rocks away as if they weighed nothing.

Trunks focussed on the ki, digging a path towards the injured person. When he found an arm, dark and covered in spikes, he sighed in relief, and began to pull out the Fardarnan man with Seria’s help.

But as they laid the man out on the ground, Trunks realised it was too late. The Fardarnan’s ki stuttered out into nothing, his green cat-like eyes staring blankly up at the sky.

“Keep going,” Seria said, wiping her eyes. “We have to keep trying.”

Trunks pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. He was going to have to alter his strategy and rescue the people with the highest ki first, knowing that those with weaker signatures probably wouldn’t make it.

Trunks dropped his hands and nodded at Seria. “Over here.”

Vegeta rose into the air before the cannon, ignoring the rolling waves of heat coming off it as it continued to power up, and the trails of sweat trickling down his neck because of it. The cannon dwarfed him - he knew that from the ground he would look like a mere speck against it - but he drove himself further up, even as the scalding temperature rose and began to singe his skin.

How to disable the cannon without blowing up the ship? Vegeta couldn’t attack it head on - that would result in an explosion that would take out both the ship and half the city. But he only had about a minute to disable it.

The inside of the cannon was concave, and Vegeta peered through the red glow, looking for a clue to the mechanics of it. When he saw a panel that looked removable, he sped towards it then ripped it off as fast as he could, hissing as the hot metal burned his fingers. He dropped them panel then blasted it into dust to avoid hitting bystander below, before staring at the mass of multicoloured wiring.

Bulma would know what to do. She’d have pulled it apart in seconds. But while Vegeta could cobble something together from plans, he didn’t have the luxury of mechanical engineering PHDs to allow him to decode alien technology in seconds. So, he did the only thing he could.

Vegeta shoved his hand amongst the wires, wrapped his fingers around them, then tugged.

Electricity sparked, blue embers exploding like fireworks in the red heat. A jolt ran through
Vegeta’s arm, contracting his muscles in sharp spasms, then reached his head with a sharp pain that felt like a kick from Frieza.

As the glow from the cannon began to fade, the heat ebbing with it, Vegeta’s ki dropped, his eyes rolled back in his head, and gravity took over as he plummeted away from the ship and down to the city, his hand still clenched around a mass of broken wiring.

Trunks and Seria scrambled the get more people out of the rubble. A few Fardarnans began to help, hauling rocks out of the area, their lithe muscles rippling with the effort. Trunks lifted a large block of concrete with twisted metal skewering it. Underneath was a weak Fardarnan, her eyes fluttering against the sudden light.

Trunks tossed the concrete to the side and helped Seria lift the woman out, before placing her in the arms of a waiting Fardaran, who quickly sped off, presumably to get the injured woman medical care.

“Where next?” Seria asked.

Trunks opened his mouth to reply, but the sensation of a familiar dropping ki made him pause and search the sky.

A black dot plummeted down towards the planet, away from the now deactivating cannon. Without a word of explanation, Trunks powered up to Super Saiyan and blasted through the air towards the falling body as fast as he could.

He caught his father’s limp body mid-air, but the force of the fall made them both descend. Trunks managed to right himself before hitting the ground, landing heavily on his feet with his father still in his arms.

Breathing heavily, Trunks set his father down then bent over him and shook his shoulder. “Papa. Papa!”

Vegeta let out a soft groan in response, his eyes stirring under his eyelids.

“Is he okay?” Seria called out as she landed a few metres away the ran to close the distance.

“I don’t know,” Trunks said, grabbing his father’s closed hand to inspect what was in it. Thick electrical wiring stuck out of it, and when Trunks opened the palm and yanked the wiring off his skin and tossed it aside, he winced at the black scorch marks and indentations on the palm’s skin. Vegeta’s fingertips were also red and blistered, and the raw redness crept all the way up his arm.

Trunks had been shocked by the time machine once when he’d crossed wires accidentally. It had thrown him across the room and had hurt like hell. He glanced up at the now black cannon. The shock from that, assuming his father had done what he thought he had, must have been massive.

Vegeta grunted and tugged his hand away from Trunks. “Did it work?” he asked, his words coming out slurred.

“The cannon is off,” Seria said, helping him sit up.

“Good.” Vegeta blinked a few times, then set a glare on Trunks. “I told you to stay inside.”

Trunks started to stammer out a reply, but Seria cut him off.
“People are dying!” She glared back at Vegeta, her scowl rivalling his. “You can’t expect us to hide when we can help.”

Vegeta furrowed his brow even more, but then sighed and shook his head, before glancing at Trunks. “We’ll talk about this later.”

Trunks swallowed at his father’s scarily calm tone, and as Vegeta began to stand, tried to help him up. Vegeta shook Trunks off with a huff, and stared up at the sky.

When Vegeta bent his knees, about to take off, Trunks grabbed his wrist. “Wait, Papa. Let us help.”

Vegeta paused, but didn’t take his eyes off the ship. “People will die Trunks.”

“People are already dying.”

The Saiyan prince let out a loud breath, clearly hesitating to say something. When he looked at him, Trunks was shocked to see a thread of genuine fear in his father’s eyes.

“I will be the one killing them,” Vegeta said, his tone almost gentle.

Trunks dropped his hand away from his father, his breath catching.

Vegeta looked away, but not before Trunks saw the disappointment cross his face.

“Papa,” Trunks said. “I-”

“The cannon won’t stop the ship from attacking. Smaller attack vehicles will deploy as soon as they get their soldiers in order. If you want to help, stay here and try take out their weapon systems from a distance. If you can’t, do not engage.” Vegeta gave his son one last glance, before taking off, hurtling towards the ship in a flash of golden light.

“You took your time,” Lieutenant Han said, scowling at Vegeta.

“At least you didn’t blow up the ship.” Ara gave him a broad grin and slapped his burnt arm, making Vegeta fight back a wince.

“They’re releasing the cavalary ships,” Vegeta said, inspecting the metal panels of the port bow that the three of them currently hovered in front of. There weren't too many ki signatures at this part of the ship - most seemed to be gathered at the other end where the fleet was being released. “If we can gain access to the main controls we can shut them down remotely. In the meantime, our disobedient children will take care of them.”

“Seria’s out there?” Ara glanced down at the city, her eyes wide.

“Yes, with Trunks.”

“You left a couple of kids in the city to fend for themselves?” Han bared his teeth, marring his symmetrical features with a surprisingly ferocious expression for his race whose smooth features didn’t allow for much facial movement.

“Seria will be fine.”

Ara glared at Vegeta. “Because she’s half Saiyan? She-”
“Don’t be ridiculous,” Vegeta said, cutting her off. “She got all her good genes from you, not Raditz. Trunks is with her. They’ll be okay.” He pushed past them both to inspect a door in one of the panels. It opened only from the inside, but Vegeta drew on his ki to produce a ball in his hand, ready to blow the door open.

“Let me do it,” Ara said, shoving him to the side. “We are going for stealthy here.” She created a smaller ball of ki, the size of her finger tip, then drew it around the doorway.

The door fell forward, and Vegeta extinguished his own ki ball and flew forward to catch the edge before it could fall to the ground with a clang and alert those inside.

When all three of them were inside the ship. Vegeta propped the door against the wall then looked at the lieutenant. “Lead the way.”

Small, bullet shaped airships dropped out of the ship, falling straight down before seeming to catch themselves before hitting the ground, the blasting forward, firing ki at the city.

Trunks and Seria took to the air and flew towards them. As he got closer, Trunks saw that these small ships were sleeker and newer than the monstrosity currently hanging over them. Their ki guns jutted out only slightly on their top, and Trunks narrowed his eyes and took careful aim at the small target.

He hit it dead on, shattering the ki gun, and let out a whoop. “Did you see that?”

Seria laughed, her wild hair shaking with the movement. “Brilliant! But there’s hundreds more. We can’t get them all.”

“Can you use ki?” Trunks asked, realising he hadn’t seen Seria use it before other than to fly.

“Not like that,” Seria said. “But I don’t need to.”

She blasted into the air, a purple aura surrounding her like a bubble. She dropped on top of one of the incoming ships and ripped the ki gun off it before throwing it to the side. Then she used the ship as a launchpad to propel her up again onto the next ship and repeated the action. A ki gun from another ship fired at her but the blast disintegrated against her ki shield and Seria took to the air to remove the gun from that ship too.

It looked like Seria could take care of herself, so Trunks continued his tactic of taking careful aim at the guns and destroying them from a distance. But as more and more ships appeared, he began to realise that his efforts weren’t even putting a dent in the waves of vehicles hurtling into the city. He took too long trying to aim specifically for the guns to avoid killing anyone.

Seria seemed to be having better luck, taking down twice as many as him. Maybe he could try her technique. Trunks often rose his internal ki level to protect himself, but he’d never manifested it outside himself before to use as a shield.

Concentrating hard, he gave it a go, drawing out his ki, and instead of forming it into a ball like he usually would, began to mould it around his body.

Satisfied that he’d managed it, he leapt back into the fray, joining Seria in destroying the ships’ weapons systems. He knew this was exactly what his father had told him not to do, but engaging them directly was the only way to stop them in time, so he jumped from ship to ship, playing leapfrog on top of them, ripping off the weapons as he went. Trunks spared a glance up at the mothership above them, hoping his father had a plan, because while they were now having an
impact on the fleet, it wouldn’t take long for the ships to break through.

The bowels of this ship weren’t sleek and white like Frieza’s main space base, where Vegeta had spent most of his off-planet time. Instead, the walls of this hulking warship were composed of dark, unpolished metal with thick rivets bolting panels together. The floor showed signs of grease and dirt, and the small inset lights dotting the roof flickered as the trio crept down the abandoned hall.

Lieutenant Han lead them through the maze of corridors, and while Vegeta had been dubious about letting the man tag along on this operation, he was relieved to have someone who seemed to know their way. Vegeta only had the vague sense of heading towards the front of the ship, and could have trekked around for hours. Or he could have just blown his way through walls to make a direct route, but Ara wouldn’t have appreciated him damaging the ship.

"Wait," Vegeta said suddenly, sensing a few people up ahead. Han and Ara paused, and Vegeta pushed past them and stepped into the next hall. Three bored-looking soldiers were leaning against the walls of the hall, guns propped next to them. Before they had a chance to reach the triggers, Vegeta blasted them all.

"Was that necessary?" Ara asked as she rounded the corner and saw the bodies. "If someone comes across them they’ll know we are here."

Vegeta raised his hand and send a beam of ki at the bodies again, turning them to dust. "Problem solved."

"I thought you'd said he'd changed," Han said to Ara. "Still seems like a psychopath to me."

Vegeta chuckled at that. "If you cross me you'll find out just how tame that was."

"Stop it, both of you," Ara hissed. She began to stomp down the hall, making Vegeta roll his eyes at the noise she made. She was the one who wanted to do this incognito.

They made it to the main control room, meeting only a few more soldiers on the way that Vegeta quickly disposed of, thankfully without any more muttered comments from Han.

“This is it,” Han said, pausing in front of the closed double doors. He hit the button to open them, but doors didn’t slide up. Han blinked his four eyes at Vegeta, who grinned and raised his hand, a ki ball already forming.

It hit the doors in a flash of purple light, creating a hole big enough for all three to enter side by side.

Through the hole, Vegeta saw a dozen soldiers all armed with ki guns. Most were Kad’buhrs, an insectoid race whose exoskeleton was harder than Saiyan armour. One person stood out as the only person with a uniform, the curved blue symbol on his chest showing his status as ship’s commander.

"Surrender the ship and we'll let you live," Ara said, aiming her gun at the commander.

The commander’s green eyes widened for a moment, then he let out a snarl. “Fire!”

When the guns erupted, Vegeta stepped in front of Han and Ara to contain the attack, then sent waves of ki at the soldiers, killing them all but the commander who had thrown himself backwards to cower under the control desk.
Han growled under his breath, frowning at the scattered bodies. "You didn't have to-

"They would have only returned later," Vegeta said. "Mercy only comes back to bite you later."

Ara gave him a long look, her pale eyes sizing him up. "You let me go."

Vegeta hummed agreement under his breath as he stepped over to the desk and yanked the commander out from under it. "And look at the mess I'm in now."

He threw the commander across the floor, watching impassively as the man tried to scramble away, his lithe muscles rippling under his skin as the spikes covering his arms stood up in fear.

"As for you." Vegeta took a step towards him. "Why don't you tell me why you've led an attack on your own people, Fardaran?"

At first Trunks thought the fleet was retreating. Their numbers began to thin closer to the city, but then they seemed to gather in clusters near warship. He took out the gun on one of the stragglers, grinning as Seria did the same.

But then he saw the ships peel off, then spin through the air in three swarms, coming straight for the two of them. They were planning on trapping them, Trunks realised. Or at least, making them retreat.

Seria didn’t look like she had any inclination to run away. She’d dropped to the ground in the middle of the destroyed part of the city, knees bent and arms up in a defensive fighting stance.

Trunks flew over to her and touched her elbow. “There’s too many of them.”

“Not for you,” Seria said, her voice low, an undercurrent of fury rippling through it. Trunks could tell she wasn’t angry at him though. Her gaze was directed at the incoming ships. “You could tear them to pieces.”

"Seria…" Trunks dropped his hand and glanced around them. The civilians in the area were either dead or had fled, and although he could hear the sounds of the intact part of the city behind them, the air around them felt stagnant, its atmosphere eerie. “I’ve never killed anyone,” he found himself admitting. “I don’t think I can.”

Seria straightened slightly and frowned at him. “Neither have I. But this is my home, not yours. You don’t need to help me.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Trunks said fiercely, dropping into his own fight stance beside her as the thrum of the incoming ships increased to a roar. “They’ll kill everyone in the city if we let them pass.”

“I’ll take the left, you take the right,” Seria said.

Trunks nodded, not bothering to ask what they were meant to do about the middle group of ships. With only two of them they didn’t have much choice.

The half-Saiyans blasted into the air to meet the ships, and began their dance over the tops of the spacecrafts, taking out as many weapons as they could. Trunks blocked most of the ki blasts headed towards him with his ki shield, but every time he used his ki to destroy a gun, his shield wavered. When a particularly large ki blast came towards him, he jumped up to avoid it and the blast hit the small spacecraft instead. The ship went down in a smoking spiral, crashing into a
crumbled building and bursting into flames.

Trunks felt ill, but didn’t have time to contemplate his role in the pilot’s probable death as more ships began aiming at him, ki flying wildly.

A scream to his left broke his concentration, and as Trunks glanced towards it, a ki blast got through his shield, grazing his arm. He hissed at the pain, but powered through the ships to look for Seria. When he found her, he caught the last moments of her fall as her limp body hit the ground.

“Seria!” His eyes widened when she didn’t move, seeing several ki blasts coming her way. Abandoning the fleet he’d been attacking, he darted through the ships towards her, dropping in front of her and charging up his own retaliatory ki attack towards the firing ships. He let out a war cry as he released his attack, and the giant ball of ki he’d formed cut through the ki of the ships’ weapons, and continued to head for the group of ships.

It hit the front of the fleet, destroying the first ships instantly and starting a chain reaction of explosions throughout the rest of them. Ships came hurtling to the ground, and Trunks dove to cover Seria and protect her from the falling debris. He could feel her breaths on his neck and he let out a sigh of relief. She was alive at least.

One ship skidded to a stop next to them, and when Trunks lifted his head, he saw a struggling alien struggling out of the cockpit with pincer arms. The cockroach-like alien made it half way out before collapsing, purple blood streaming down the side of the ship in rivers that pooled on the ground.

Nausea rose in Trunks’ throat and he pulled away from Seria and dropped to his hands and knees. He threw up on the ground, dizziness making everything spin.

“Trunks.”

At Seria’s weak voice, Trunks wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and turned back to her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded as she sat up slowly, wincing at the movement and placing a hand on the back of head. “They’re retreating.”

Trunks glanced up at the sky to see the ships heading back to the warship. Papa must have done it, he realised. He must have taken control of the ship and ordered them back.

A part of his wanted to stand up and cheer, but as he surveyed the damage around them - the disintegrated ships, the bodies of pilots scattered on the ground - he shuddered then closed his eyes, knowing that those deaths were on his hands.

Something was wrong with Trunks. Vegeta froze, his hand still holding the Fardarnan commander against the wall by his throat. Trunks ki wasn’t weak, but his energy felt off, with a ragged edge to it that only occurred when the boy was upset or frightened.

Vegeta dropped the commander with a sneer. The man had given them the access codes so Han could disable the cavalry, but he hadn’t revealed why he’d instigated the attack in the first place.

“Find out what he knows,” Vegeta said to Ara. “He’s just a lackey. I trust that I can leave it to you to get information on who he’s working for?”
Ara stepped forward with a grin that looked more like a wild animal baring its teeth. “I’ll get everything we need to know.”

Vegeta gave Ara and Han a quick nod before speed back out and down the halls, finding the way they’d come in. He launched himself out of the ship and hurtled to the ground, focusing on Trunks ki to direct him.

The city was a mess, with an entire three blocks flattened by the warship’s cannon, but it didn’t look like the cavalry ships had done much damage. A few dozen were scattered in the rubble, most in pieces and some still in flames. The bodies of pilots of various races littered the area, some still alive and twitching.

Vegeta ignored them all, and concentrated on his son. Trunks sat on his knees in the middle of the destruction, his head tipped forward so his purple hair covered his eyes. Seria sat next to him, a hand on his shoulder, and when she lifted her pale face towards Vegeta, he saw the concern in her eyes.

Vegeta landed in front of them and dropped to his knees on the ground. “It’s over.”

Trunks didn’t move, but Seria let out a deep breath and remover her hand from Trunks. “Is Mama okay?”

“She’s fine. Just taking care of some loose ends.” Vegeta frowned at his son. He had a gash on his arm, but otherwise seemed unhurt. He placed a cautious hand on the boy’s uninjured arm. “Trunks? You did well. The ships didn’t break through.”

Trunks shuddered under his hand, and lifted his head, revealing red-rimmed eyes. “I killed them.” A small sob came out with those words and Trunks squeezed his eyes shut. “Papa, I killed them.”

“They would have killed me,” Seria said, glancing around at the destruction as if it were the first time she’d seen it. “They would have killed everyone.”

Vegeta clenched his teeth. *Gods*, this was all his fault. If they hadn’t come here Trunks wouldn’t have been forced to see this. Or been forced to defend himself. *And then everyone on this planet would be dead*, Vegeta reminded himself.

“You had no choice, Trunks.” Vegeta said. “They would have killed a lot more people if you hadn’t stopped them when they did.”

“There is always a choice.” Trunks opened his eyes, their blue depths piercing. “You told me that.” His stare begged Vegeta to make this right, to fix everything.

How was he supposed to do that?

“Yes,” Vegeta said slowly. “And you made the best choices you could in the moment.”

Trunks looked at him blankly for a moment, then his face crumpled and he flung himself forward. Vegeta wrapped his arms around his son, pulling him closer.

“I know. And I know that you did too, Papa,” Trunks said with a sniff.

As it sunk in that his son was talking about more than today, Vegeta felt a weight lift off him that he hadn’t realised was there, and leaned his chin on Trunks’ head. It wasn’t how he wanted his son to forgive him, but he’d take it.
“Zersa,” Ara said, slamming her hand on the desk in front of her.

Vegeta started. He hadn’t heard that name in a long time. “Zarbon’s cousin?”

Ara nodded grimly, her lips pressed together in the sharp line.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Lieutenant Han muttered from the armchair he’d slumped into the moment they arrived.

They three of them were in Ara’s apartment, squeezed into her office. The embassy had sustained damage in the attack, and Han and Ara wanted to gather their collective intel before making a report back to his superiors.

Vegeta leaned against a wall, arms folded across his chest and fingers drumming on his bandaged arm. He’d only met Zersa once, and it wasn’t an experience he’d ever wanted to repeat. Zarbon was a sick bastard, but Zersa took cruelty to a new level.

“Zersa’s base is in the Gol’thak quadrant.” Ara pressed a button on her desk to bring up the holograph, then brought up a map. “We have a warship. I say we take it out, and prevent any further attacks before they happen.”

“We have one warship. One damaged warship,” Han pointed out. “Zersa has hundreds.”

Ara looked at Vegeta. “We might have a Super Saiyan.”

Vegeta scowled at that. “I’m not a weapon for you to cart around on your galactic hero’s quest. I have a mission of my own.”

“Salokrah is in the next quadrant over. Zersa is practically on the way,” Ara pointed out.

“We won’t stand a chance without you,” Han said, although the twisted expression on his fine features revealed just how distasteful admitting that aloud was.

“I’m not going.” Vegeta glared at Han, unable to look at Ara as he said the words. “I did what I came to do.”

“You don’t want to get Trunks any more mixed up in this,” Ara said. “I get that. But Vegeta, if the commander was correct and Zersa is starting up the WTO again, billions more will die.”

Vegeta finally looked at Ara and grit his teeth against her imploring stare. “He’s been through enough.”

The door to the office opened partially, and Vegeta glanced over to see a pale Trunks peeking into the room. “What have I told you about eavesdropping?”

“We should help them,” Trunks said, ignoring Vegeta’s accusation. “It’s the right thing to do.”

Vegeta scowled at his son. First spying on a conversation, now questioning his decision? At least Trunks seemed back to normal. “Just because it is the right thing, doesn’t mean we must do it,” he said. “We came back in time to save a planet, not the universe.”

Trunks cocked his head with a small smile. “This is the best choice. We always make the best we can, right?”

Vegeta let out a sigh and rolled his eyes skyward, knowing the boy’s point couldn’t easily be refuted. And truthfully, Vegeta wouldn’t complain about a chance to destroy Zersa. Payback was
well overdue.

“Fine,” he said in a low growl, turning to glare at Ara. “Prep a ship for the Gol’thak quadrant.”

Chapter End Notes

It's amazing how much more difficult a chapter is to write when you have to make up an entire world (as opposed to it being set on Earth at Capsule Corp where someone else has done it for me)! Next chapter will be back on Earth, pure V/B, and as much as I love writing Papa!Geta and Trunks I am looking forward to concentrating on Vegebul for a bit. Anyway, let me know what you thought of my attempt at a sci-fi battle chapter!

Review commentary:

How long does it usually take for you to finish writing a chapter?
- I'm a bit up and down to be honest. Depends on the length. I was averaging weekly updates before Christmas, but since the holiday period I haven't quite got my mojo back. I'll get there though!

I've been reading the section, where Ara telling Vegeta he did the right thing by not telling Radditz she was alive. I wonder was she just fond of Radditz or was it love? Is Ara the Vegeta between the two? (I can still imagine Radditz's face when she said she didn't really care for him).
- I've left it fairly open for interpretation I guess, but my view is that Ara didn't love Raditz, but did care for him.
He was avoiding her.

For the last three months, Vegeta had stopped coming to meals altogether, barely come into the house at all, choosing to sleep in the gravity chamber most nights, or disappearing from the compound completely, as he’d done for the last week.

There had been no requests for upgrades, repairs, or new bots. On the rare occasion she managed to spot him in the compound she attempted to engage in a verbal spar, tossing insults his way, but the only response he gave her was a glare before stomping away.

Bulma chewed on the end of her pencil and scowled at the calculations she’d been staring blankly at for the last fifteen minutes. Figuring out a way to shut down or at least limit the androids had not been going well, and she’d been hitting roadblocks at every corner. She was beginning to understand why the Bulma of the future hadn’t figured it out and had instead turned to the time machine. It probably wasn’t helping that she’d been working for twelve hours and as her thoughts often did, they’d turned away from her work and towards her moody houseguest.

Vegeta was avoiding her and no one ignored Bulma Briefs.

Bulma wasn’t angry at him. She didn’t even mind that he’d left her so quickly after their, erm… christening of the gravity room. She knew he had the emotional capacity of a vegetable, and after sex that mind blowing she’d have forgiven him for anything short of murder.

But while she figured that he was probably avoiding her in the hopes of not succumbing to temptation again, she had no such qualms. Vegeta might have slept with her in the hopes of ridding her from his mind, but all it had done for her was ignite the embers into an inferno. Bulma dropped the pencil with a sigh and ran her hands through her curly hair, her face heating at the memory.

*Kami*, it had been incredible, and completely different from sex with Yamcha, or the other few flings she’d had during their “off” times of their on-again, off-again relationship. With Vegeta,
there had been very few feelings involved in the act - it was as pure lust really - but she couldn’t help but admit that a small part of her cared for the arrogant man, and she suspected he cared for her too, at least a little.

Bulma slid open the drawer of her desk and pulled out the photograph Trunks had given her. She looked happy in the picture. Tired, but happy. She flipped it over to look at the date. She’d written a quick calculation on it that calculated conception based off a forty week human pregnancy. If she was correct, it was supposed to occur in about five months.

It certainly wouldn’t be a chore to sleep with the man again, although she knew Vegeta was vehemently against having a child, and getting him to agree to it for the purposes of conceiving Trunks could prove challenging. If not impossible.

Unless he thought it was safe, the voice in the back of her head said. If he thought you couldn’t get pregnant, or that it wasn’t the right time, you could-

Bulma cut her own thoughts off by dropping the photo into the drawer and slamming it shut.

Giving up on her ruminating and work, Bulma made her way out of the lab and up the stairs. She crossed the compound towards the main house, taking in a deep breath of the crisp, fresh air as she went. With the moon’s crescent only just peeking in the sky, the stars glowed brightly, unhampered by clouds.

As she neared the main house, her gaze shifted and she spotted a lone shadow sitting on top of the curved roof, silhouetted by the brilliant sky.

Vegeta.

She paused to peer at him, and even from this distance he seemed... forlorn somehow. His shoulders were slumped, his knees drawn up to his chest, and his arms wrapped around his legs. She wouldn’t have thought it was him if not for the obvious peak of hair.

Bulma hesitated at the front door for a moment, knowing that the likelihood of him sticking around if she joined him was low, but just before her hand fell on the doorknob she changed direction to the fire escape ladder on the side of the house.

She climbed it noisily, her low-heeled shoes clanging in every rung, so was surprised to find him still sitting there when she arrived at the top, mildly out of breath and trembling with nerves from the three-story height. She tugged the end of her pencil skirt down, which had ridden up during her climb, then cautiously scrambled across the smooth, rounded surface. She was even more surprised (and thankful because she wasn’t sure she’d be able to get down by herself) when he didn’t so much as flinch as she sat down next to him, her shoulder brushing his.

Bulma took a moment to slow her breathing, then gave him a sideways glance. Even in the starlight she could see streaks of mud on his face and his white gloves, and rips in his training suit, as if he’d been training outside. Vegeta didn’t move under her watchful gaze, his eyes remained focused on the stars above. Or, perhaps, on a particular star in the sky.

“I never got a chance to ask,” she asked after a beat, turning to look straight ahead while peeking him out of the corner of her eye. “Did it work?”

Vegeta remained silent for a moment, then his forehead creased as he pulled his gaze towards her. “Did what work?”

Bulma turned back to him, licking her lips and peering at him through her eyelashes. When she saw
his throat bob, she curled her lips into a smile. “The sex, of course. Did it get me out of your head?”

Vegeta rolled his eyes, but couldn't quite hide him embarrassment as he went back to looking at the sky. “I haven’t sought you out, have I?” he muttered, furrowing his brow.

“That doesn’t mean it worked.”

“Well it did.”

“Really…” Bulma nudge him with her arm, hiding a smirk when he flinched at the contact. “For how long?”

Vegeta pressed his lips together, giving Bulma the answer she’d suspected. Not long enough. He sighed again and bowed his head, closing his eyes. “Regardless, it did not help with my goal.”

Bulma’s stomach sank as she noticed the dullness in his voice. Although she knew he battled with the frustration of not ascending daily, he’d never acted like this before, never revealed how he truly felt about it. The man usually oozed self-confidence, his cocky attitude driving her mad at times, but it was what made Vegeta, Vegeta. Now though… he sounded tired, as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“No Super Saiyan yet, huh.” Bulma chewed on her lip, waiting for a response, but he didn’t so much as twitch at her statement. “You’ll get there,” she added.

“I’ve tried everything.” He unwrapped his arms and drew his legs down flat against the roof. When placed his hands on the surface below them, leaning back on his arms, he gave her a sweeping look. “I can feel it, I’m so close, but no matter how hard I train, even if I nearly kill myself, nothing happens.”

Bulma gave him a long look. “Maybe you’re trying too hard.”

“There is no such thing.”

She rolled her eyes at his instant reply. “Ever heard of rest days? Look at you, you’re a mess.” She reached out and dragged a finger down his arm, then inspected the dirt on her finger. “What have you been doing, training in the wilderness? You have state of the art equipment right here.”

“I like it out there,” Vegeta replied, drumming his fingers on the roof. “It reminds me of…” He trailed off and Bulma looked at him curiously.

“Of what?”

“Of… before.”

He didn't elaborate, and Bulma didn't know if he meant when he worked for Frieza as a planet purger, or if he was referring to a time much further in the past, when he had a planet to call home. “You need a different perspective,” she said, an idea began to form. She used his shoulder for balance and stood up, planting her feet carefully to avoid falling off. “And I have the perfect place for you to get one. You can fly us there.”

“You want me to fly you.” Vegeta looked up at her, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“What, are you afraid you’ll get your rocks off by just flying me?” Bulma scowled at him, placing her hands on her hips. “Or is there some Saiyan taboo about flying with other species?”
“Get my what? No, I…” Vegeta spluttered and although it was dark Bulma could have sworn he was blushing. “I didn’t think you’d trust me to fly you.”

“Oh.” Bulma blinked, then offered her hand to the prince. “Of course I trust you, Vegeta.”

The Saiyan frowned, and ignoring her hand launched himself to his feet gracefully. Still frowning, but appearing more puzzled than angry, he placed his hands on her waist. “Then you are an idiot.”

“Maybe.” Bulma grinned and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her chest to his and hiding a smile at his sharp intake of breath. “Head east.”

This was a mistake.

Holding her warm body in his arms, pressed so close to him he could feel her heart beat against his chest, had made all those irritating feelings - the ones he’d successfully held at bay by avoiding her - return. He’d scooped her legs, which were bare other than that short, tight skirt, into his arms and all he could focus on was the feel of her soft skin against his arm.

Fuck. She shifted in his arms, burying her head into his chest and sending little shivers through his veins. Who was he kidding? He hadn't lied exactly - their spontaneous exploit in the gravity room had managed to relieve his tension long enough for him stop thinking about her while training, but every other hour since, awake or dreaming, everything came rushing back and he had to force himself to stay away lest he seek her out and willingly fall under her spell once more.

It was as though she didn’t realise she was casting it, with each of her verbal jabs, and all those small touches she deigned to bestow driving him further and further into madness. What he would give to have her writhing under him again, cheeks flushed with exertion and pleasure, calling his name in rapture…

“Down there,” Bulma called out, the wind of their flight throwing her words up at him. She pointed below them and in the dark Vegeta could make out a dome building surrounded by a forest on one side, and a large, peanut shaped lake on the other.

He descended quickly, landing hard and cracking a few paving tiles on impact in his haste to untangle himself from the woman.

She let out a little yelp, clinging even tighter on impact. “Careful Vegeta! I’m not a freakishly strong alien like you.”

He whipped back his arm to let her legs fall until her feet hit the ground. “No, you’re pathetically weak,” he growled back, grasping her wrists which she’d looped around the back of his neck and bringing them forward.

“Delicate,” Bulma countered, tugging her wrists out of his hands. “And I might not be physically strong, but we both know I have the stamina to keep up with you.” She gave him a wink then turned and began walking towards the building. “This way, hot stuff.”

“Hot stuff?” Vegeta muttered to himself. He peeled off a glove and touched his arm with his hand. He wasn’t any warmer than usual. If anything he was cool from the flight and the early winter air. With a frown, he pulled his glove back on and followed her up the paved pathway.

As Bulma sauntered up to the front door, security lights flicked on, bathing the front of the
property in light and revealing dark exterior walls of knotted wood. The entrance was a monstrosity, with two double doors that were a story and a half high, with no visible door handle.

Bulma slid up a small metal casing on the wall beside the door, revealing a control panel about the size of her hand. She punched in a few numbers, then the two doors swung inwards.

As she stepped in, warm lights inside the building turned on automatically. Vegeta trailed behind, glancing around as he stepped onto the hardwood floors. The entrance opened out into a large living area with a fireplace set into a stone wall, a thick white rug covering most of the floor in front of it, and a plush, brown lounge suite positioned around it, facing the fireplace. It looked cosy, despite the large size of the room, although the air was chilly - almost colder than it had been outside.

Vegeta walked in further, watching Bulma head to the right of the lounge and into a kitchen.

“Do you know how to light a fire?” she asked, rummaging around in the kitchen cupboards. “The fireplace is hooked up to a ventilation system that will warm the whole building up.”

Vegeta snorted, remembering the thousands of times he and his squad had to build a fire to cook their food. He didn’t reply, but set about the task, opening the fireplace door and arranging the firewood.

By the time Bulma returned to the living room, two steaming mugs in her hands, the fire was roaring nicely, soaking the room in undulating waves of heat.

Vegeta took the offered mug and leaned against the wall next to the fireplace, frowning at Bulma as she sank into one of the seats.

She stared at him over the top of her mug as she took a sip, but didn’t say anything. Vegeta felt his cheeks burn under the weight of her look, but couldn’t work out any meaning behind it.

“Why are we here?” he asked, grinding out the words through clenched teeth. “I’m assuming you didn’t bring me out here to drink this concoction.”

“It’s coffee,” Bulma said. “And you love that ‘concoction’.”

Vegeta frowned and took a sip. It wasn’t bad, he had to admit. There was something earthy about it that was appealing. He couldn’t recall having it before though, so how did she- Oh. It hit him suddenly, and he placed his mug on the fireplace ledge, his stomach turning. She’d had this drink with his future counterpart.

“You’re mixing me up with someone else,” he snarled, unable to hide the venom in his tone. “Why are we here?”

Bulma raised her eyebrows and placed her own mug down on a small coffee table next to the seat. “We are here so you can take an evening off from nearly killing yourself. And I have something I want to show you.”

“Then show me.” He crossed his arms and glared at her, but she only curled her lips into a smirk.

“There’s no rush.” She looked him up and down, her blue eyes appraising him like he was an experiment she was analysing. “You need something stronger,” she declared, standing up. She wandered into the kitchen, hips swaying so delectably that Vegeta was certain she was doing it on purpose.
He pushed himself off the wall and followed her. The kitchen had a counter in the centre, and Bulma bent down and poked her head into a cupboard underneath it obviously hunting for something. Vegeta leaned against the doorframe his gaze falling to her rear, eying up her curves which were accentuated by the black skirt clinging to her like a second skin.

He dug his nails into the palms of his hands as he fought against the heat flooding his body. When Bulma finally straightened, bringing out a bottle of amber liquid and two short glasses, he hurriedly moved to the other side of the counter in case his traitorous body gave him away. As Bulma liked to point out, his training suit didn’t leave much to the imagination.

Bulma slid a now full glass across the counter towards him. As a rule, Vegeta didn’t imbibe, preferring to have all his senses at their best in case of an unexpected fight, but given he wanted nothing more than the current sensations coursing through his body to disappear, he tossed back the drink in one go. The liquid burned as it ran down his throat, and Vegeta fought back a cough. Bulma drank hers as well, but she seemed unaffected by the alcohol’s strength, and refilled both their glasses.

“Does what you want to show me require inebriation?” Vegeta asked, raising the glass to his lips. He sipped it this time, enjoying the warmth that tingled down his throat, into his chest, and then trickled out to his limbs.

“It can’t hurt.” Bulma leaned her elbows on the counter, holding her glass with both hands. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look relaxed.”

“Idleness is a Saiyan’s worst enemy.” He tossed back the last of his drink and stepped out from the counter, relieved that his ‘problem’ was no longer revealing itself. “Hurry up, woman. I have better things to do.”

Bulma rolled her eyes, but grabbed the bottle and both glasses, then led him through another door out of the kitchen. They walked down a narrow hall with several doors off it, and stopped at the door at the very end. “Do you mind?” Bulma asked, indicating with a nod at her full hands.

Vegeta scowled, but opened the door for her. As he followed her in, he frowned at the odd room. It had a white and black tiled floor, and a curved roof with a large glass porthole at the very top. The room was empty save for a two-seater maroon leather sofa facing a blank wall, and a very large piece of equipment that had a large cylinder pointing up at the porthole.

No lights came on when they entered, but the bright starlight illuminated the room through the glass roof window, making shadows dance across Bulma’s face as she stared at him with an unreadable expression. The light changed her hair from blue to silver, and as she set the drink and glasses down beside the sofa, then headed to the piece of equipment, motioning for him to come closer, Vegeta could have almost sworn she was a Saiyan from the way she held herself, daring him with her eyes.

He moved towards her, pretending to inspect the equipment that was clearly the central focus of the room, while watching her out of the corner of his eye.

“It’s one of the most powerful commercial telescopes in the world,” Bulma said, reached a hand out to touch it. “I thought you could do with stargazing that allows you to see more than a spec in the sky.”

Vegeta scoffed at that. “You might only see specs. Saiyans have superior vision.” Even so, he found himself reaching for the end of the telescope, and glancing up at the glass window overhead to find the star, the one he looked for every night the constellation was in view. He found it then moved
the telescope to face the general area before pressing his head into the casing meant for looking through. He couldn’t help the small sound that slipped from his lips, a small intake of breath as he saw familiar stars from a point a view he hadn’t seen in years.

He began to move the telescope a little, searching for the exact spot when he felt something touch his hand. He jerked back, pulling away from the telescope, to see Bulma standing before him.

“You can focus it here,” she said, reaching out and touch his hand again, curling her fingers around it and drawing his hand up to a small wheel above the lens. “It will make it even clearer.”

Vegeta gave her a gruff nod and went back to looking through it, noticing the cool air on his hand the moment she drew back. He found the area he’d been looking for, and used the wheel as she’d suggested, bringing it into focus.

There is was. Vegetasei’s sun.

Glowing red, it stood out amongst the white and blue stars peppering the rest of the view. Vegeta used the wheel once more, getting it even more focussed, then completely froze as he spotted something just beside the sun. It was small, barely a needle head in size from this distance.

“Fuck,” Vegeta breathed, the Earth curse word spilling out as he stared at it. Vegetasei.

At Vegeta's hushed expletive, Bulma sat herself down on the couch and lifted a panel in the sofa's arm, revealing an electronic panel. She touched the icon of the projector and a whirring sound filled the room. As the projector kicked in, an image of stars lit up the wall in front of her, brightening the room. Vegeta made a soft sound from the telescope, and when she turned to look at him, she saw his gaze fixed on the wall.

"It’s a bit more comfortable to view it from here," she said, patting the seat next to her.

For a moment, it looked like he was going to bolt from the room. A raft of expressions washed over his face in an instant - annoyance, concern, and most astonishingly - or perhaps not, given that she knew exactly what star was the focal point of the image on the wall - sadness. But just as quickly his face hardened into his usual stony expression. He strode forward and to her surprise, he scooped up the bottle and the glasses with one hand and sank into the seat next to her.

He handed her a glass and started to pour, but Bulma caught the slight tremble in his gloved hand and placed her hand on his, stopping him. She took over, handing him a drink that he promptly threw back so quickly she wasn’t sure he’d even swallowed. He tilted his head back against the back of the sofa, his dark eyes staring unblinking at the image before them.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, taking a sip of her own drink. "Did it have a name, or were Saiyans as unimaginative as humans and call it the sun?"

"Siliata," Vegeta replied quietly. "It means, shining light, so not particularly imaginative I suppose."

Bulma let out a soft chuckle at his wry tone. "I suppose you can't expect much from a planet that names its royal family after the planet itself."

"Actually, the planet was named for my ancestor," Vegeta said, letting out a languid sigh and settling into the soft couch further. He tilted his head to the side to look at Bulma. "Or rather,
renamed after it was conquered." He turned back to the wall and lifted a hand to point at another star. "That there was Vegetasei's closest solar system."

Bulma squinted at it and pointed at a large white star close to what she thought was Siliata. "There?"

Vegeta leaned closer to her, following her hand. "No, the blue one to the left." He moved her hand to point in the right direction. "It had no inhabitable planets, but we set up a space station outpost for refuelling, creating an artificial atmosphere that allowed people to live there."

Realising that Vegeta's hand was still on hers, Bulma spread her fingers out, intertwining them closer with Vegeta's and wished there wasn't a layer of clothing separating them. He stiffened at the movement, but before he could pull away, she moved both their hands, curling some of her fingers, and his with them, to point at a small dot beside Siliata. "And that? Is that a planet in Vegetasei's solar system?"

Vegeta remained silent for a moment, and drew in a ragged breath as he pulled his hand away from hers. "That is Vegetasei."

Bulma turned her head to look at him, taking in the slight downturn of his lips, and the pinching between his eyes, the slight smears of dirt still on his face only making his angled face appear harsher. Maybe she'd done the wrong thing, bringing him here. She'd hoped to cheer him up, but it had been a stupid, impromptu decision. Of course it would be upsetting rather than comforting to see an image of his home.

"It would have had another name," Vegeta said, still staring at the wall. "We are what, ten thousand lightyears away? It will be ten thousand years before the planet disappears from view on Earth."

Bulma closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. "I could almost pretend it still exists."

Bulma placed her hands in her lap and staring at them. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have-"

"Don't," Vegeta snapped, his sharp tone making Bulma look back at him. "I don't want your pity."

"I'm not-"

"You are," he snapped, his tone making her fall silent. He pressed his lips together before continuing. "You are the only one who doesn't look at me differently." He sat up straight, his dark eyes boring a heavy gaze into her. "Everyone else looks at me like I'm either going to murder them in their sleep or like… like there is something wrong with me."

Bulma sat up straighter as well, not really sure what he meant but too afraid to open her mouth again in case he decided to run out on her, as was his usual modus operandi.

He continued to stare at her - really it was unnerving how little the man needed to blink - and she felt herself leaning in towards him.

"But not you," Vegeta said in a hushed, husky voice. He cocked his head and drew his hand up to her face, not touching it, but bringing his palm close enough for her skin to tingle with anticipation. "Everyone else runs away from me, not towards. Why not you?"

"Because," Bulma said slowly, recalling the words of Vegeta's future self, realising just how truthful he had been with her. "We are the same, you and I." And she closed the gap between them, pressing her lips to his and grasping his hair with one of her hands to pull him close.

He let out a groan under her mouth, deepening the kiss in the process. The hand that had been
hovering by her face found its way to the small of her back and lazily crept underneath her blouse, sending shivers up her spine with each movement of his fingers, the soft, suede-like material of his glove caressing her.

Sex had not been her intention when she’d brought him here (okay, not her first intention), but fuck it, she was a hot blooded woman, and damn it if she didn’t need this as much as him.

Impatient for more, Bulma shifted onto his lap, hiking her skirt up to straddle him, grinding herself against the growing cock straining against his training suit. Vegeta used his teeth to pull off both of his gloves, tossing them to the side, before trailing a hand up her thigh, ghosting against her skin until he reached the bottom of her skirt. When he wriggled under it, Bulma shifted to allow him better access, tilting her head back with a gasp as he pushed her underwear to the side and ran his finger along her slick, sensitive bud.

Vegeta placed his lips on her neck, scraping his teeth against her skin, and at her moan, he inserted two fingers inside her, keeping his thumb on her clit. Bulma bucked at the movement, riding his hand, and he chuckled against her neck, his hot breath warming her.

“Please tell me it’s still too early?” he asked.

“For - oh, Kami - what?”

“The brat.”

It took a moment for Vegeta’s words to sink in, particularly since the deft movements of his hand were rather distracting. “Fuck, right there.” She squirmed under his touch. “Uh… yes. Too early. Trunks was born mid-May next year.”

Vegeta paused for a moment, his hand stilling frustratingly against her. “Saiyan gestation is about… fifty-three Earth weeks.”

“That’s just over a year.” Bulma gripped his shoulders tight as she contemplated if she should tell him the exact conception date she’d calculated.

Vegeta started moving his hand again, in tantalisingly slow strokes. “So, the brat would be uh…”

“Conceived?” Bulma suggested, squeaking out the word as a flood of pleasure rushed through her.

“Three months from now.”

“It’s not an exact science, but I- oh, fuck, don’t stop - three months from now is-”

“Is far enough away not to be concerned,” Vegeta said, cutting her off and dragging his mouth down to the sensitive spot between her neck and shoulder blade.

“Well, yes… but-”

“Thank the gods,” he growled, his hot breath making her shiver. “I’ve thought about this, you know.”

“About what?” Bulma gasped out as he bit down, the sharp pain slowly soothing as he suckled the area.

“Fucking you under Vegetasei’s sun.” He moved his hand, the lack of pressure making Bulma huff, but quickly put it back, adding a third finger inside her. “What I would give to see you
sprawled naked on the red terrain, screaming my name while I fuck your tight, wet, cunt.” He punctuated each of the last words with heavy thrusts of his hand, and she whimpered with each one.

“The couch is red,” she pointed out, shuddering as he pulled back, the curve of his mouth turning animalistic.

“So it is.” Vegeta gave a low chuckle. He withdrew his hand then placed both on her hips lifting her off him quickly so she stood in front of him. “Strip,” he commanded, with a small lick of his lips as he looked her up and down.

Bulma hissed between her teeth at his demand, tempted to shoot back a cutting response at his audacity. Truthfully though? The heated look in his eyes gave her the knowledge that it would be worth it to give into his demands. She’d let him have his power play - for now - for the greater good.

She took a step back and began to undo the buttons of her white blouse, one by one, looking down before glancing at him coquettishly through her eyelashes. She slipped it off, dropping it on the ground, then slowly undid the zip on the back of her skirt before shimmying out of it.

Vegeta’s face didn’t change but she saw his chest rise and fall faster as she reached around to unclip her lacy white bra. Bulma took it off, dropping it on the growing pile, before sliding her thumbs into the sides of her underwear. She paused, smirking as his eyes darkened with need. “See something you like?”

He made a rough sound in the back of his throat. “Get on with it,” he said, his words coming out strained as he clearly tried to appear unaffected.

Bulma laughed and shucked her underwear, then placed her hands on her hips. “Your turn, my prince.”

She let out a squeal as he grabbed her, slamming her onto the couch and holding her down by her throat with one hand. It didn’t hurt - he put just enough pressure on to keep her there - but he looked over her with hooded eyes.

“It’s ‘Your Royal Highness’, to you,” he growled at her. “If you are going to be fucked by my royal cock then you will address me correctly.”

Bulma couldn’t help but giggle at that. “Or what?” she countered, jutting her hips upward towards his unfortunately clothed groin.

He bared his teeth at her and bent down to suckle her nipple, dragging his teeth across it and bringing her right to the blurred line between pleasure and pain. “Or you’ll be punished accordingly.”

Oh, fuck yes. Bulma shivered in delight as she let out a breathless moan.

Giving her a satisfied, Cheshire Cat grin, Vegeta pulled back and tore off his training suit. He stood at the other end of the sofa, all his naked glory before her. The sex they’d had before had been so rushed, so hedonistic that she’d been too busy bathing in the glow of pleasure to really appreciate him. And fuck, was there a lot to appreciate.

His hard muscles rippled beneath caramel skin with every slight movement. His entire torso was marred by scars, but they somehow made him all the more appealing, his imperfections making him seem more human somehow. Tight abs tiled down to the V of his hips, and below that, his rock-hard cock stood waiting to attention, so large she wasn’t sure how he’d been able to fit it last
Bulma chewed on her bottom lip fighting the urge to lunge at him. “Come on then, Your Royal Highness,” she said mockingly. “Show me exactly what your royal dick can do.”

*Gods,* she was gorgeous. Laid out on the red sofa, hair spread around like a halo, chest heaving with anticipation, Vegeta knew that there would be no coming back from this.

The first time had been a necessary evil, the only way to concentrate on his training. He had no excuses this time though. He simply wanted her.

Maybe it was the alcohol, which did have him feeling warm, or perhaps it was the nostalgia of the projected sky on the wall next to them. Either way, despite the voice in his head telling him to escape while he still could, he wanted - no, *needed* - to rise to her challenge. To fuck her into an oblivion, until all thoughts of legends and androids and pointless dreams of what could have been were purged from his mind.

He climbed on the couch so he hovered over her, propping himself up with his arms to avoid crushing her, keeping the tip of his shaft just out of reach of her pooling heat. When she ran her hands down his stomach muscles, he snatched both her wrists with one hand and held them over her head.

“No.” He smirked at her glare of irritation and the hiss of defiance that escaped her lips as she struggled in his grasp. “No touching, human.”

“But I-”

He swallowed her objection with a searing kiss, tilted his hips, then rammed into her. She screamed into his mouth at the motion, arching her back and going stiff under him before biting down on his lower lip.

Vegeta let out a gasp at the feeling. *Fuck,* she was so tight, and the metallic taste in his mouth only heightened the sensations coursing through him. He pulled his head back and grinned at the sight of blood smeared on her bottom lip, insubordination lighting a fire in her eyes.

“Are you questioning me, little human?” he asked, using a tone that had made grown men piss themselves in his WTO days.

“Vegeta!” She wriggled her hands in his grip. “Let me go, I want to-”

“What did I say about addressing me.”

Bulma eyes widened at that, and she licked her lips, sweeping up the blood staining them.

Vegeta let out a low laugh and leaned in close, his mouth scraping her ear. “Beg for forgiveness.”

“Never!” she gasped out, tilting her head back and inadvertently giving him access to the smooth contour of her neck.

*She would have made a good Saiyan,* he realised as he clamped his teeth down onto her skin in retaliation and moved his hips back, only to thrust inside her once more. Bulma cried out, the sound a delicious combination of pain and ecstasy, and lifted her hips to meet his, wrapping her
legs around his waist and allowing him to go even deeper.

Vegeta let her neck go, smirking at the mark he’d left, but kept thrusting, their bodies growing slick with sweat. Without breaking his pace, he manoeuvred to draw himself up on his knees, pulling her down further on the couch in the process, and freeing her hands. She reached out for him, and Vegeta immediately pulled out, using the tip of his cock to trace her clit with just enough pressure to make her feel it, but not enough to be satisfying.

“Keep your hands to yourself.” He sneered at her affronted expression. “Or do you want me to stop?”

He watched as her face flickered between lust and anger. When she shook her head and dropped her hands, clenching them at her side, he almost crowed in triumph.

“Say it,” he said instead. “Tell me what you want.”

“You.” The word escaped her mouth with a whimper. “I want you… inside me.”

Vegeta gripped her hips tighter, making her squirm as he moved and teased her clit again. “You will address me properly.”

Bulma closed her eyes, and when opened them again, they were dark with fury. “I want you to fuck me, Your Royal Highness,” she spat. “Fuck me like I’m your queen.”

“Like my whore, you mean,” he replied, pushing himself back inside her with a grunt.

She opened her mouth as if to argue, but only a moan came out as he continued his assault, driving into her again and again until the only sounds were the slapping of skin and their ragged breaths and the small cries of rapture they drew from each other’s lips as he fucked her under Vegetasei’s stars.

Bulma groaned and opened her eyes, trying to wriggle away from the sticky leather underneath her. She couldn’t move much, thanks to the weight on top of her. Vegeta had collapsed on top of her immediately afterwards, and unlike in the gravity room, he’d decided to stay.

His head rested on the sofa’s arm beside her, and with his eyes closed and gentle breathing he looked more relaxed than she’d ever seen him. She was uncomfortable though, and as surprising—and to be honest, completely adorable—as his choosing to cuddle her after sex was, her arm had gone dead.

She shifted slightly, rocking underneath him. He was heavy, but not as heavy as she’d thought he would be. If she could just… Bulma tilted her hips up and to the side, and Vegeta slid off her onto the tiled floor with a yelp.

He blinked blearily up at her, a scowl forming on his face as she grinned at him. “Bitch,” he snarled, although she could tell that the anger in his voice was put on. It was hard to find him threatening while he was both groggy and completely naked.

Bulma sat up and stretched with a yawn. “Idleness is a Saiyan’s worst enemy,” she quipped, throwing his own words back at him. “You were crushing me, and I’m desperately in need of a shower.”
Vegeta let out a feral growl and rose to his knees, using the couch seat beside her for support. He leaned in close and took a deep breath beside her neck. “Hm, yes woman… you stink.”

“Excuse me?” Bulma recoiled in fury. “I’ll have you know-”

“I can fix that.” Vegeta leapt at her with an evil grin, then scooped her into his arms. Bulma shrieked and clung to him, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding on in a panic as he zipped through the lake house so fast everything went by in a blur. The next moment, he burst through the front door and took to the sky, only stopping when they hovered a story above the lake.

“Don’t you dare!” Bulma gripped his neck tighter, grabbing his hair with her fingers.

Vegeta just laughed and completely dropped her legs so she was dangling above the water, her frantic grip the only thing keeping her dry. “Or what? I thought you said you trusted me,” he taunted, his voice low and gravely in her ear.

“Vegeta, I swear to Kami, if you drop me I will kill-” Bulma screamed as she plummeted towards the water, still clinging to the Saiyan. She barely had time to take a breath before overwhelming coldness encased her, and she found herself floundering, unable to see which way was up, and now no longer able to feel Vegeta.

She let out a cry, which was a big mistake because it got rid of all the air in her lungs. Frantic, she clawed in the water until finally her head burst through the surface and she gulped in breaths of air.

“Vegeta!” She coughed and spluttered, trending water and spinning around in the water to look for him. The sun hadn’t begun to rise yet, and while the lights from the house gave enough light to make out the surface of the lake, she couldn’t see anyone else in the water. “Th… this isn’t funny!” she called out, her teeth chattering.

That’s when she felt it. Something touching her bare foot.

Bulma squealed and lurched away from the touch then began swimming for the shore. But it was slow going, with her limbs too cold to be much use. She was barely keeping herself afloat as it was.

When something touched her again, this time wrapping around her ankle, Bulma barely had time to take in a breath before she was dragged under.

She kicked out, flailing wildly, and her hand hit something firm and warm. An instant later and a purple glow lit up the water around her. Her ankle was released, but something warm wrapped around her waist, and she was suddenly staring into Vegeta amused face.

His hair, usually so stiff with the way it defied even the strongest of gravity, floated around his head like a dark, ethereal halo. The look on his face was anything but angelic however, with his lips curved evilly. He held her tight, and when she motioned for her to let her up to get air, he simply shook his head.

As the air left her mouth, bubbles bursting forward, Bulma let out a scream and started scratching at his chest. Vegeta still didn’t let her up, and when the bubbles faded he placed one hand at the back of her head and pulled her mouth to his. Bulma started to try pull away, but couldn’t escape his grip, and suddenly she felt warm air flow from his mouth into hers. Feeling oxygen enter her burning lungs, she sank into him automatically, winding her legs around his hips and circling her arms around his neck.

She felt him kick, and as they rose to the surface he pulled back, allowing her to breath the fresh air.
“You are such an asshole!” She escaped his arms and drew her hand back, slapping him across his cheek so hard his damp hair flicked with the movement.

He didn’t dodge, letting it connect, but while her hand stung he didn’t look like he’d even felt it. “Did you think I was going to let you drown, little human?” he asked, reaching to ensnare her with his arms once more.

“I didn’t know you had the lung capacity of a whale!” Bulma said, still furious, but unable to put in into her tone as he started to draw lazy circles on her back with his fingertips.

Vegeta smirked and planted a kiss on her neck, making her shiver as he breathed in deeply, then out again, his hot breath warming her. “That’s much better,” he mumbled against her skin. “Now you smell like fear.”

“I do not.”

“Don’t you feel it?” His eyes were wide, excitement lurking in their depths. “Fear heightens everything.” He dragged a hand down her back, across her ass, and then around, settling in front of her heated core and slipping a single finger inside. “And I mean everything.”

Bulma couldn’t help but let out a moan at his touch, grinding herself against his hand. She could feel his now hardened length against her thigh and chewed on her bottom lip in anticipation. Kami, he was insatiable. Almost as much as her.

Bulma realised that the water surrounding them was now warm. She frowned at Vegeta suspiciously. “That heat had better be your ki, and not piss.”

Vegeta looked affronted at that, and pulled his hand back away from her, much to her irritation. He raised his eyebrows as he reached out and pushed her damp, bedraggled hair off her forehead. “Such a vulgar creature.”

“I’m vulgar?” Bulma gasped in mock shock. “You’re the one with the filthy mouth, Your Royal Highness.”

He gave her a lopsided smirk at that, his eyes darkening. “Do you trust me, vulgar woman?”

“I did up until you nearly drowned me,” Bulma said.

“Trust me now,” he said before planting a forceful kiss on her lips.

She opened her mouth for him automatically, mentally chastising herself for making this easy for him. But really, it was hardly her fault that he was so goddamn sexy.

He pulled back slowly, breathing heavily. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

Bulma frowned at him, but gave him a small nod, hoping that whatever he had in mind didn’t involve her choking on mouthfuls of lake water.

Vegeta sucked in a deep breath, then let go of her and slid under the water. Bulma jumped when she felt his hands on her waist, but tried to remain still. Soon, she felt his hands move down to her legs and hook them over his shoulders - still underwater - and then something pressed against her core.

“Shit!” she gasped out as she felt his tongue slide against her clit. Arching her back, she grabbed onto his hair to avoid falling backwards, bucking against his firm caresses. The more she gripped
his hair, tugging at it with each wave of pleasure, the harder he assaulted her, drawing cries of pleasure with each flick of his tongue.

He grabbed her ass, holding her still and pressing her more firmly against his face. When he made a circular movement with his tongue, Bulma felt her release build to breaking point. She threw her head back and screamed out to the star filled sky. When he did it again, she was gone, collapsing forward in a shuddering mess.

Vegeta pulled back and rose to the surface, keeping her afloat with one arm as they both gasped in the frigid air, their breaths turning to white clouds before them.

When she shivered in his arm, Vegeta glanced at her before raising his ki again, lighting up the area and warming the water.

“That… that was…” Bulma tried to get the words out, but couldn’t, and pulled herself towards his chest to soak up his heat.

“How long can you hold your breath for?”

“Twenty minutes if I don’t exert myself.” He gave her a dark look and brought her flush to his body so their foreheads touched. “Apparently it’s only about five minutes if I do.”

Bulma giggled at that. “So you nearly drowned down there?”

“What a way to go,” he drawled. “It would have been an honourable warrior’s death.”

Bulma laughed again, wriggling against him and feeling his still hard cock against her lower stomach. “And yet, you survived. Such a feat surely deserves a reward.” She used his shoulders to draw herself up higher in the water.

Vegeta sucked in a breath, closing his eyes and she sank onto him, letting him fill her completely. “**Gods**, you’ll drive me to madness.”

“Vegeta,” she chastised gently, lifting herself up a little before sinking back down. “You’re skinny dipping in a lake with Earth’s most beautiful woman, having the best sex of your life.” She repeated the movement, drawing a gasp from his lips. “You’d be mad **not** to enjoy this.”

He grunted in response and dipped his head to capture her mouth, kissing her slowly, matching the pace of her hips with his lips and tongue.

She could feel him getting impatient, his hips beginning to rock with hers, but Bulma couldn’t get enough momentum in the water. Vegeta stopped kissing her and slid his hands down to her hips, taking control and moving her up and down faster. She arched back as she felt her own climax build again, and Vegeta bent forward and captured her breast with his mouth, suckling on her nipple.

She came with a cry, and he followed, clutching her close and pounding into her frantically, before slowing, drawing out their release with each thrust. When he stopped completely, Bulma clung to his arms, resting her head on his shoulder just out of the water as he treader water.

“Are you going to disappear on me for months again?” Bulma asked, tickling his back with her nails.
Vegeta stiffened underneath her. “I don’t recommend expecting anything from me.”

Bulma straightened and frowned at his stony expression. “I expect nothing from you. I get it. This is just sex. Really fucking good sex, but I don’t have any illusions of anything more. If you are going to train out in the wilderness again though, I want to know you have a place to sleep, and food to eat. I want you to have this lake house.”

Vegeta gave her an odd look and didn’t reply. Unable to fight the urge to fill the silence, Bulma began rambling. “I can give you the combination, and link the house to a credit card so you can order food when you need it. But don’t expect me to put a gravity room here. If I did that, I’d never see you…” She trailed off, figuring she should let him respond.

He remained silent for a moment, the only sounds the crickets on the shore and the gentle lapping of water. “You’re giving me a house,” he said finally.

“Well, yes…” Bulma struggled to understand what the furrow between Vegeta’s eyebrows meant.

Vegeta’s frown deepened. “No one has…” He cleared his throat. “No one has given me anything since I was handed over to Frieza.”

Bulma’s hands, which had moved to lightly stroking his shoulders, stilled. Had she ever given him anything before? There was the gravity room of course, but she’d always made it abundantly clear that it was hers, and he was only borrowing it. Was he freaking out about this? Vegeta overthought everything so she had to feed carefully to get him to accept. “Don’t read too much into it,” she said lightly. “It’s a trade really, for you defeating the androids.”

“For defeating the androids,” Vegeta repeated back. “You believe it will be me?”

“It will be you,” she said firmly, squeezing his shoulders to make her point. “You will become a Super Saiyan and you will destroy them.” And despite having seen Goku defeat every enemy Earth had ever had, she believed the words. She knew that it would be Vegeta, the man sent to kill them all, who ended up saving them.

She kept watching the Saiyan prince, whose expression didn’t change until a split second before he kissed her. It was brief, barely recognisable, and for all his blustering certainty about him being able to ascend defeat the androids, the look that flashed across his face was something she’d never seen on him before.

Hope.

Chapter End Notes

Did you enjoy? Please leave a comment!
Inception

Chapter Summary

On Earth, Vegeta and Bulma get back to what they are good at - arguing. And maybe something else? In space, Trunks wants to find out more about Zersa, but gets more than he bargained for.

Chapter Notes

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wind whispered eerily around him, picking up loose snow that danced through the air and landed on him, but Vegeta did not move from his spot. He sat cross-legged on the peak of a mountain, staring out at the hazy view without actually taking it in.

His skin - thicker than a human's - was built to withstand extreme temperatures, but he'd always preferred the heat and knew that he wouldn't last much longer out here. Even so, he pushed the discomfort away, and attempted to clear his mind once more. Think of nothing, he instructed himself. No thoughts of androids, of legends, of blue haired women...

Cursing, Vegeta curled his hands into fists. It had been days since he'd seen her, and he'd barely managed to go an hour without remembering how she felt in his arms, remembering the soft sounds she'd made, and the way her skin tasted sweet and salty at the same time.

For the first time since his future self had turned up, Vegeta understood how he'd ended up having a relationship with the woman. How they'd ended up having a child. Bulma was addictive - even now he'd much rather be in her bed than training. They'd probably fucked so much in the future that the brat was inevitable. But that wouldn't happen to him. No, he'd never wanted children, and that hadn't changed. Children were too easily turned into weapons to be used against you by your enemy. And even if the child survived, What hope was there for them anyway?

He himself had survived his childhood, but only in the most literal of senses. Vegeta was well aware that he'd been twisted into something darker, something more monstrous that he would have become had he grown up on Vegetasei without Frieza. He was proud of his survival, but even he had to admit that he would have been better off if he'd died a long time ago, with a semblance of decency still inside him.

Even the one child he'd rescued, the half-Saiyan girl who looked up to him like he was some sort of hero, she had lived a life no one should suffer through. The things she'd seen...

And as for his son from the future... born to a world destined for destruction? No, bringing a child
into this world was cruel, and as twisted as his heart was, Vegeta simply couldn't do it. Not to his own flesh and blood. Better to never be born than to suffer through this life.

Vegeta watched the snowflakes leap in twirling funnels for a while longer, letting their patterns pull him out of his reverie and into a calmer state of mind. Finally, with all thoughts of the past banished from his mind, he decided it was time to get back to training.

He stood up slowly, shivering as he did so, then shocked himself by sneezing suddenly. Vegeta wriggled his nose, a little unsure if it was just the chilled air, or something more. When nothing else happened, he began to gather his ki. Before he took to the air, he sneezed again.

Maybe mediating at the top of a mountain in only his training suit hadn't been the best idea…

Bulma yawned sleepily as she stumbled down the stairs towards the kitchen to get her first coffee of the day. *Ugh,* it was too early to be up, but she hadn't slept well for the last few nights, and had been in a bad mood because of it. Or rather, because of *him.*

It had been five days since the lake house, and she hadn't seen Vegeta since. He was staying there at least some of the time, her credit card bill for the card she'd hooked up to the house told her that, but it looked like he'd done his usual trick and retreated into himself, avoiding her at all costs.

Or at least, that's what she'd assumed until she opened the door to the kitchen and found him sitting at the table frowning at a bowl of cereal.

"You're back," she said, hovering with her hand still on the doorknob.

Vegeta raised his eyebrows at her, the word *obviously* not falling from his lips, but being said all the same. He scooped cereal on his spoon and put it in his mouth, his gaze never leaving her.

Bulma shivered and made her way to the coffee machine. How did he manage to make something as mundane as eating bran flakes look sexy?

"Do you want me to cook you some eggs?" she asked, keeping her voice as casual as possible.

He tilted his head, as if considering her offer, then gave her a nod.

"Uh… how would you like them?"

He said nothing, still staring at her, and Bulma flushed in the silence.

"You know… fried, scrambled, poached?" She clamped her teeth together to avoid rambling and waited for his answer, but he just gave her a shrug. Letting out an annoyed hiss, Bulma glared at him. "Have you taken an oath of silence? Or have you decided that my plebeian ears are not worthy of hearing your royal voice."

A slight twitch of the corner of his lips gave him away, and Vegeta set his spoon down. He cocked his head, the ghost of a smile on his face smoothing his usually stoic expression. When he gave her another shrug, Bulma rolled her eyes, realising that he was teasing her, in his odd Vegeta way.

"If you don't tell me what you want, you get nothing," she griped as she made her coffee, too tired to play games with the man.

His smile fell at that and the skin between his eyes furrowed. He opened his mouth, clearing his throat. "Scrambled," he murmured, but even his quiet tone couldn't hide the scratchiness in his
Bulma looked at him suspiciously. "Are you sick?"

Vegeta shrugged again, and continued devouring his cereal. "It's nothing," he grumbled, but he couldn't hide the wince as he spoke, and every time he swallowed his spoonful of cereal his expression tightened.

"You are!" Bulma took a sip of her coffee, looking at the man curiously. "I thought Saiyans didn't get sick."

Vegeta looked genuinely surprised at that, and shook his head.

"Goku never got sick," Bulma said, placing her coffee on the bench before venturing to the fridge to pull out a tray of eggs. "So I suppose I'd assumed you'd be the same. Then again, he did grow up here so maybe he developed an immunity early on." She began scrambling the eggs when a thought hit her. She looked across the room at Vegeta with a grin. "Do you think it was that cold swim in the lake that got you sick? Ha! That would serve you right for nearly drowning me."

Vegeta scowled again, jaw clenching as though he wanted to say something. He remained silent though, staring daggers at his bowl.

His throat must have been sore if it was preventing him from his usual verbal retaliation. Bulma finished the eggs and played them up, giving herself some too, then placed the food in front of him before taking a seat opposite him at the table.

"I ran a diagnostic on the GR yesterday," she said in between taking a mouthful of food. "The gravity level is stuck at five hundred. You can't gradually increase it. How long has it been like that?"

Vegeta lifted his shoulders and Bulma sighed in exasperation. This non-verbal communication was getting old, fast.

"You'll kill yourself eventually."

A scoffing sound came from the Saiyan, but he didn't stop his methodical eating.

"You will! The machine isn't made to handle it. I'll fix it today. Go back to training in the wilderness or something until I'm done."

Vegeta looked up at that, slamming his cutlery on the table. "I only use the top level anyway. If you're bored, make me some new bots. The latest ones are rubbish."

"Rubbish!" Bulma stabbed her eggs with her fork. "They are state of the art - no one else in the world has better equipment."

"Two of them are broken. They are structurally deficient."

"They aren't made to be constantly in five hundred times gravity for hours at a time." Bulma stood up with a growl and went to the fridge to get out some orange juice. "I'll fix the gravity level today, and look at the bots later."

Bulma shut the fridge door and turned around. She jumped and dropped the bottle of juice when she saw Vegeta standing there, inches from her face, his dark eyes flashing.
"You will fix the bots instead," he hissed, slamming his hands against the fridge so his arms trapped her. He pressed himself closer to her, so his chest was against hers, and she was forced to step backwards so her back was against the cool fridge door.

"No," Bulma spat, placing a hand on his chest to create space between them.

Vegeta leaned in even closer, rendering her hand useless, until his lips almost touched her ear. "If you touch the gravity room today," he whispered, his huskier than normal voice giving her shivers, "I don't care how beautiful you are, or how good you taste - you will regret it. I will have you screaming, have you begging for mercy."

Bulma swallowed hard, her breath hitching in her throat as heat pooled in her lower region at his - possibly accidental - insinuation. "Is that a promise?" she asked, clenching her fingers around the material of his training suit.

Vegeta pulled back slightly, his cheeks flushed. "I… Don't touch the gravity room," he commanded before stepping back and stomping out of the room, leaving her still panting against the fridge.

Bulma grinned to herself and placed her hand on her chest, feeling her pounding heartbeat. Maybe today wouldn't be so bad after all.

Vegeta spun in the air, sending a ki blast towards the only working bot. The machine dodged expertly and retaliated, forcing the Saiyan to drop to the ground. Seeing the bot manoeuvre to the left, Vegeta began to power up another attack. He dropped into an offensive stance, ready to leap forward, but a sudden coughing fit had him doubling over.

The bot, programmed to take advantage of any weakness, attacked.

Metal arms spun out and grabbed Vegeta by his throat, picking him up and slamming him against the wall as if he weighed nothing. Ki exploded from the bot's red eye, and Vegeta narrowly managed to stop coughing long enough to wrench himself out of the way, and instead of firing through his chest, the blast scraped his arm.

A loud whining noise filled the air, and the bot suddenly deactivated, dropping Vegeta to the ground, and the gravity level fell instantly back to zero.

Gasping for air, Vegeta looked up furiously at the opening door of the gravity room.

Bulma strolled in wearing khaki shorts and a white t-shirt, with a tool belt strapped to her waist. She glared back at Vegeta placing her hands on her hips.

"Idiot," she spat out. "I saw that on the security camera. You won't be stopping the androids if you continue training like this because you'll be dead."

"You think a mere cough will stop me?" Vegeta snorted at the notion and walked towards the console. "Woman, I've been dying and continued fighting."

Bulma growled and stomped over to him, wrapping her cool fingers around his wrist. "But you don't have to. Kami, Vegeta, you're burning up." She moved her hand to his forehead with a concerned frown.

Vegeta batted her hand away. "I do have to. Unless you want to die when the androids get here?"
Bulma rolled her eyes. "A few hours won't hurt. Go lie down for a while, let your superior Saiyan genes work their magic so you can feel better, and when you come back I'll have fixed this."

"I told you to fix the bots instead," Vegeta said with as much anger as he could muster.

Unfortunately it must have come out sounding weak, because Bulma just looked more concerned and her fingers snaked around his wrist again. "I'm not fixing the bots until I've done this," she said, squeezing her fingers tighter. "Go rest now, and I promise, I'll not only fix the bots but upgrade their programming too."

Vegeta hesitated, his pride not wanting him to give in so easily, but the bots really could do with an upgrade and he could feel another coughing fit creeping up in his throat.

"Fine," he barked out, yanking his arm out of her grip. "They'd better last more than two weeks."

Bulma grinned at him, clearly pleased that she'd won, but Vegeta just stomped away, heading for the house. There was no chance he'd go and sleep as she'd suggested, but he could do with sitting down for a moment.

Bulma knocked on Vegeta's door. "The GR is fixed," she called out. At the lack of reply, she opened the door and peeked in.

Vegeta's room was the least decorated in the house. When he'd first moved in he'd insisted on removing any pictures on the wall, any excess cushions - anything he deemed unnecessary. The only way anyone would have known the room was his was from the pile of armour he had stacked on top of the dresser in the corner, and the blue training suit lying on the floor at the foot of the bed.

The man himself lay on his stomach on his double bed, on top of the blankets, wearing only a pair of black boxers. His head was turned away from the door, towards the open window, and from the small snuffling sounds, Bulma suspected he was fast asleep.

She hesitated in the doorway for a moment. If she started on the bot upgrades now, she'd have them done by the end of tomorrow. *I'll just check on him quickly,* she decided, stepping into the bedroom and shutting the door behind her.

Bulma crept over to the other side of the bed so she could see his face, confirming that he was indeed asleep, his face set into a frown even in that state.

Carefully, she reached out and placed her hand on his forehead, checking to see if it still felt like he had a temperature. He flinched at her touch, eyes fluttering under their lids, but he didn't wake.

He was warm, but not burning, so Bulma drew back, intending to leave.

"Bulma."

That stopped her in her tracks. The word was faint, and Vegeta didn't seem to have woken up. Hesitantly, she reached out and placed her hand on his. At the touch, Vegeta let out a sleepy sigh and curled his fingers around hers.

With a grin, Bulma threw out the idea of doing anything productive, and slipped on top of the bed, next to Vegeta. He rolled slightly, onto his side, and she curled into him, breathing in his earthy scent.
Vegeta mumbled something incomprehensible, and Bulma felt his arm drape across her waist, pulling her even closer. She couldn't help but smile at how sweet - and how weirdly normal this would have been if they had been in a human relationship - this moment was.

With the warm afternoon sun streaming in, Bulma began to feel sleepy too, and closed her eyes, letting sleep take over as she lay in the arms of the strange alien prince.

As the vestiges of sleep began to fade away, Vegeta became acutely aware of the warm body pressed against his own. He cracked open his eyes to see Bulma curled into his chest, her blue hair covering most of her face. One of his arms was trapped underneath her shoulders, and his other was on top of her body, entangled with her arm.

How did she even get in here? Years of being constantly on high alert meant he was a light sleeper, and no one usually managed to get close to him while he slept. Yet this minx had managed to not only sneak into his room, but creep into his bed too.

He had half a mind to wake her up and order her out, but she felt so warm and soft next to him, and even with his deadened arm he was comfortable.

Vegeta swallowed experimentally. It didn't hurt, and as loath as he was to admit it, he knew the woman had been right about him just needing to rest. Saiyan's didn't get sick often, and never for very long with enough rest.

He breathed out deeply, the sigh making the blue hair in front of him flutter. He really should get up. He assumed the gravity chamber was fixed, and there was no reason for him to remain here.

Then Bulma moved, wriggling even closer to him, so her lower half was pressed against his. Vegeta sucked in a breath and held it. It felt like he was already up… just in a different way.

As he tried to move back, lest she awake and feel him, he heard her breathing change and knew it was too late. Her hand, which had been resting against his back, began moving in light circles, her fingers brushing teasingly against his skin. She tilted her head back, sending the hair out of her face as she opened sleepy blue eyes and exposed her smooth neck to him.

"Feeling better?" she asked, her voice raspy with sleep.

Vegeta didn't answer, and dipped his head so his mouth met hers.

"I'll take that as a yes," she murmured against him, moving her hips so she pressed further into him.

"This will not be a regular occurrence," Vegeta said, growling as he rolled them both so he lay on top of her, propped up on his arms to avoid crushing her weak body.

"Of course not." She looped her arms around his neck, burying her fingers in his hair. "This is just a warm up for your gravity room training." Then she tugged him down to kiss him languidly, and he responded in kind, taking his time as he moved his lips against hers, tasting her and revelling in the sensation.

His training was shot for today anyway, he decided as he freed up one of his arms to slide a hand down to the waistband of her shorts. He might as well make the most of it.

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_The Clunker_, as Ara had so aptly dubbed the commandeered warship, was large enough for Trunks and Seria to get lost in daily, with Trunks having to use is ki sensing abilities to navigate back to
the main quarters.

The starboard section of the ship that Trunks and Seria were currently in was a series of empty rooms, and the pair had picked a large one to spar in, with Trunks promising to teach Seria some offensive ki techniques after she'd masters some sparring katas.

She already had some solid skills, taught by Ara apparently, although Trunks suspected Vegeta had taught her a couple at some point because something in the way she threw a punch - straight, solid and with absolutely no holding back - reminded him of his father. She clearly lacked some of the more basic training however, and Trunks could spot the holes in her attacks easily.

"Defence," Trunks said, jabbing a soft punch to her left side as a reminder to keep her arms up.

"Yeah, yeah." Seria bared her teeth at him and lifted her arms before lunging at him. Trunks kept blocking, forcing Seria in circles around the room.

They'd been travelling in space for about two Earth weeks, heading towards the mysterious Zersa's base. Ara, with Han's help, had secured a crew just large enough to pilot and maintain the ship. Vegeta had insisted they avoid taking more soldiers, claiming they would not be required, and that he would finish Zersa himself.

Trunks didn't know what Zersa had done to his father, but hatred rolled off the Saiyan prince in waves at the mere mention of the name. He was frustrated that the only information he had on this person was that Zersa was the cousin of one of Frieda's top men, and that both Zersa and Ara had worked in the department of extracting information from those whom Frieza suspected of treason. Trunks could only guess that Zersa's methods were more violent than Ara's had been.

Seria kicked out at Trunks, surprising him with a hit to his shin and bringing him back to their spar. "Stop daydreaming," she commanded.

"What do you know about this Zersa guy?" Trunks asked, throwing a sharp punch that Seria blocked.

"Woman," Seria replied shortly, twisting away from another of Trunks' hits and retaliating with her fists. "Not guy."

"Oh." Trunks frowned, the image he'd created in his mind of a bulky green man fading away. "What's she like then?"

Seria scowled and sent a sweeping kick out that Trunks jumped to avoid.

"She's a monster," Seria hissed, the venom in her voice making Trunks flinch.

"Okay, but-"

"And you are too distracted," Seria said, her clenched fists shaking. She opened her mouth as if she was going to say something else, but instead shook her head and then stomped out of the room slamming the metal door behind her.

"Weird," Trunks muttered to himself, although he should have been used to mood swings - his father was the king of them. It didn't look like he was going to get any more information on Zersa from Seria after all.

"You need to eat more," Papa said, his gaze boring holes into Trunks.
Grunting in response, Trunks picked up his fork and jabbed his food. Like all Saiyans he usually had a big appetite, but everything made his mouth feel dry and his stomach turn. "I'm not hungry."

His father sighed, leaning back into the threadbare chair next to Trunks' bed. He'd barely moved from it, not even to sleep in the perfectly good second bed Videl had dragged into the room for him.

"You need to eat," Papa repeated, but the words came out dull.

"So should you," Trunks argued, moving his food tray to the side table.

"You need food to heal, boy."

"I'm feeling much better." Trunks stretched and wriggled his fingers in the air in proof. "I want to start training again."

"No."

"But now that I'm a Super Saiyan, the two of us can kill the androids."

"I said no!" His father stood up abruptly, the chair scraping back noisily behind him. "If Gohan and I couldn't do it, how exactly do you think you and I will?"

Trunks narrowed his eyes, hurt at his father's lack of faith in him stinging in his chest. "We have to try. We have to avenge Mama."

"We don't have to do anything of the sort." His father rubbed his face with his hand. "Your only concern should be healing."

Trunks felt a burning prickle in his eyes and he blinked rapidly to push it away. "But they killed Mama and Gohan. They killed them and they are still out there. We have to do something."

"I will not risk you as well," his father snarled, the fury in his voice making Trunks shrink back. "You will rest and get better. There will be no talk of fighting the androids. Understand?"

"Don't you care about what they did?" Trunks cried, throwing back his sheets and standing unsteadily on his feet.

"Get back in bed," Papa commanded, his voice low and dangerous.

Trunks shook his head, clenching his fists at his side. "The androids killed them, and you want us to stay here with these humans and do nothing?"

"That is exactly what I expect you to do." Papa placed a heavy hand on Trunks shoulder. "Go back to bed, son. Forget about the androids and focus on getting better."

"How can I?" Trunks stepped to the side, forcing his father to drop his hand. "Every time I fall asleep I see her... I see Mama..." A warm tear slipped from his eye and Trunks dashed it away with the back of his hand. "I see her dying."

"Trunks..." Papa had paled, making the dark rings around his eyes even more obvious. "You need to push that from your mind. You need to-"

"Get better, yeah, yeah." Trunks twisted his face into a scowl, grimacing as the vision of his mother's bloody face surfaced in his mind. "You weren't even there - you left and they died, and you don't even care! If you did you would be fighting those monsters instead of hiding down here,
too scared to do anything!"

Trunks gasped as he felt himself lift into the air by the front of his t-shirt. His father glared at him, dark, swirling fury in his eyes. Papa's fist was clenched, mid punch as if he wanted to strike Trunks, but something invisible held him back.

"Listen to me, brat," Papa growled. "There will be no training until you are healed, and if you get any funny ideas about taking on the androids, you'll wish they'd killed you when I get to you." He hissed through his teeth as if he was going to say something else, but then dropped Trunks back on the bed, then stomped out of the room.

"You're a coward," Trunks called out to his retreating figure.

Papa paused at that, his shoulders tightening as he stood in the doorway. But he didn't turn around. Instead he stepped out, quietly shutting the door behind him and leaving Trunks' side for the first time since they'd arrived at the human base.

Trunks stared at the closed door, his anger melting away into something else, something that gnawed at his stomach and gave him the urge to run after his father and apologise. He remained where he was though, staring at the door, too proud to admit the truth. Trunks wasn't really mad at his father. He was mad at himself. If he'd been stronger, if he'd been more capable, his mother would still be alive today.

Hours later and his father hadn't returned. Trunks lay in bed staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep or do anything other than turn over the horrible things he'd said to Papa.

He could sense his father's ki nearby, the ragged edges of it flickering unusually, and knew that Papa was upset. Knew that it was his fault.

Giving up on feeling sorry for himself, Trunks decided that he had to do something about it. He slipped out of his room and navigated the corridors, not really aware of where he was going other than following the feeling ki that grew easier to sense the closer he got. No one else was up at this time of night, although he could sense the humans sleeping in nearby rooms.

When Trunks got to a nondescript brown door and sensed his father behind it, he opened it and stepped in. The room was large - big enough to fit several double beds if it had been furnished. It wasn't though, and the windowless room was almost empty save for the Saiyan whirling around it in a series of intricate kata.

Sweat coated the shirtless man's skin as he moved about the room in fluid motions. He'd obviously been at this for a long time - perhaps hours - but his stride didn't falter. In fact, Trunks wouldn't have known anything was wrong if it wasn't for the edge of his papa's ki. It felt brittle, as if any wrong move would cause the man to snap.

Trunks placed his hand on the open door, wondering if he should leave. But something was wrong with his father, and he knew that his father would never leave him if he were upset. "Papa?" he said quietly.

The noise made the man spin around. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he caught his breath, and sweat trickled down his face. He froze, his red rimmed eyes staring at Trunks. It was then that the boy realised that mixed into the perspiration were tears running track marks down his father's cheeks.

"Papa," he said again, swallowing hard before trying to continue. "I-"
"Don't," Papa cut him off, striding to the side of the room where a towel lay on the ground. He picked it up and dried his neck and face before picking up his t-shirt and pulling that on.

"I'm sorry," Trunks said, making another attempt. "You must hate me. I wasn't strong enough to save her. It's... it's my fault..."

His father paused for a moment, his shirt only half on. He frowned, his gaze settling on Trunks. After a long moment that had Trunks holding his breath, Papa finished dressing, moved forward, knelt in front of Trunks, and pulled him into a hug.

Trunks froze under the embrace. Papa rarely showed affection, and seemed to hate this human display of it. The hug was awkward, his father's arms stiff instead of warm and welcoming, but Trunks felt himself relax, and he wrapped his arms around Papa's neck and fell against his chest with a choked sob.

"Never say that again," his father said, his tone not one to disobey. "It was not your fault, and I hate a good many things, but not you." He pulled back, placing both his hands on Trunks shoulders. "It's just you and I now, but I promise you, on my honour as a prince, as a warrior, we will find a way to fix this. We'll bring them back." He squeezed Trunks shoulders gently. "And we'll do it together. Okay?"

Trunks sniffed and nodded weakly.

"Say it," Papa said urgently.

"We'll bring them back."

"Together."

Trunks gave his father a watery smile, and was struck by the conviction in his father's eyes. Papa wasn't broken by Mama's death, the boy realised, because he knew, with complete certainty, that he was going to get her back. "Together," he repeated, and to his surprise, he believed it.

Trunks sat up abruptly, the sweaty sheets he'd been tossing and turning in pooling at his waist. He found his father's ki by reaching out through the ship to focus on it. He was in the main navigation room, and there were a few others with him, Ara included.

Feeling his father's ki, smooth and strong, was comforting. But something had woken him... There was another ki signature nearby that felt off. Trunks frowned as he concentrated on it. Seria.

Her ki fluctuated in small vibrations that indicated a nightmare. When the fluctuating grew, Trunks climbed out of bed, threw on a t-shirt and shorts, then padded down the cool hallway until he came to Seria's room.

He knocked on the door first, but when he didn't get a response and her ki only grew wilder, he let himself in.

His Saiyan vision gave him a good view of the room, even in the dark, and he saw her lying on her back on her small bed, her dark hair swept around her head. Despite the sheets that had bunched at the end of her bed, and movement of her ki, she lay completely still, reminding him of the tale of sleeping beauty that his mother had told him, with her chest rising and falling underneath her white top, and her hands relaxed at her side.

As Trunks crept closer to her, only the fluttering movement under her eyelids gave away her

He reached out a hand to touch her bare arm and realised at the last moment, as he felt an energy crackle between them the instant his hand fell on her skin, that he'd made a mistake. The room spun out under him, and everything disappeared into darkness.

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Colourful stalls, their fabric roofs flapping in the dusty breeze, littered the street. Seria ran down it giggling, slipping around the legs of bustling, shouting aliens.

"Stay close!" Mama called out, and Seria glanced back to nod in reply before stopping at a stall selling pretty jewellery.

She reached out to touch an arm cuff with a red gemstone, but found her hand slapped away by the store owner. Seria flinched at both the sharp touch, and the fragment of memories thrown at her, and realised she'd forgotten to put on her gloves.

"No touching," clicked an insectoid woman, her antenna wiggling.

Seria glanced at the cuff, recalling how the woman had accidentally revealed how she didn't want to sell it - how her mother had made it for her, and how her sister was sick and now they needed to sell everything. When Seria looked back up at the woman, she smiled at her and dug into her pocket for the small coin her mother had given her to spend.

She placed it carefully on the edge of the table. "For sister," she said as clearly as she could in Yardi’carlin, the woman's home language.

The woman's antenna stilled, and her mouth opened and closed. Before she could say anything, Seria dashed off again.

Seria continued looking at the stalls even though she had no money now. She could hear Mama nearby, arguing with a seller about the price of food, but she soon found herself enthralled by a man in the corner of the street, wrapped in hole-riddled blankets, and his small, furry dancing pet with large ears and a squashed face.

The animal danced around, and a few people threw the pair money. Seria was so busy watching the dog perform that she didn't notice the crowd suddenly hush until she heard her mother call her name.

Seria turned around to look for Mama, and saw three soldiers stroll down the street. They were all large, with blubbery grey skin, and they all had a piece of coloured eyewear over one eye that Seria recognised for Mama's memories.

One of them scanned the market with a predatory grin. "The whores are this way, Yerlo," he said, motioning to the left.

The soldier at the front waved his hand dismissively. "You two go on. I'll join you soon."

"Seria!"

She heard Mama say her name again, but dashed through the street to get closer to the now lone soldier. Yerlo glared at everyone he passed, and they all looked down, or hid behind other stalls. When his gaze fell on Seria, she stared back at him curiously.

"Hello, little girl," he said, a grin forming on the saggy flaps of his face that made his mouth. He
stepped forward, and before she could react, Yerlo reached out with his hand and grabbed the back of her shirt, making her yelp as he lifted her into the air.

The soldier squinted at her and leaned in close, then sniffed loudly. "Well," he drawled. "If you had a tail I'd think you were a Saiyan monkey."

"Let my daughter go," Mama said, and when Seria twisted in grip she saw her in front of the soldier, while keeping her head down so her face remained hidden by the hood of her clothes.

Yerlo chuckled at that. "Or what?" He reached out and snatched Mama's arm. She tried to pull away, the hood falling back in the struggle, and Yerlo's eyes widened. "Ara." He bared his teeth at her, revealing their jagged edges. "You're supposed to be dead. I'd heard a rumour that you were here though, and just had to find out if that was true. What luck this is!" He laughed loudly, the folds of skin jiggling with the sound. "It's divine timing, really. The gods clearly want me to be in Frieza's good books."

At the word 'Frieza', Seria lashed out at the soldier, managing to grab his large nose. Yerlo cried out and Seria felt him go still under her as she was thrown into his memories.

Unlike the market woman, whose memories had been clear and easy to navigate, all Seria saw this time was splashes of red and purple and her ears were filled with the sounds of screaming, dying people. He loved it, she realised. He loved the sounds people made as they died. As he wrapped his hands around their necks and their eyes went dark.

The visions stopped suddenly, and Seria realised that the screaming hadn't stopped, because it came from her mouth as she flew through the air. She tumbled through a stall before skidding face first into a small firepit, the embers sparking in her face and burning her skin. Seria gasped, then opened her mouth to cry again - this time from pain - but Mama swept her up in her arms and began running with her tucked against her chest.

"It's okay," Mama whispered, patting her hair as they ran through the market. "Hush, baby. It's okay."

Seria let out a sob and clung to her mother's arms, trembling all over. She'd never seen a memory filled with so much evil before, and her face throbbed with pain she'd only ever felt in memories before.

"Hide," Mama said, shoving Seria through the window of a small house. "Don't come out until I come and get you."

Then she fled down the street, leaving Seria standing alone, shaking in the window. The girl peeked out the window and saw that Mama hadn't got far. Yerlo snarled and spat, and Mama slowly took a defensive fight stance.

"Frieza is going to reward me when I bring you and your half breed in," Yerlo said with a low chuckle. "And whoever helped you escape will be mine to torture - I'll make sure of that."

"Who else knows?" Mama asked, her voice oddly calm. "Won't you need to share your reward?"

The soldier shrugged a shoulder. "The others think we are here for whoring. Don't worry, pretty one. You'll be all mine."

"Good," Mama said. "No one will suspect me when I kill you." She attacked then, fists flying.

The soldier was obviously surprised at her strength, but quickly fought back. He sent Mama flying
into a building and Seria held back a scream by covering her mouth with her hands. Mama dragged herself up out of the wreckage and made to attack again, but the soldier suddenly slumped forward, landing on his face. A hole in his back smoked slightly, and with a shock Seria realised he was dead.

A dark-haired man stood behind the called soldier, his hand still raised. He glanced at Mama, quirking his eyebrow. "In trouble again, I see."

"I had it handled," Mama snapped at him.

"I know," he replied. "But my way was quicker, and the less witnesses the better." He pointed his hand at the soldier again, and light flew out from his hands and absorbed the body, disintegrating it into ash.

Seria stared at the man, trying to place where she'd seen him before. When she remembered, she climbed out the window and ran over to them both.

"I told you to stay hidden," Mama said, grabbing her hand to keep her from running straight for the man.

Seria smiled, even though the movement hurt the scorched skin on her face, watching the man as he stared back at her solemnly. He had an odd name. What was it?

"Veggie," she said, grinning as his eyes widened in shock. He was the man who'd saved her and Mama from the lizard monster. The prince.

"She looks like Raditz," he said quietly, still looking at her. When he pulled his gaze towards mother, his face became even more serious than before. "You need to be more careful. Get out of here, hide out for a few weeks before leaving this planet. I'll clean up this mess."

"Vegeta…" Mama said, her grip on Seria's arm turning almost painful.

"Raditz is fine," he said shortly. "Still suspicious of me, but he's alive."

"And you?" Mama asked.

His eyebrows drew together into a scowl. "Go, Ara. I'll keep them off your trail."

Mama nodded and picked Seria up. They slipped down the street, and Seria watched Veggie until he disappeared from sight.

It wasn't until she turned around that Seria realised she was dreaming. This had all happened before and she was reliving it, just as she had many other nights. Usually she woke up at this point, but in this dream, time shifted abruptly and Seria found herself standing before the prince once more.

They were no longer outside in the market and were instead in a small house - one she'd spent a couple of years in as a child. She had a feeling she should try and wake up - she knew this memory was not a completely good one, but couldn't recall why.

The prince leaned against the grey wall of the small bunker Mama had fashioned into their home, his arms folded across his chest, dark eyes studying her as if seeing her for the first time.

"Still looks like her clown of a father," he said in clipped tones. There was a hint of amusement in his eyes though as he stepped forward, away from the wall, and lifted his gaze to Ara. "I suppose if
the Saiyan race must live on through half-breeds, it is better that our superior genes win out."

Mama scoffed and rolled her eyes. "I'm merely thankful that Seria has my intellect."

"I'll concede that point. I wouldn't wish Raditz's brain cells on anyone." The corner of the prince's mouth lifted into a smirk and he dropped his stare back to Seria. "Can you fight, girl?"

"I punched Darlin in the face for calling me names," Seria replied carefully, unsure how this man would take it. Mama had been mad that she'd brought attention to herself by knocking out the boy. The man's face broke into a genuine smile and he let out a gravelly laugh, reminding Seria of the person she'd imagined rather than remembered.

In her memories - which thanks to her abilities never faded - she remembered him as a large, imposing figure. A prince who killed the monsters hunting her and her Mama. At five, she had grown a little taller, and suddenly Prince Vegeta of the fallen Vegetasei didn't seem as big.

He was slimmer, his muscle mass unable to hide the fact that he was underfed. He was shorter than Mama too, although he held himself like someone much taller. Seria knew from stories her mother had told her that this man could one day be the strongest in the universe. He could be the one to save them all from Frieza.

"She has abilities like mine," Mama said, sounding hesitant, as if she wasn't sure what the prince would think.

He merely tilted his head curiously. "Show me."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Mama started to say, but Seria stepped forward eagerly, wanting to impress the prince.

She had better control over her powers now, and was able to focus on memories she wanted to see. And the prince held answers she'd always been curious about. Since he'd stopped the soldier Yerlo from hurting Mama, they hadn't been bothered by anyone since. How exactly did he stop Frieza from finding out?

Seria reached out and touched the prince's forearm, already imagining the heroics of a warrior slaying his subject's enemies. The moment her skin connected with his she sank into darkness, only to open her eyes to nothing at all.

She gasped, realising she was blindfolded, the musty smelling material covering both her eyes and nose, making her gag. No, not her.

Him. She was in his memory.

Not only was he blindfolded, but he was restrained too, with cool metal rings around his wrists forcing his hands behind his back. He struggled valiantly against them, but was already so injured that his ki was too weak to do much against the bonds.

When a searing pain cut through his left leg, Vegeta grit his teeth, determined not to cry out. He would not appear weak, for it was a sure way of making them believe he had something to hide.

"You abandoned your post, went to a planet outside your jurisdiction, killed three loyal soldiers, and caused as yet unquoted damage to a valuable port town," a smooth, feminine voice purred in his ear. "Tell me little monkey prince. What would make you risk that?"
"I wanted a break," Vegeta replied, managing to keep his tone aloof even with the ragged blade currently embedded in his thigh. "I didn't know they would be there and they attacked me."

His torturer laughed, twisting the blade ever-so-slowly in a circle so that it squelched against his bleeding muscle, making his leg spasm uncontrollably. "I'll get the truth, Prince Vegeta. I always do."

"I've already told you," Vegeta started to say, but cut off with a gasp as he felt a metal claw on his head, sharp appendages twisting through his hair and digging into his scalp.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the blindfold, hoping that the rumours of this particular torture method were just that - rumours.

Then his skin burst into flames and Vegeta forgot about staying silent, forgot about not appearing weak, and screamed.

Trunks hit the floor facedown, a ragged cry ripping from his throat. With a choking sob, he clutched his head, feeling for the metal hand that had moments ago been inflicting the most excruciating pain he had ever felt.

"It was just a dream," Seria said from the bed above him. She flicked on a light then looked down at him with dull, dark-rimmed eyes. After a moment, she reached a shaky hand to the glass of water on her bedside table, and when Trunks hauled himself to his feet and sat on the bed beside her, she handed it to him.

"That was not just a dream," Trunks said after taking a sip. "That was…"

"Memories," Seria finished, rubbing her eyes with her hands. "What were you doing, Trunks? I'm sorry you got pulled into it but you shouldn't have touched me."

"Your ki…" Trunks started to explain, then shook his head. "It doesn't matter. You… do you see things like that often?"

Seria nodded in response.

"What was happening to my father?" He shuddered and wrapped his arms around himself, trying to shake off the remnants of the memories of pain.

Seria looked down at her lap, twisting her hands in it. "Your papa abandoned his mission and came to make sure we were safe. He'd removed his pod's tracking chip, but didn't realise there was a second, and got found out." She paused and pulled the bunched blanket at the end of the bed, wrapped it around her, then shuffled so she leaned against the wall. When she began talking again, she closed her eyes, her face scrunched up as if she were trying not to cry. "They tortured him to find out why he'd deserted his mission and his squad, but he never gave us up." Seria opened her eyes again and looked at Trunks. "They nearly killed him and he didn't say one word about us."

"Who tortured him?" Trunks asked, already knowing the answer and clenching his fists to prepare for it.

Seria gave him a long look, pressing her lips together. Finally, she answered. "Zersa."

Chapter End Notes
I do love writing Bulma and Vegeta argue-flirting! It's 100% why they are my
favourite couple. I really hope the memory within a memory within a dream made
sense in the space scenes. Let me know what you thought!
Vegeta, Trunks and their new space friends arrive in Zersa's quadrant.

Sorry for the unexpected hiatus! Details on that at the end.

As a reminder of what happened in the last chapter, on Earth, Vegeta and Bulma continued with their flirtatious arguing, and in space Trunks found out more about Seria's past. Now, onto this chapter!

“She's asleep,” Ara said as she came back into the main living area, closing the door to the bedroom softly behind her. She padded across the room towards Vegeta, twisting her long yellow hair into an intricate braid as she walked, before heading into the cramped adjoining kitchen.

Vegeta nodded in response, then rubbed his temples at the shot of pain throbbing through his skull at the movement, his head aching from Seria's intrusion into his mind. The girl's abilities were impressive. He'd found Ara's unnerving, but having that much power in the hands of a child was downright frightening. He sighed and leaned his head back against the wall he was currently propped against. "Her ki isn't as pathetic as yours," he commented, noting how even in sleep it hummed strongly, and with a distinctly Saiyan edge to it.

Ara scoffed at that. "I'm aware. When she has a mind to do something I don't want I hardly have the strength to stop her." She poured a cup of water then crossed the room and handed it to him. "Drink. Being mind-swept is dehydrating."

Vegeta took the cup and tossed the water back in one gulp. As he set the glass on a wall shelf, then sank into one of the ratty seats Ara had furnished the bunker with, Ara sat down opposite him, her pale eyes watching his every move.

“What?” he snapped.

"Seria said she was trying to see how you managed to keep the WTO off our trail." She tapped her long fingers on her knee, her unblinking gaze still focussed on him. "She only saw the aftermath, but I must admit, I'm curious too."

Vegeta clenched his jaw. Although Ara had been on many purging missions, she radiated an innocence that should have been stripped from her long ago. "You don't want to know," he said finally, breaking her stare to look down at the broken tiles of the floor.

"If I ever get captured, I need to be able to corroborate your story,” Ara pointed out.
He sighed and looked back at her. She was right, he knew. Although the idea of them getting caught was... unpleasant. Fear was a constant in his life, as much as he pretended never to feel it, but fear for others wasn't something he felt often. "The best way to avoid telling the truth in a torture session is to make sure you appear to be hiding something," he said, placing his hands carefully on his knees to avoid the temptation to ball them into fists.

"That seems counterintuitive... don't you want to appear innocent?"

"No one is innocent," he replied. "There were two other soldiers at the whorehouse. I killed them and everyone in it, then when tortured I admitted - but only under a lot of pain - that I'd..." Vegeta scrunched his nose in distaste at the mere thought, "...developed an ongoing interest in one of the whores. I said that I got into a fight with the Yerlo's men trying to protect her."

"And they believed you?"

"They believed that I'd been trying to keep that secret, but had succumbed under torture. It was... convincing."

"That was reckless," Ara said with a growl. "You had no way of knowing if they had another like me. They could have got the truth - the real truth - from you easily."

"My intel said there was no one else with your abilities. Perhaps it was reckless," he admitted before throwing her a cocky smirk, "but it was strategically reckless."

Ara frowned at that. "And your..." She swallowed audibly, then reached over the table and tentatively placed her hand over one of his. "Your punishment?"

Vegeta's hand stiffened under hers and he fought the urge to throw her off. "It doesn't matter."

"It does to me." She wrapped her fingers around his palm and squeezed.

"Ara..." He pulled his hand back slowly then stood up, turning away from the unreadable expression on her face. "I'd endured worse punishments for less," he said, striding to the door. "Train the girl. I'll come by if I can do so without raising suspicion."

"I will defeat Frieza, and when I do I'll tell Raditz the truth and he will come for you."

Vegeta screamed as he slammed his fist into one of the gravity room's bots, revelling in the sensation of skin and bone against crumpling metal. It didn't make the fury bubbling inside disappear though, and he spun in the air to send the last working bot against the wall with his foot.

It dropped abruptly to the floor and lay in a twitching, sparking mess. Cursing inwardly, Vegeta landed in front of the control panel, sweat pouring down his bare chest, limbs shaking from the current level. With all bots down his training would be hampered for a while, and all because of a temper tantrum over events that happened years ago.

He didn't know why he was recalling his brief moments with the half Saiyan girl and her mother, but the memories filled him with almost as much rage as his inability to transform into the legendary did.

He'd failed them both, just like he'd failed the rest of his people. He hadn't defeated Frieza. Raditz had died too soon to ever find out about his daughter. Had died hating him.

With a low growl, Vegeta turned the newly upgraded gravity room up to its highest setting, letting
the pain of the weight bearing down on him burn through his limbs. He could barely move to begin his press ups, but he pushed past the pain, past the memories haunting him, and focussed on the only thing he could do. Get stronger so he didn't fail again.

Vegeta had travelled extensively enough to know that most of the known universe was barren and devoid of life. The Gol'thak quadrant however, left to develop on its own for millions of years thanks to the dangerous meteor fields surrounding it, was famous for having a disproportionate number of life supporting planets. Named for its unusual ring of rocks that had brought down many a warship, Gol'thak loosely translated to paradise through hell's gates.

That's not to say it was impassable - Vegeta himself had been through a few times in his small pod - but how Zersa had managed to get hundreds of warships through safely to take over the quadrant was something he hadn't managed to figure out yet. He had to find a way to work it out though, because they were going to need to get The Clunker through, preferably undetected.

"Cloaking is up and being monitored automatically every five minutes," Han said from his hover chair at the ship's main control panel. "We are about three sleep cycles away, so we need to figure out our plan before we arrive."

Vegeta glanced up from the other side of the room with a frown. He was well aware that they needed a plan, and that both Han and Ara were counting on him to come up with one. "I need the exact dimensions of the ship." he said, scrawling notes onto a piece of thick paper in front of him.

He sat on his own hover chair in front of three holographic screens of scrolling data. Ara had provided him with the last twenty years of meteor activity from the quadrant, and Vegeta had been studying it for hours since, to no avail.

He continued his methodical process of copying down any key information that stood out in the hope that it might spark an idea, snatching the piece of paper Han handed him without a look in the man's direction. The ship's size was proving to be a problem, with very limited windows of opportunity for a ship that large to get through.

How had Zersa managed it?

Vegeta dropped his pen with a disgusted hiss and slumped in his chair. Not for the first time, he wished that Bulma were here, for he knew she would have written an algorithm to discover any correlation between meteor activity and ships that made it through successfully.

He tapped his fingers on the desk in front of him with a frown, reminded of the last time he faced a mathematical problem like this...

He'd copied out Bulma's time machine plans onto paper and taped them on the wall of the small room he'd commandeered for his use in the human's hideout. Unable to find more paper, he'd moved to literally writing on the walls in an attempt to alter her calculations for his purpose.

The machine she'd designed was meant for one person, but Vegeta had no intention of leaving Trunks behind on this hell hole. If they were going back in time, they were going together. Unfortunately, while Vegeta's physics skills were better than the average human thanks to his time spent maintaining his space pod, the sheer amount of complex equations involved were doing nothing but giving him a headache.

Rubbing his temples, he sighed and sank into a wooden chair beside his desk, staring miserably at the wall in front of it. He'd always been rather proud of his intellect, using it to his tactical
advantage time and time again in battle, but he had nothing on Bulma's genius, even with her notes designed to dumb it down for him.

"Do you want to spar, Papa?" Came a small voice from the doorway.

"No," he said, his voice coming out shorter than he'd intended. He turned to see his son's crestfallen face quickly mask itself into an impassive expression so much like his own, and cursed at himself inwardly. "Wait," he said, stopping the boy from leaving. "Come look at this."

Trunks entered the room, his smile returning.

"We need to amend the calculations for the propulsion," Vegeta began to explain, standing up to show Trunks the diagram on the wall. "Your mother built her prototype for only one passenger."

Trunks stared at the diagram thoughtfully, then wandered around the room to the other walls, inspecting the scrawled calculations. "You need enough propulsion to create the force required to send us back in time," the boy said, running his fingers against a complex expression.

"Yes." Vegeta looked at his son curiously as the boy picked up another coloured pen and began writing another version of the equation underneath.

The boy had proven himself to be of above intelligence from an early age, but even if he had his mother's genius, he was only six years old. Surely he couldn't... Well, shit. Maybe he had.

Trunks stepped back, cocking his head at the calculation, then smirked at his father. "Will that work?"

Vegeta ran it through four times before conceding that he'd been outsmarted by a six year old. "Yes." Even as he wanted to feel embarrassed at how easily the boy had figured it out, a wave of pride washes over him. "Good," he said, ignoring how Trunks' eyes lit up at the praise and striding over to the other side of the room to point to another equation. "Now, how about you fix this one too?"

Vegeta chuckled at the memory as he felt for Trunks' ki. The boy was with Seria, and by the feel of their heightened ki they were sparring. Rather than going to Trunks, Vegeta pulsed his ki three times in an old signal from their own time, where they'd communicate in ki pulses when it was too dangerous to talk.

Immediately, Vegeta felt his son's ki pulse in response, then sensed the boy moving through the ship. When Trunks appeared at the doorway, face flushed and still slightly out of breath from his spar, Vegeta waved him in.

"I require your assistance," he said, jabbing a finger towards the screen.

Trunks came closer, peering at the piles of numbers with a frown. "What is this?"

"Data from the meteor field around Gol'thak." Vegeta swiped through it, pausing at key variants.

Han made a scoffing sound and twisted in his chair to look at the two Saiyans. "Ara said you were a master tactician, Vegeta. Are you seriously resorting to getting advice from a child?"

Trunks flushed, his eyebrows narrowing, but Vegeta cut him off with a raised hand before he could speak.

"Any worthwhile tactician knows to use the resources at his disposal, Lieutenant. I was the
strongest Saiyan alive at four years old. Age has nothing to do with one's abilities." Vegeta turned back to Trunks then, continuing as if Han hadn't interrupted. "There are millions of meteors circling the quadrant, and every now and again they open up so there is space to fit a large ship through. I'm trying to predict when and where the next gap big enough to get The Clunker through is."

Trunks nodded and took over from the screens, pushing his father's chair - with Vegeta on it - so it moved out of the way.

Vegeta frowned at his son's insolence, but said nothing as he recognised the look on the boy's face. It was the same one Bulma got when confronted with a problem she was determined to solve.

"The translator doesn't translate written letters," Trunks said suddenly, frowning at the holographic keyboard displayed on the desk with blue lights. "I can write a script to analyse the data, but someone will need to type it for me."

Vegeta slid his chair back towards the desk, making Trunks jump out of the way. "Fine," he said, cracking his knuckles. "Tell me what to do."

The stubborn nut wouldn't budge. Whoever had tightened it could well have stripped the thread. Bulma swore as the spanner slipped out from her hand and skidded across the floor.

"I've got it," Daniel, the technician assisting her said, scrambling after it with his white lab coat fluttering behind him. He came back with the wrench in hand, brandishing it like a trophy.

Bulma wriggled in her uncomfortable position, legs under the space ship, and her other half curved up around the bottom to reach the control panel. She took the spanner and tried again, but the damn thing wouldn't loosen. "Give me a hand?" Bulma puffed out as she tried again.

Daniel slid under the spaceship as well, and reached up to help, his arms intertwining with hers to get a proper grip.

They tugged hard, and the nut finally moved, so suddenly that the wrench flew from their hands and both Bulma and Daniel fell back against the floor.

Bulma tipped her head back with a huff to see two bare feet in the doorway of her lab. There was only one person who would walk around a dangerous laboratory with no shoes on. Bulma scrambled out from the ship, and away from the now very flustered and red-faced Daniel, to greet her guest.

"Vegeta," she said brightly, ignoring his cold expression that flicked from her technician to her. "What do you think?"

His gaze fell on Daniel again, who seemed to wither under the stare. "Think about what?" Vegeta asked, folding his arms across his deliciously tight t-shirt and dragging his head back towards Bulma, looking her up and down.

Bulma felt her cheeks heat up at his unblinking look, and she realised how dishevelled she was in her old lab clothes, covered in grease. Vegeta, meanwhile, looked good enough to eat, wearing loose slacks with his muscles clearly defined by his shirt, and his hair still slightly damp from a shower. He smelt good too, even from this distance.

"The spaceship," Bulma replied, narrowing her eyes at him to hide how much she wanted to jump
him then and there.

Vegeta finally stopped focussing on her and looked at the half-built machine. He strolled up to it, undid all four bits with his fingertips - even the ones she hadn't attacked with a spanner yet - and inspected the control panel. "This has more power."

"It will be twenty percent faster than the old one," she said.

"And will have smoother controls," Daniel added.

"Is that right, human?" Vegeta snarled, taking a step towards the technician who shrank under the Saiyan's glare.

Bulma stepped in between the men, placing a hand on Vegeta's chest, hiding a grin. Was the Saiyan jealous? "Yes, that's right. The new controls will make navigating through meteor fields much easier. Despite its size it will have the manoeuvrability of a motorbike."

Vegeta's eyes flickered with confusion, but he didn't reply, and Bulma realised he wouldn't know what a motorbike was, but certainly would never admit to not knowing anything.

"That will be all, Daniel," Bulma said without turning towards him, keeping her gaze locked on Vegeta instead. "Take the afternoon off."

"Are you sure-"

"You heard the woman," Vegeta ground out, and Bulma felt his chest tense under her hand.

"Ah… okay…"

Bulma heard the lab door click, and when Vegeta visibly relaxed his shoulders, Bulma knew Daniel had left. Vegeta still didn't seem happy though, with his eyebrows knitted together and his lips tight.

"You are building another space ship," he said, stepping to the side so that Bulma's hand hung uselessly in the air. "You already have one."

Bulma shoved both her hands in her deep lab coat pockets. "Future you is taking it with him when he and Trunks go back to their time."

"You don't think I can do it." His black eyes stared at her intently. "You think you will need to escape Earth."

"Excuse me?" Bulma balled her hands in her pockets. Did he really think that she was building a spaceship to run away?

"You are building that ship," he pointed roughly at the half complete shell, "to leave Earth if we do not defeat the androids."

Bulma dug her nails into her palms, ready to snap back at him that she was not a coward, when she caught a glimpse of something else in his eyes. He wasn't accusing her of being scared, she realised. He was hurt, thinking that she'd lied when she'd said she had faith in him to destroy the threat to Earth.

Slowly, Bulma uncurled her fists and brought her hand out, placing them palms out in front of her. "That's not true." She stepped towards him again, settling both hands on his bicep. "I want to have
But that just made Vegeta appear more upset, his eyes widening and blinking unusually rapidly for a Saiyan. "You… you want me to leave?"

"No!" She gripped his arm tighter, digging her fingers into it as if she were strong enough to force him to stay. "That is not what I meant. I don't want you to leave, but I don't know what you'll want to do after the androids. I want… I want you to have a choice."

Vegeta gradually unfolded his arms, cocking his head as he crinkled his nose with a frown. "A choice."

"Yes." Bulma breathed out a breath she hadn't realised she was holding as the man's muscles relaxed underneath her touch.

"I haven't thought about what will happen afterwards," Vegeta said, still rigid in his stance, but unflinching as Bulma edged closer. "Other than using my Super Saiyan powers to defeat Kakarot, of course."

"Of course," Bulma agreed with a small chuckle, noticing immediately that he'd said 'defeat' and not 'kill'. "I haven't much either to be honest."

"You've thought about it enough to build a ship," he pointed out.

Bulma slid her hands from his arm, to across his chest, clutching the front of his shirt lightly. "Even if there weren't androids turning up to destroy Earth, I'd still have built this, if only because I can. Now, did you come down here for a reason, or were you just trying to scare off my new technician?"

"All the bots are broken. And I don't like him," Vegeta said with a scowl, the words vibrating in his throat.

"You don't like anyone," Bulma retorted. *Ha! He was jealous.*

The Saiyan raised his eyebrows at that, and leaned in towards her, until barely centimetres parted them. "Is that right?" He asked in a husky whisper, leaning further forward so his lips scraped against her ear. "I'll leave you be then."

Bulma giggled at the soft breath on her sensitive neck, and placed a hand on his cheek, turning his head to face her. "Don't you dare," she said, before closing the gap between them and pressing her lips to his.

With Trunks' calculations, they managed to get *The Clunker* through the field using a rare gap in the meteors and full thrust. Trunks had held his breath the whole time, terrified that the numbers his father had put so much faith in would be wrong. But other than a few surface dings, the ship was unscathed, and the ship and its occupants had landed on a remote part of one of the outer planets.

They had all gathered outside the ship, standing in formation in the frigid, oxygen-thin air, all standing tall under the planet's fifteen times Earth's gravity. Every single one of the ship's occupants - from the soldiers to the ship's chef looked dead ahead at Vegeta, ignoring their surroundings.

Not that there was much to see, Trunks realised as he snuck a glance from his position with Seria at
the back of the group. There was nothing but ice for miles.

"We need to do this quietly and efficiently." Vegeta stood rigidly in front of all the soldiers on the ship, an imposing figure in his full Saiyan armour. "Right now we have the element of surprise. We lose that, and I guarantee we won't get anywhere near Zersa."

"We've landed in the middle of enemy territory," Ara added. "Zersa's hold on this quadrant is extensive. Now is the time to be strategic, and to use any advantages we have."

Vegeta bared his teeth into a feral grin, his gaze flashing past Trunks for an instant. "The base on this planet is a port for two thirds of the quadrant's spaceships. The majority of Zersa's fuel comes from here. We take this port, we limit her reach." He snapped his fingers at Han, then began barking out more specific instructions at the man who then strode off, sending groups of people off in different directions.

"Where is everyone going?" Trunks asked Seria, impatient to find out what his father would have him do.

"This isn't a direct attack," Seria replied beside him. "They are going to destroy the fuel reserves on this planet."

"Exactly," Ara said, coming towards them. "And you two are going to stay here."

Trunks scowled at that. "I want to help."

"You can, by staying with the ship," Ara insisted.

"But I-"

"But nothing, brat," Vegeta snapped, striding forward with a glare. "I need someone to keep on top of comms and to protect the ship. I need someone I can trust to do both of those."

Trunks opened and closed his mouth, torn between feeling like he'd miss out on all the action and pride at knowing that his father had chosen a task specifically for him. "Yes, sir," he said finally.

"Good." Vegeta placed a hand on Trunks shoulder and squeezed it gently. "Go to the comms centre. I want you to relay between squads where necessary and to try intercept any comms coming in from Zersa's forces. If anything of interest comes through for Zersa, patch through to me directly."

"What about me?" asked Seria eagerly.

Vegeta pulled back from Trunks and furrowed his brow. "Stay with Trunks. Don't do anything stupid."

Seria pouted at that. "I could help interrogate anyone you capture."

"Absolutely not," Ara snapped. "Stay with Trunks, keep the shields up, and protect the ship."

"If anyone gets within fifty clicks, contact me immediately," Vegeta added, before nodding at Ara then taking to the sky.

Taking over the port was easy. Too easy, Vegeta thought uneasily as he barked orders at the few soldiers they had to secure the area. The planet's inhabitants hadn't put up a fight, claiming that they only worked for Zersa because they had no choice. Zersa's actual soldiers numbered in the
tens and were easily contained.

He stomped into the control room where Han was riffling through all the digital records to look for clues to Zersa's exact whereabouts.

"I don't like it," muttered Han, echoing Vegeta's thoughts. "Zersa has left this planet too unprotected for it to be the quadrant's main source of fuel."

"She doesn't need fuel," Ara said, striding into the control room. "I swept the memories of every one of Zersa's soldiers and they all say the same thing. Zersa is using a renewable energy source that doesn't require charging."

Vegeta frowned at that. "Everything needs to get its power from somewhere. Nothing lasts forever."

"Well, this mysterious energy source is powering Zersa's entire fleet. No one knows how it works." Ara began helping Han skim through the records. "Look for anything with the word cognilium."

Leaving the two to their hunting, Vegeta picked up the room's comms unit and patched through to The Clunker. "Trunks? Everything still intact?"

"Affirmative," came Trunks' crackly voice through the speaker. "No problems here."

"Open that one," Ara said in the background. "No, the larger file. Son of a… Vegeta, you need to see this…"

Vegeta glanced at Ara, whose eyes had gone wide. "Son, I've got to go. I'll return soon-"

"Wait, Papa. I'm getting some weird disturbance on the security system," Trunks said in a rush. "It's coming from high up, in the outer reaches of the atmosphere, but it's coming in fast."

"Vegeta!" Ara sounded panicked. "Zersa has a whole automation army powered by this energy source."

"How soon before it arrives?" Vegeta asked Trunks.

"Not it," came Seria's voice. "Them… it's thousands of machines coming in as one."

"Papa," Trunks said quietly. "What should we do?"

Vegeta cursed under his breath, then blasted a hole straight through the roof of the control room, revealing the sky above. Even though it had been daytime minutes ago, the sky had darkened, blotched with dots silhouetted by the sun behind them and making it appear as if stars were above them.

"That's them," Ara said. "That's Zersa's army. And Vegeta, if the records are to be believed, they are one hundred percent machine and all have the same abilities as Zersa."

Han swallowed noisily. "That doesn't sound good."

"Papa?" Trunks asked again through the speaker. "What do we do?"

Vegeta's breath caught in his throat and he clenched his fists so hard he felt his nails pierce his skin. "Get everyone back on the ship. Retreat and cloak the ship. Don't wait for me."

Vegeta felt Trunks' ki flair in the distance. "Papa! Let me come with you!"
"Stay where you are," he replied. "That's an order." Not that Trunks ever obeyed his commands, but it was worth a try. Vegeta cut the comms to his son then dropped his stance to take off into the air.

Before he could leave, Ara grabbed his arm. "You're going to do something reckless, aren't you." It wasn't a question, but she raised her eyebrows and dug her fingers tighter.

He smirked back at her and shook off her hand. "Strategically reckless perhaps."

Chapter End Notes

Wow, it took me a while to get this chapter out! I did want to get it done sooner, but I had a massive project at work requiring a lot of overtime (now complete, yay!) and then I had to travel overseas for work AND THEN to top all that off my husband has had some unexpected health issues that have thrown both my schedule and my ability to think creatively completely out. Honestly, this has been a very tough few weeks, so thank you for all of your reviews and support on this story.
Vegeta shot into the air, the wind around him singing like the blood in his veins that called for vengeance. He'd hated Zarbon with a passion he usually reserved for Frieza, but the one experience he'd had with his cousin had shaken him at the time - not that he had ever admitted that - and the idea of ripping her green head from her body to see how she liked the feeling of her skull imploding had definite appeal.

Of course, he had to get through the automations currently closing in from above first…

Gathering a ball of ki in his palms, he experimentally fired it upwards. It soared in a straight line, and when it hit the automations it exploded with an electric crackle, creating a small hole in the formation.

Within seconds the hole was filled by more machines.

Vegeta paused in flight to hover midair, then began to draw on his energy to produce his signature attack. The air flickered with purple light that danced in his hands and up his arms, and when he fired, it exploded across the automations like a rippling wave. But when the smoke cleared, there were no gaps in the machines, and they continued their rapid descent.

Interesting. It was as if the automations had learnt from his first attack and prepared enough for his second, making it unable to penetrate their shields. Curious to test his theory, Vegeta launched into a choreographed attack, launching several blasts after the other. This time a few of the automations fell. He repeated the same attack sequence, but didn't succeed in eliminating any.

Next, Vegeta tried the same formation, but with the final attack changed. He only disabled one automation. The bastards were learning. They reminded him of the bots Bulma had created for him after he'd agreed to stop picking fights with the androids and instead train to defeat them. He was going to have to find a weakness in them, and quickly, or they'd soon learn all his attacks and move from defence to offence.

He needed to get closer to them and fight them close range.

Vegeta considered becoming Super Saiyan, then decided against it, realising it was something the machines couldn't possibly predict and he should keep it up his sleeve. Remaining in his base form,
he shot up towards the centre of the still-approaching horde.

As he got closer, he could distinguish the individual machines more clearly. They were a dark grey, oval in shape with eight angled arms that connected to the machine beside it. They reminded Vegeta of Earth's spiders, but they each had a glowing blue light on the front that Vegeta suspected fired a weapon and they were much larger than arachnoids – only slightly smaller than Vegeta himself.

He veered to the left before hitting the centre, colliding instead with a different group of machines in the hopes that he'd caught them off guard. They broke apart at his impact, firing burning hot ki. Each blast merely singed his skin, and Vegeta twisted in the air, grabbed one of the machines by its arm, then swung it into another. Both machines died and plummeted to the ground, but the hole he'd created was quickly replaced.

His method so far was inefficient. He needed a way to take them all out, or he'd be here forever. The only clue he had was that they all acted as one. They were connected, and thanks to his WTO days, Vegeta knew all about exploiting an enemy's relationships to gain an advantage.

Taking a punt, Vegeta dropped down so he was no longer at close range, then powered up to a level just below turning Super Saiyan. He began a full onslaught to the left flank of the machine fleet. He kept his shots as wild and unpredictable as possible, drawing in more machines from other parts of the fleet as they tried to fill the gaps. Their descent to the planet slowed, and when Vegeta saw the number of machines had clustered in his area of attack, he flew back up, punched a hole through one of them, then sent a blast of power to it.

The machine let out a horrific screaming sound, almost as if it was alive, and Vegeta kept his ki pulsing through it, overloading the machine's energy core. It exploded abruptly, sending shrapnel flying, and about twenty more rows of machines around it exploded too, unable to let go of each other in time to avoid the energy overload.

Letting out a sharp laugh, Vegeta realised he'd finally made a sizeable hole in the automations that they couldn't fill. He moved to try a similar attack, hoping they hadn't had time to assess and learn from his last one when the machines all separated.

Four of them flew straight towards Vegeta, surrounding him then pressing their bodies to him. He made to increase his ki to blow them off, but before he could the automations made a clicking sound.

"Fuck," he grunted out as he remembered what Ara had said. The machines had the same abilities as Zersa.

He felt sharp needles press into then pierce his skin. Then the pain started.

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*Trunks hopped his knight deftly up and to the right across the board, taking out Videl's bishop and setting himself up for a move against the king. "Check!" He crowed triumphantly, dancing a little in his seat.*

*Videl's eyes widened and she shook her head in disbelief. "I taught you this game a few weeks ago and you're already kicking my butt?" Her eyes narrowed before a grin broke out on her face. In a sweeping move, she pulled her queen across the board, taking out his knight and positioning it in a direct path to Trunks' king. "Check mate."

"What?" Trunks leaned forward to peer at the checked board, trying to figure out how he'd missed
that possible outcome. "No way."

"Yes way," Videl said, leaning back in her chair nonchalantly. "You were too caught up in your own move to think about what it would mean for me."

"But..." Trunks tried to think of a way out of her move, but his king was well and truly trapped. "I want a rematch."

Videl laughed at that. "Maybe tomorrow, kiddo. I need to-"

A resounding explosion cut her off and the room shook, sending the board and all the chess pieces scattering to the floor. Videl let out a yelp and threw herself on top of Trunks – as if he were the one needing protection! - and the small pieces of plaster began to fall from the roof, covering the room like snow.

When the shaking stopped, Trunks shoved Videl off and immediately began sensing his father's location. He didn't need to look far, as Papa's ki signature was heading straight towards them.

"What was that?" he asked, coughing from the floating dust.

Videl just shook her head and clambered to her feet.

A moment later, the door to the room burst open and Papa strode in. His gaze looked Trunks up and down, and apparently deciding Trunks was unharmed, shifted to Videl. "Your father is directing everyone to the lower tunnels. Take Trunks and go with them."

"Is it the androids?" she asked, her voice tight. At Papa's sharp nod, Videl clenched her shaking fists, her fear showing for a moment before her hands relaxed and her face became stony. "What about you?"

"They are here for me," Papa replied. "I'll draw them off."

"They are here for us," Trunks said standing up then brushing the plaster from his clothes. "I should come with you."

"I'm only drawing them off, not engaging them." Papa drew a hand over his face, and when he dropped it Trunks realised just how weary the man looked. "The less variables the better and if it doesn't work the humans will need someone to protect them." He tossed Trunks a capsule. "Look after that. It's everything we have on the time machine."

He turned to go then, striding out of the room the same regal way he'd entered.

"Papa!" Trunks called out.

His father paused in the doorway, but didn't turn around.

Trunks opened his mouth, but found that he wasn't sure what he'd wanted to say. "Don't die," he said finally, his throat closing slightly at the words.

Papa glanced over his shoulder at that, and gave him a two-fingered salute. "See you soon, son."

The pain came in rolling waves, blacking out his vision and searing every nerve ending.

It's not real, Vegeta told himself.
But his skin felt as though it was being peeled off his body layer by layer while his muscles and bones twisted and cracked underneath. And his head - that was the worst of it. He could feel his brain pulsing and stretching under his skull.

He'd been through this once before, and even managed to avoid giving up the truth. Move! he commanded himself. Fight back!

Vegeta barely managed to wriggle a finger when the agony intensified until he couldn't feel his limbs, let alone move them… and it grew until he couldn't do anything but scream.

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His father lay on the small white bed, his bruised skin dark blotches against the white sheets. Trunks held Papa's hand and mentally catalogued every injury his father had sustained lest he forget how lucky he was to have his father alive.

Five broken ribs - two on the left, three on the right. Internal injury to his right kidney. Collapsed right lung. Broken right tibia. Shattered right knee. Fractured left ulna. Concussion. Abrasions to twenty three percent of his body. Two lacerations - one to his left thigh, the other to his forehead.

Papa had fallen unconscious the moment he'd seen Trunks, and seven hours later he still hadn't woken up. The human's doctor had done their best, but he'd been told that if his father was human, he'd be dead already.

The door behind Trunks opened then closed quietly, but he didn't look up, knowing who it was. "I should have helped him," he said, voicing aloud what he'd been thinking since his father arrived back barely conscious and bleeding out.

"No... Trunks." A warm, comforting arm wrapped around his shoulder and he felt Videl's head lean on his. "You have no way of knowing if that would have helped or made things worse. The most important thing to your father is knowing you are safe. He wanted you to stay."

"I don't want to lose him too."

Videl pulled back, then moved beside him, cupping his jaw and gently forcing him to look at her. "Kiddo, I know. Believe me, I know. But he came back. He's a strong guy - he'll pull through."

"This time," Trunks said bitterly. "He used to have Gohan. They had each other out there. Now all he has is me. He's protected me my whole life. I should be doing the same for him."

"Trunks, protecting you is his job. He's your father-"

"If I'd protected my mother, she'd still be alive," Trunks snapped.

Videl continued talking, but Trunks blocked her out, going back to assessing his father, eyes only flicking from Papa to check the numbers on the monitor next to him.

Trunks knew instantly that something was wrong. Everyone had made it to The Clunker, which was now cloaked, and Trunks had spent the last ten minutes in the control room staring through the large window at the black expanse that had taken over the sky, torn between staying to protect everyone and flying off to help his father.

He'd barely been able to make out his father, so small he was against the massive automation threat, but when he'd seen the damage Papa had been able to cause, Trunks had let out a whoop of excitement.
It was short lived though, because moments later his father's ki plummeted, then spiked erratically. Papa was in pain, and a lot of it.

Trunks immediately powered up to Super Saiyan and fled the ship ignoring the shouts of Ara commanding him to stay put. Once outside, he took to the air, closing in on his father's ki.

When he got close enough to see, he realised that Papa was enclosed by automations and that they held him captive. Trunks could just make out Papa's limp, dangling legs, but the rest of him was surrounded. The sound coming from his father's throat was like no other Trunks had heard. A wild, desperate cry.

With a scream of fury, Trunks fired at the machines, dodging the retaliatory blasts from the automations still coating the sky. He managed to destroy one of the machines by Papa, and he got close enough to grab his father and rip him away from them.

The moment Papa was away from the machines he opened his eyes with a gasp, a scream dying on his lips. "Don't let them touch you," he choked out, before spinning to the side to deliver a sharp kick to a machine that had ventured too close. "I told you to stay with the ship."

Trunks scowled as they positioned themselves back to back, arms up defensively. "Rules of engagement, Papa. When it goes to hell..."

Papa let out a hissing sound between his teeth, blocking a blast from one of the machines. "There are no rules," he finished the familiar mantra. "But I had it under control, brat."

"It didn't feel like it to me."

Papa growled in response. "If you want to make it out of this alive," he let out a roar as he fired at approaching automations, "you'd better start doing what I damn well tell you to do."

"You and me, together," Trunks retorted through gritted teeth. "That's what you said. I'm not going to let you die like Mama."

Trunks felt his father's back stiffen against his. Another wave of machines came at them, firing blasts, arms whirring madly.

"Trunks," Papa started to say. "Listen closely. That's not-"

But Trunks never found out what his father was going to say as a heavy wave of energy pulsed through them, cutting Papa off. Trunks felt each and every one of his cells tremble before all the ki he had inside him vanished, as though it had been sucked out. He couldn't find enough energy to even cry out as he tumbled to the ground below, and could only reach out for Papa, who fell beside him, as everything spun until everything faded to black and a deep nothingness took over.

"What do you mean we have to go?" Trunks asked, staring at his father who was currently pulling on a grey t-shirt that was three sizes too big.

Papa yanked it over his head, wincing at the movement, then pulled it down over his mottled green and yellow torso. "The androids won't stop until they find us." He dragged on a pair of pants then limped across the room to pick up a pair of laceless sports shoes. "If we stay here the humans will be collateral damage. If we leave, when the androids close in we can at least attempt to escape without detection. There are too many humans for us to do that here."

"And we are supposed to leave them defenceless?" Trunks demanded, his stomach roiling at the
thought.

Papa sat back on the edge of the bed to shove his feet in the shoes, then paused to look at Trunks, his black eyes unblinking in their stare. "I know you have made a friend here. For a human the girl is not a complete waste of space. But she is more likely to die if we stay."

"This is running away." Trunks blinked back hot tears of anger. "I don't want to run. I want to fight."

"We've talked about this. We are in a temporary retreat. Our first mission needs to be to complete the machine." Papa sighed and dropped his head, rubbing his temples with his forefingers. "I don't like it either but we are playing the long game here." He looked back up at Trunks, his eyes pleading. "Do you understand?"

Yes, Trunks understood. He just didn't like it. He swallowed hard then nodded, noting how his father's shoulders relaxed at his agreement. Papa was probably right - he usually was. But that didn't make it any easier.

The cold was the first thing Vegeta noticed as he awoke.

The way the frigid air slunk over his skin, seeping into his pores, reminded him of every corner of Frieza's ship. The lizard liked every room to be heated to his body's preference, whether he would ever enter the room or not, and all the warm-blooded soldiers were left to suffer. Vegeta had spent many nights huddled under the meagre blankets provided, trying to rid himself of the bone-deep chill that permeated the ship.

He was never successful.

Vegeta peeled his eyes open and peered through sticky eyelashes, half expecting to see his old room, with Nappa curled in a ball in a chair, and a snoring Raditz passed out drunk on the floor.

Instead, he found himself lying on tiles inside a dark, cramped cell, the only exit a heavy metal door.

"Papa?" A small, groggy voice came from the darkest corner of the room and Vegeta could just make out the huddled shape and his purple hair.

Vegeta grunted his response as he sat up gingerly, his lungs burning in the thin air, every gasp in making his teeth tingle. "You hurt?" he managed to get out.

Trunks shook his head and looked at his hands. "F…feel weird though," he stammered through chattering teeth. My ki is gone. That blast… it was some sort of EMP."

"Hm." Vegeta tried to draw on the ki from his well deep inside. It normally overflowed with so much energy he had to train daily to keep it level, but all he felt now was the smallest of sparks that was barely enough to keep his heart beating. Was this how humans felt all the time?

Trunks stood up, using the wall for stability. "The one we tried to use on the androids disrupted electrical signals. This one seemed to disrupt ki. A Ki-MP." The boy chuckled at his own joke, making Vegeta roll his eyes.

Still, if his son could find humour in this situation it meant he wasn't lying when he'd said he was unhurt. Relieved, Vegeta struggled to his feet as well, taking in a few deep, steadying breaths. The lack of ki had him feeling odd, and he knew it meant he wouldn't be able to use his Super Saiyan
transformation. An annoying setback, but he hadn't spent so much time training in his core form, building up his strength for nothing. Vegeta had learnt at a young age not to take anything for granted, and his ki was no exception.

He made his way to the door, drew back his fist, and slammed it into it. The force of his punch left a sizeable dent in the door, but before he could try it again, the door opened, revealing a Sasbala - a small, bird-like creature no taller than Trunks. Vegeta couldn't tell if the alien was male or female, and while the species usually had a luxurious rainbow array of feathers, this one's had mostly fallen out, giving him the appearance of an oversized, semi-plucked chicken.

"No need for that," it chirped through its small beak. "Zersa will see you now, Prince Vegeta." It nodded towards the back of the cell. "You too, youngling."

Trunks joined Vegeta at the door and they glanced at each other, then shrugged at the same time. "Keep your mouth shut," Vegeta warned quietly as they began following the Sasbala down a labyrinth of deserted hallways, each so cold condensation had frozen in droplets to the walls.

Each breath the two Saiyans took came out in frosty clouds, and Vegeta resisted the urge to rub his arms to keep warm. He glanced at his son as he felt themselves getting closer to a ki level that wasn't far off his own base form. Trunks' expression remained stoic, and Vegeta could tell from his flickering gaze that he was doing as Vegeta had taught him and taking in his surroundings to look for an advantage.

The Sasbala stopped at a double door, then turned to them. "Through there," he commanded, then he scuttled away back down the hall they'd just came from.

Vegeta frowned in confusion. He'd been expecting armed guards, but for Zersa, this was almost… welcoming. Stuffing down his hesitation, Vegeta shoved both the doors open so they swung inwards and hit the walls beside them with a slam, then strode in, Trunks keeping step at his side.

The room was large and white, and smelt so strongly of acrid cleaning products Vegeta had to resist gagging from the assault to his sensitive nostrils. But all the cleaning in the universe couldn't hide the underlying scent of death in the room.

One wall was taken up by huge holographic screens, and in front of them hovered a chair, eerily reminiscent of the one Frieza used. It spun around, revealing a tall, green-skinned woman whose delicate features resembled Zarbon's. She was beautiful, even with the left metal half of her body. The reconstructed side of her had been crafted carefully to make her features perfectly symmetrical, and she'd braided the wiring spilling out of her temple into her hair.

She smiled as her gaze fell on him, the organic half of her mouth curving crookedly. "Vegeta," she said, her voice sickly sweet. "I've been expecting you."
Zersa uncrossed her green leg from its metal counterpart and rose out of the hover chair to stand in front of it. "I've been expecting you, Prince Vegeta," she drawled, the smooth consonants of Galactic Standard echoing through the barren room.

Vegeta raised an eyebrow and relaxed his shoulders to shift into the nonchalant stance he'd perfected at an early age. "Have you? And to think, I spent so much time trying to get your attention."

"You stole my ship, killed many good soldiers, and destroyed a third of one of my fleets." Zersa's smile stiffened and her eyes hardened. "Yes, you got my attention, Little Prince. What is that you want? Are you lost without your master?"

Vegeta hid a grimace at the endearment – one of Frieza's favourites for him – and smirked back at her. "Didn't you hear? I killed my last master."

"What a shame…" Zersa pouted as she walked towards him, somehow managing to strut gracefully in her chunky Saiyan-styled armour, the design taken by Frieza and used in his army, shoulder pads and all. She stopped just short of Vegeta and tapped his chest with her sharp fingernail. "But you and I could make such a good team."

"My Papa would never work with you!" Trunks snarled.

Vegeta winced as Zersa glanced over his shoulder at the boy.

"Ah, the brat is yours I see." She dragged her gaze back to Vegeta baring her teeth. "Interesting that he was never mentioned when we had our little…" Her nail dragged up his chest, across his shoulder, then all the way up his neck and head and settled on his temple. She tapped it hard, and Vegeta fought not to flinch. "…chat."

"Maybe your methods aren't as effective as you thought," Vegeta said coolly.

Zersa let out a laugh at that. "Your methods were always brutally effective though, weren't they?"
Her stare shifted back to Trunks. "Did your Papa tell you about how he would torture a person's family to gain their compliance? Killing a man's son is a surprisingly quick way of getting what you want. Almost as good as my own methods."

Vegeta stiffened at the obvious insinuation, and felt Trunks' still-weak ki spike. "I came to offer you a chance to crawl back into whatever hole you came from before I destroy the rest of your army."

Zersa raised a thin, green brow. "If I recall correctly, it was I that captured you."

"Your reign is over."

"Oh. do shut up, monkey." She cut him off with a wave of her hand, then began walking around the cavernous room in a circle, her hands behind her back. "You always were a stick-in-the-mud, Vegeta. Always keeping to your ridiculous code of honour, even as you slaughtered men, woman and children." Zersa whirled about suddenly, glaring at him from across the room. "And you were such a whiner. My daddy's dead, my planet was blown up, I'm a prince of nothing… Did you think you were the only one dealt shit in this life?" Her lips puckered as if she'd sucked on a sour citrus fruit. "Did you think I wanted to be some torture instrument for Frieza to get out when his soldiers got out of line? With my powers I was meant for greatness and that purple freak made me a low-ranking torturer while making my shit-eating cousin his right-hand man." She marched up to Vegeta again, slamming her hand on his shoulder, squeezing hard. "And now I want what is rightfully mine!"

"And what is rightfully yours, Zersa?" Vegeta eyed her closely. The woman was dangerous, even without her power to incapacitate a man and cause excruciating pain augmented by the circuitry running through her. Her ki was powerful - higher than Zarbon's had been - although he suspected that she relied too much on her powers to be a real threat in hand to hand combat if he could somehow deactivate them. "Do you want to be Lord of the Universe like Frieza? What makes you think you have the right?"

"Who holds the power, has the right." Her lips curled nastily. "And your little power display against my pets was impressive. The readings I got show that you and your brat are stronger than even Frieza was. And since you are my captive, I'd say that makes me more powerful than him."

Vegeta opened his mouth to respond, but Trunks burst into scornful laughter behind him. "You can't keep us captive for long. Our ki is already coming back and once it does you'll wish you'd never-"

The sound of his son's scream hit his ears before his own pain shuddered through his body. It rang out, reminding him of the sounds of agony Trunks had made only a few short years ago after the androids had attacked.

Vegeta collapsed to the ground only vaguely aware of Zersa's hand grasping him as well even as he clawed at it to get it to stop. He'd failed Trunks then, and he was failing him now… but there was nothing he could do. Underneath his skin his blood bubbled, heating so hot he was certain his skin would melt and his body would turn into a puddle on the floor.

And then it stopped.

Vegeta lay on the cold tiles gasping for air. As his vision cleared he looked for Trunks, who lay next to him, a small whimper emitting from his throat.

"Trunks. Are you okay?"
The boy gave a weak nod, the cowed as Zersa reached for him, picking him up by the scruff of his shirt.

"Your powers are mine," Zersa hissed. "Or your son will spend the rest of his miserable life going through the most excruciating experience you can imagine." She gave Vegeta a long look. "And we both know that when it comes to pain your imagination is vast."

Vegeta's rage rushed to the surface. Drawing on what little ki he had, he fired a small blast at Zersa's arm. It struck its target, making her yelp and drop Trunks. Weakened, but determined to protect Trunks at all costs, Vegeta sprung forward and kicked Zersa, toppling her over. He then twisted mid-air and landed beside Trunks before grasping his son's arm and yanking him behind him.

Zersa recovered quickly and slammed her hand on a comms unit bolted to the wall. "To the bridge," she commanded before turning her attention back to the Saiyans. Her hand raised in an open palm towards them, and the pain rocked through Vegeta once more. It was less strong than before though, and through his haze he realised that using her powers drained her.

The agony making him writhe on the ground stopped the moment the doors to the control room slid open. A mix of spider-like automations and soldiers of a variety of alien races flooded the room.

"Contain them," Zersa said, breathing heavily as she smoothed her hair down. "Secure them back in the brig."

The soldier's guns aimed at Vegeta and Trunks and the automation's legs clattered on the hard floor as they encircled them. As one of the automation's lights began to glow, Vegeta braced himself and pulled Trunks into his arms, hoping desperately to shield him.

When a rumbling explosion made the ship rock, Vegeta thought one of the automations has fired. But there was no pain, no sizzling of flesh from hot ki. Soldiers and automations alike stumbled as the ship teetered once more, the lights flickered and died, and smoke began billowing up from under the doors.

"Contain them!" Zersa shrieked, but the crew were more interested in the thudding sounds at the door.

There were three solid bangs and the doors exploded in a cloud of grey smoke. Trunks and Vegeta began to cough as a small, glowing figure rushed into the room.

Hair of gold, ki pulsing erratically, Vegeta recognised her immediately. Seria had transformed. Her dark eyes settled on Zersa and she let out a choking sound of fury. "You," she hissed through her teeth. A wave of ki blasted outwards from her, slicing through the soldiers and automations.

The soldier's dropped, and the automations all lit up in defence before dying out. She'd used his overload trick, giving them more power than they could handle.

Zersa looked as though she had tried to send her painful energy towards Seria, but it bounced back and sent her flying into the wall. Zersa's circuits sparked, and as she scrambled to her feet her eyes widened and she raised her hands defensively. "Careful little girl," she said. "You hurt me, I hurt them. See?" And she sent waves of electrical energy towards Vegeta and Trunks.

Vegeta grunted as it hit him, and he clenched his fists, concentrating on breathing to try and ride it out.
But at Trunks' pained cry, Seria's ki stuttered. Taking advantage of the distraction, Zersa sent a powerful ki blast in the girl's direction. Doing so broke the connection between her and the Saiyans, but while Seria dodged the blast, Zersa fled the room along with her soldiers.

For a moment it looked as though Seria was going to rush after her, but one look at Trunks and she rushed to his side instead. The boy groaned and held his head. "Remind me not to annoy that lady again," he mumbled. "You sure know how to pick your enemies, Papa."

Vegeta laughed at that, relieved that Trunks was okay. Seria wasn't though, he could feel it in her ki. She didn't have full control over her transformation yet, and the sharp edge made him worry that she'd blow up the whole ship, with them all on it.

"We are okay," Vegeta said, reaching out to touch her shoulder gently. "Lower your ki."

"I can't," she gasped out, golden waves pulsating around her. The already damaged ship began to groan even more, and Vegeta could see the thick rivets in the walls vibrating. She was going to tear this ship to pieces.

"Breath through it," Vegeta instructed.

"No! We need to stop Zersa."

Vegeta felt for Zersa's ki. "She's below. And if you don't control your power you'll kill us as well as her." He stood up, swaying dizzily as he felt the ship begin to fall at an alarming pace. He stumbled towards the holographic screens, hoping to regain control of the ship. His eyesight in the dark was good, but it didn't do any good as the controls were completely out. The ship was going down, and going down fast.

"We need to get off the ship." He began looking around for an exit. The porthole window overlooking the planet below was the most obvious way out, but they were in the atmosphere with no oxygen.

But there wasn't any other choice.

As the ship walls began to crack, Vegeta ran to the children, scooped them under his arms, then hurtled towards the window, sending a blast of ki towards it before crashing through.

Trunks felt himself lift into his father's strong arm, and the next moment they were surrounded by glass, stars, and absolutely nothing else but the exploding fragments behind them.

It had been cold on the ship, but now he felt it in every pore, like a thousand stabbing needles. Without any pressure, his skin seemed as though it might come away from his bones, and Trunks realised exactly where Zersa had got ideas for her mental torture from.

Only this wasn't in his mind. This was real.

As the explosion pushed the trio forwards, Trunks tried to scream, tried to ask his father what he was doing but the air lacked oxygen and nothing came out. Gasping like a fish out of water, he struggled to shove the terror down as they tumbled down, the pieces of Zersa's ship falling around them.

He barely heard the clattering of the other ship coming up behind them. Didn't really register it until their fall stopped abruptly and he realised his father had landed on top of The Clunker. A door
opened, and Vegeta threw Trunks and Seria at it, before falling in himself.

They landed in a small metal chamber, and the moment the door closed gravity kicked in and a hissing sound reverberated through the room, filling it with sweet oxygen.

Trunks gulped it greedily, gasping it in as though it were water and he a man dying of thirst. Beside him, Seria did the same, now with black hair and her pale scarring standing out even more in the odd blue lighting of the chamber. She shivered uncontrollably, and Trunks realised he was doing the same, so shuffled next to her, still panting on his hands and knees, and wrapped his arm around her.

A shutter slid open on the door leading to the ship, and Ara's face peered through. "You all okay?" She asked in a muffled voice, her panicked gaze settling on her daughter.

"All fine," Papa replied. "Any sign of Zersa?"

"The ship is in a million pieces. We didn't pick up on any ki readings but yours."

"Let us out then," Papa snarled, rubbing his hand over his face, which had caught some soot from the explosion and smeared down his forehead.

"You need to repressurise," Ara said. "I'm not having one of you die on me from prolonged space exposure."

Trunks opened his mouth to argue, wanting nothing more than to get out of this metal box and crawl into a warm bed, but Papa's glare stopped him short.

"Fine," the Saiyan prince barked, before turning back to Trunks and Seria with narrowed eyes that were colder than the empty space outside. "And while we are stuck in here maybe the two of you can tell me why both of you disobeyed orders and explain exactly what in Kami's name you were thinking?!"

"According to the ship's scanners, overloaded the automations with you ki," Han said, settling into The Clunker's command chair with a sigh and swivelling it to face Vegeta. "Once we figured that out we used the same technique to get through Zersa's defences."

"It was Han's idea," Ara said, sounding almost surprised at her admission and making Han puff his chest out in pride. "Of course, then Seria went ballistic, saying she couldn't sense your or Trunks' ki - apparently your boy taught her that - and did that…" Ara waived her hand at Vegeta. "Super Saiyan trick."

"She barely had it under control," Vegeta said. "If you hadn't been as close as you were, we would have died out there."

"Like Zersa," Han said. "There hasn't been any sign of her."

"Good," Vegeta replied. "Then Trunks and I can be on our way."

"So soon?" Ara asked, reaching out and touching his arm.

Vegeta stepped back, forcing her to drop her touch while Han looked as though he'd turn Super Saiyan himself. "You, Han and Seria need to get back to Salokrah. They will be needing your expertise in rebuilding. Trunks and I will go on to place and get the fuel we need. If we have time, we'll stop by Fardarna on our way to Earth."
"I'll get your ship ready," Han said cheerfully, standing up from his chair and looking as though all his weariness has washed away. "We wouldn't want to delay you."

Ara threw Han a sharp look, then turned back to Vegeta. "You be careful out there. No more strategic recklessness."

Vegeta smirked in response. "No promises."

Men. Alien or human they were all the same.

Bulma clipped furiously at the rose bush. She'd been given instructions to maintain while her mother was away with Doctor Briefs at yet another conference, but right now it was a replacement for her real object of ire. Vegeta, Prince of all Assholes had declared his intention to abstain from her "distractions". He'd wheedled Trunks' birthdate out of her and done his own calculation for conception, and was now claiming it was too close for him to risk it, despite it being a month too soon, even for the shorter, Saiyan gestation. No talk of human birth cycles, alternative contraception or risks would make him change his mind.

And apparently if she wasn't good for fucking, she wasn't even worth interacting with. Vegeta had returned to his stone-cold demeanour, spending most of his time in the gravity room and nights out at the lake house, if he slept at all.

Fucking asshole.

Bulma yanked on an unruly part of the shrubbery, then yelped at the stabbing sensation in her left forefinger. With a snarl, she ripped off her gardening gloves, which were thin with overuse, and inspected the wound. A bead of blood pooled at the end of her finger and she instinctively put it in her mouth to stem the bleeding.

Then she heard it. The worst sound in the world.

Bulma straightened immediately, brandishing the clippers in her hand, gaze casting about for a sign of her nightmare in the flesh.

When she saw it, everything around her slowed, her vision blurred and her hands began to tremble. There, in front of the door to the house, sat a pimply green frog with a rust coloured underbelly that streaked up over its eyes like a scar.

Its throat puffed out as it released another call. "Croooooaaaaak."

Bulma let out a shriek and threw the gardening tool towards the amphibian. The clippers missed and bounced off the paved path and into the grass, and the frog leapt forward, making Bulma back away hurriedly. The back of her knees hit an outdoor chair, and she fell backwards with a cry.

When she managed to scramble to her feet, she froze in place as the frog moved jump after jump closer to her. Irrationally, Bulma was sure that the creature knew she was afraid and alone, and was now going to attack her.

She had to run, had to escape, but Bulma couldn't make her legs work.

Behind her the hiss of the gravity machine shutting down brought her back to reality. She wasn't completely alone. The aloof prince was never particularly inclined to help her with anything unless it was in the bedroom (and that hadn't been for a few weeks now), but this was different. This was life and death!
Bulma set off in a sprint towards the man exiting the spherical room in the middle of the lawn, not slowing down until she ran into his hard, shirtless body.

Vegeta immediately brought his hands to her shoulders and shoved her away from him, then set a dark glare on her. Bulma swallowed hard as she took in the sight of muscles before her, his caramel skin glistening in the afternoon sun.

The man didn't say anything, but a low growl emanated from his throat, clearly demanding an explanation.

"The… I… frog…" Bulma stammered and twisted to point back at her tormenter.

She turned back to Vegeta, silently begging him to help. His hard stare didn't change in intensity, but he glanced over her shoulder. Slowly, he stepped around her, heading for the frog.

Bulma placed her hands over her mouth, suddenly terrified that she'd made a mistake asking him for help. She watched in horror as the Saiyan prince bent down and scooped up the tree frog in his palm.

When he straightened, his dark, emotionless eyes boring into her, Bulma's already erratic breaths came faster, and the black spots dancing in her vision threatened to topple her over with their dizzying display.

Vegeta now knew her weakness. Would he use it to his advantage and threaten her with the object of all her nightmares? He didn't move though, and not even a smirk tugged at his lips as he continued to stare.

When the creature let out a ribbit, Bulma sank to her knees in the grass with a whimper, desperately wishing she had the strength to flee. Unable to do anything but attempt to keep sight of the frog in his hand, she watched as the man increased his ki, purple light swirling around him, then channelled it into his hand, setting off a small explosion. When the ki cleared, the frog was gone.

Vegeta lowered his hand and stepped forward, halting when Bulma flinched at the movement. "Slow breaths," he instructed the vowels round and rolling in his husky, alien accent. Then he stepped forward until he stood in front of her. To her immense shock, Vegeta crouched down and took her sweaty palms in his. "Slow," he said again. "And in between, tell me each of Earth's elements."

Bulma blinked, then did as he said, sucking in a slow shaky breath before gasping out, "Carbon." She tried again. "Helium. Hydrogen."

With each element, her breathing grew steadier, and Vegeta gave her a nod, then let go of her hands and stood up. Without a word, he blasted into the sky, leaving Bulma alone on the lawn wondering if maybe the prince wasn't completely uncaring after all.

The scent of peach and vanilla cupcakes filled the lake house kitchen as Vegeta pulled open the oven door to inspect his handiwork. A gentle tap of the top of one saw the cupcake spring back at the touch, indicating its perfectly cooked state.

Vegeta breathed in deeply, the wave of heat relaxing him, before moving to pull out the tray of cupcakes onto the kitchen bench. And Kami knew he needed relaxing. He'd never have admitted it to her of course, but he'd felt Bulma's ki spike erratically and had rushed to her aid, ready to defend her from an unknown enemy without even realising he was doing it. The relief he'd felt when he'd realised it was just an amphibious creature and that she wasn't in any real danger had shaken him.
He shouldn't be feeling anything at all towards her. She was nothing to him. Nothing. The woman been warm body to satisfy him but even that had stopped now.

He needed to get the blasted female out of his head so he could concentrate on training to ascend but ever since he'd put the brakes on he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her, no matter how much he ignored her.

Vegeta carefully extracted the cupcakes from the tray and placed them on a cooling rack, and as a way of ignoring the voice in his head telling him that Bulma Briefs was far more than a warm body, he began planning the icing. Green. Or perhaps blue. No! Definitely not blue.

The Saiyan was so caught up in trying not to think about the woman, that when he finally looked up from his task and saw her standing in the kitchen doorway, he jumped and dropped the cupcake in his hand.

It rolled across the floor, stopping at her red-heeled feet. Vegeta slowly dragged his gaze up from the cupcake, unwillingly taking in her long, bare legs, immediately noticing how the black coat she wore clung to her curves, until he met her gaze.

Bulma cocked an eyebrow at him, then slowly, in an exaggerated movement, bent down and plucked the cupcake off the floor.

"Well," she said when she straightened. "I'm not sure how I was expecting you to spend your downtime but this…" She stepped towards the bench, heels clicking on the tiled floor. "This is… unexpected." She placed the cupcake down, curving her red-painted lips into a smile, and moved even closer to Vegeta, until finally she reached out and brushed her long fingers across his now burning cheeks. "You have flour on you."

Vegeta batted her hand away with a scowl and rubbed at his cheek himself.

Bulma let out a tinkling laugh and stepped back to an empty part bench where she hoisted herself up onto it so she perched next to the cupcakes.

Vegeta's first thought was that sitting on the bench, especially next to food, was completely unhygienic, but then the damn woman crossed her legs and he realised that underneath that coat hiding all her assets, she wasn't wearing anything else.

He swallowed hard, reciting his battle mantra in his head. Show no fear.

"While these are cooling, why don't we heat things up?" Bulma suggested, her tone sounding far more innocent than the heavy look through her eyelashes she currently had set on him.

Strategy over strength, he reminded himself, but Vegeta could do little more than shake his head as the woman's hands went to the tie around her waist - the only thing keeping the coat from opening.

"You know, Vegeta… there are lots of things that we could do to satisfy each other that don't have risks."

Heat flooded through him as her fingers undid the tie, but kept the coat together.

"I will not be your… your baby daddy," Vegeta managed to burst out despite the dryness in his mouth as he recalled the term used on one of the dreadful television programs that Mrs Briefs liked to watch while making Vegeta lunch.

Bulma's eyes crinkled at that, as if she were trying to hide a laugh. "What I'm talking about doesn't
involve intercourse, so uh… no baby daddy risk."

"No intercourse," Vegeta repeated dumbly, understanding what she meant without it completely registering in his hormone addled brain.

"Yes. But still plenty of pleasure," Bulma licked her lips suggestively, "…if you'll accept my terms."

"T-terms?" Her statement should have brought him back to Earth, but instead it was oddly soothing to his frantic mind. A business transaction. Yes, he could manage that even though all blood had flowed away from his head and to another region altogether.

"Yes, terms," Bulma repeated, then began to check off items on her fingers. The coat must have been made of remarkably stiff material for it only opened marginally, giving him a view of a slither of skin on her chest. "One. No more avoiding me. Two. If one of us isn't comfortable with something, we talk about it. And…” She grinned suddenly, her gaze darting to the baked goods beside her. "And three, I get six of the cupcakes."

"Six!" Vegeta objected, but even he had to admit it was half-hearted.

"Yep," Bulma said, annunciating the p with a pop. She swung her legs down and stepped onto the floor, holding her coat together with her forefingers as she stepped towards him. "Do we have a deal?"

He barely even registered his own movements as he reached for that damn coat and ripped it off her. Vegeta took a moment to enjoy the sight before him, then swept his arm around her waist and pulled her close, pressing his lips to his in a manner he'd come to enjoy far too much.

"I'll take that as a yes?" Bulma whispered breathlessly when he finally came up for air.

Vegeta bared his teeth into a grin. "You can have the whole batch. They won't taste as good as you."

Chapter End Notes

It's been a while, sorry. Glad to be back, and glad to be writing some present V/B. Let me know what you thought!
Chapter Summary

In space, Trunks and Vegeta go on a father son excursion. On Earth Vegeta and Bulma enjoy each other's company.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They lay on a makeshift bed of blankets in front of the red couch and under the stars of the glass-roofed observatory. The blankets had already been there when they'd stumbled into the room, mouths locked and hands desperately roaming, as if Vegeta had been sleeping in this room whenever he stayed at the lake house, instead of taking advantage of the multiple furnished bedrooms it had on offer.

Bulma turned her head to look at the man lying next to her, curled up against her body with one arm thrown over her side. His eyes were gently closed, and his face had taken on that youthful look he only ever showed in sleep. The way his chest rose and fell steadily, and how every muscle of his was relaxed would have made her assume he was fast asleep, had it not been for the hand on her back, stroking lazy waves up and down her spine.

She tucked her head into his chest, enjoying the sensation of being held and caressed by a man who usually showed complete indifference to her. He was a good actor, so often wearing an impassive mask to make him seem cold and uncaring. Bulma had come to realise that he really wasn't like that at all underneath. She'd seen his mask crack too many times, and last night, when she'd shown up wearing nothing but those heels and that coat, she'd completely broken through it. He could put it back on all he wanted, but she knew the truth - Vegeta, Prince of all Saiyans wanted her as much as she wanted him.

The hand's gentle movements stilled as his breathing shifted to something lighter, as if he'd only just fully woken up and noticed his unconscious actions. It wouldn't have surprised Bulma if he'd got up and left the bed, leaving her to doze alone like he had so often during their previous liaisons. He stayed where he was though, hand still on her back, before he shifted slightly, sliding his hand down to her backside and pulling her closer, until she could feel his hardness against her.

"You're insatiable," she murmured as his free hand cupped her chin and tilted her to look at him.

"Mph." Vegeta mumbled something inaudible against her lips, and kissed her languidly. His kissing ability had improved exponentially since their… whatever this was… had begun, leading Bulma to realise that it either wasn’t something he’d done before her, or perhaps it simply wasn’t common in the wider universe. He was a quick study though, and as he deepened the kiss, burying his hand in her hair and tugging her closer, Bulma couldn’t help the soft moan that escaped.

He responded to the sound with even more intensity, kissing her with a gasping hot breath as his expert fingers danced slowly down her back, across her stomach, and then down to her sweet spot, making her whimper with pleasure.

She wiggled impatiently against him, frustrated at his lack of urgency. If he hadn’t been so against
the idea of a condom - he said if it didn’t give one hundred percent guarantees he wasn’t willing to risk it - she would have begged him to use one because the pressure building up, making her desperate to feel him inside her.

“Vegeta…” she gasped into his mouth, arching her back in pleasure. “S… stop teasing me and get on with it.”

He pulled back with a low chuckle, his surprisingly soft lips red from their activities. “Such an impatient woman,” he growled before dipping his head again, planting a kiss that was closer to a bite on her collar bone, he teeth scraping against her skin. “I want to enjoy you.”

He began making his way down her body with his mouth, tasting her as if she was the most delicious dessert in the world. Bulma gasped at each hot breath against her skin. It was rather sweet, actually. Most of their encounters were rushed hot messes, each of them desperately chasing their next orgasm. Bulma wasn’t used to the slow pace, but as fingers were replaced with his tongue, and she felt a build up with more intensity than she’d ever felt before, she threw her head back and closed her eyes, knowing that release would come soon.

Bulma stretched out in the mass of blankets, finding the spot beside her empty but still warm. Blearily she opened her eyes, confirming that Vegeta had indeed left the room. But had he left the house? Honestly, the man was so hot and cold it wouldn’t have surprised her if he’d done a runner, but the small sounds coming from the kitchen indicated otherwise.

Since she hadn’t brought any clothes with her, Bulma found Vegeta’s discarded t-shirt and pulled it on, then wrapped one of the thinner blankets around her waist, creating a makeshift skirt. She padded out of the observatory and stood in the doorway of the kitchen, watching the strange, alien man wearing nothing but a pair of pants decorate cupcakes with intense concentration.

The small cupcakes sat in neat rows in front of him, and his large hands held onto the piping bag. His brow had furrowed and he neatly covered the surface in layer after layer of blood-red rosettes, creating a conical tower that was as high as the actual cupcake.

He either hadn’t noticed she was there, or he was ignoring her, because as soon as he’d finished a few cupcakes he began mixing another batch of icing, adding orange food colouring. Taking a clean piping bag, he added spoonful of orange, then a spoonful or red, and then he was decorating again, this time creating large swirls on top of the cupcakes, blending from orange to red.

“All you just going to stand there?” He asked suddenly, head bent over his current masterpiece. “Or is the only help you’re planning on giving going to be in eating them?”

Bulma grinned and came over to the bench. “Cupcake decorating is outside my skillset I’m afraid.”

Vegeta grunted in reply, then pushed a bowl that had been emptied of icing towards her. “Make yourself useful and clean that then.”

Bulma took the bowl and dipped her finger in and scooped up some icing. She tasted it cautiously, remembering that the older Vegeta’s cooking had been surprisingly good, but still suspicious. The buttercream icing was incredible though. Creamy, sweet, with a hint of a fruity essence, it was good enough to each on its own, without the cupcakes.

“This is good,” she remarked, having another taste. “But I thought you didn’t like sweet food?”
Vegeta paused in his icing and looked up, surprise crossing his face. “What made you come to that conclusion?”

“You avoid dessert, and if you ever do have anything sweet like a biscuit you choose the plainest kind.” Bulma took another taste of the icing, hiding a smile at Vegeta’s look of disgust at her action.

He snatched the bowl out from her hands and put it in the sink. “I said clean it, not make it dirtier with your germs,” he grumbled. “And I’ve never been to a planet with so much sweet food before. It isn’t a flavour I’m used to.” Vegeta continued his icing with a frown. “But these baked treats are adequate enough.”

Bulma picked up one of the iced cupcakes and took a bite. “More than adequate!” She let the fluffy cupcake melt in her mouth with the icing, then sighed in bliss. “If the whole ‘saviour of Earth’ thing doesn’t work out for you, you could have a real career as a baker.”

“Hey! Wait until they are all done,” Vegeta said with a scowl. Then his frown deepened. “And you are mistaking me with your clown friend. Kakarot is Earth’s saviour. Not me.”

“If you’re the one to defeat the androids, you’ll be the hero.” Bulma slid behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He stuffed at the embrace, but didn’t pull away so she leaned her head against him.

“I’m a killer, not a hero,” he said flatly, his body completely still.

“I don’t know…” Bulma let out a hot breath into the back of his neck, watching his hairs stand on end. “It was pretty heroic saving me from the frog.”

Vegeta laughed at that, and twisted in her arms so they faced each other. “Hero, enemy, I don’t care as long as I become a Super Saiyan.”

“Lucky you have the world’s best scientist to help you with your training then,” Bulma said with a wink.

“Hm…” Vegeta pulled back and looked her up and down. “Yes, training. That’s exactly what I’m interested in right now.” His hands went to the knot of her skirt and his mouth tilted into a wicked grin. “And since you need to work up an appetite for all those cupcakes, you’d better join me.”

Bulma couldn’t help the laugh that burst out of her as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. The world might have been destined to end in less than two years, but for now… everything was perfect.

Trunks and Papa had been walking for hours. Not flying. Walking. Trunks was thirsty, hungry, and his legs still ached from the training session he’d had with Papa in the spaceship before they’d stopped on this planet. “Where are we going?” He was aware of the whine in his voice - and of how much his father hated it - but he couldn’t help it. Papa hadn’t given any explanation as to their stop off, other than to say that they didn’t need to be back on Earth any time soon. He trailed after him, his hands stuffed into his pockets and his feet stomping angrily on the soft yellow grass-like forest floor. “There’s nothing here but trees.”

“I told you,” Papa ground out. “It’s a surprise.”

“But why can’t we fly?”
“Ki will disturb the energy here.” Papa pointed ahead at the gradually thinning trees. “It’s just up here.”

Trunks sprinted ahead at that, then paused when he reached a clearing beside a river, its odd black waters glistening in the setting sun. “It’s a river.” He threw his father a disgusted look. “What’s so special about that? The water doesn’t even look clean enough to drink.”

Vegeta clicked his tongue against his teeth and boxed Trunks lightly behind the ears. “Cheeky brat. Sit your ass down on the grass and wait.”

Trunks scowled but did as he was told, crossing his arms sulkily. “Yes, Sir,” he said with mock reverence.

Vegeta took a deep breath, crossed his legs and closed his eyes, appearing to meditate.

Trunks muttered under his breath in annoyance before wiggling closer in the grass to his father, adopting the same stance. If nothing else meditating would pass the time.

They’d got the fuel they needed without any trouble. It was a miracle really, considering the events of their space travel so far, and Trunks had secretly been hoping for something a little more adventurous on this surprise stopover. It didn’t look like it was going to get much more interesting than this.

Trunks stomach groaned and he clutched it miserably. Why couldn’t they have gone straight back to Fardarna to see Seria and Ara? He still wanted to try iced eggs.

“Here.”

Trunks felt something roughly shoved into his lap, and when he looked down he saw a handful of energy bars and a water bottle. Papa went back to meditating so Trunks tore the food open and shoved them down before guzzling the drink.

Since Papa didn’t seem to want any, Trunks finished the lot then returned to his meditating, suddenly happier about the whole situation. It wasn’t too long before Trunks felt the sun set, a heavy coolness settling on his skin. At his father’s nudge, he opened his eyes, then let out a small gasp.

Before them, the river had transformed from a black liquid to a shimmering rainbow of colour. It should have been impossible without the light from the sun, but the water’s surface was glowing with blues and purples and reds, shimmering with each rippling movement of the water.

The water began to move more, lapping against the riverbank. The river seemed to lift up in a spot, before a silky creature rose out of the water, its dark skin shimmering with the same effect as the water.

Trunks leaned closer to Papa and grabbed his arm. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but at his father’s slight shake of the head, closed it again.

The creature turned his head towards the two of them, nostrils flaring. It had four eyes, two sets on top of each other, but other than that its face was shaped like a dog, with a pointy snout. It had a long neck, and it reached towards the two Saiyans with its head, keeping its body under the water.

It didn’t look frightening, other than its enormous size, but there was something odd about it that was unsettling. That was when he realised that the animal didn’t have any discernible ki. It was as if the space in which it occupied was empty… almost a negative feeling of ki.
“What is it?” Trunks asked in a hushed whisper.

Papa gave him a little push. “It’s safe,” he murmured. “Keep your ki low so you don’t frighten it and it won’t hurt you.”

Trunks nodded and slowly rose to his feet before taking cautious steps to the river.

The animal’s nostrils flared at Trunks’ approach, but it remained where it was, eyes blinking slowly. Trunks reached the edge of the river, his shoes sinking slightly into the soft soil. Cautiously, he reached his hand out towards the creature, keeping his palm flat and movement slow.

The animal made a snuffling sound and edged closer. It paused a hands length away from Trunks hand. Just as he thought the animal was going to come closer, the creature’s long tail lifted out of the water, then came crashing down, soaking Trunks in the cold, rainbow liquid.

Trunks yelped at the chill, and instinctively raised his ki. The moment his ki raised, the creature ducked back down into the watery depths, leaving nothing but a few shimmering ripples.

Papa joined his side, shaking silently with laughter. “She always was a trickster,” he said when he finally stopped sniggering. “Did the same thing to Nappa when he tried to introduce himself.”

“What was that thing?” Trunks asked, rubbing his arms with his hands to try warm up without ki.

Papa began wading into the water, stopping when he got waist deep. “I don’t know. This planet is officially undiscovered. We stopped here once when Raditz had engine trouble, but we never logged it.”

The water began to gurgle around Papa and the creature rose up once more, fixing a dark stare on the Saiyan prince. Seemingly unafraid, Papa stepped forward into a dip, so the water was up to his shoulders, and touched the animal’s flank. The creature bent its head to Papa’s level and sniffed, but showed no sign of attacking.

“I called her Y’raemak,” Papa said, glancing back at Trunks. “It means speed demon.”

“Speed demon, huh. She seems kind of slow to me.” Trunks stepped into the water, deciding that if his father was this carefree around it, the creature couldn’t really be that demonic, even with its strange ki reading.

Y’raemak snorted in response and lift its tail again, sending a wave of water that hit Papa and submerged him, before lapping up to Trunks knees.

Papa emerged from the water with a gasp and glared at Y’raemak. “Hey! Stop that! My son is not like Nappa, threatening to eat you.” He paused for a moment as if actually listening to the creature’s response. “Yes, my son. This is Trunks. Now put your tail back into the water.”

Y’raemak did as Papa said, and then to Trunks amazement, the water began to move beside it and another head popped out of the water, smaller and with softer features.

“I see,” murmured Papa, patting the side of the large animal. “You also have a little one.”

“Is it really talking to you?” Trunks asked, edging closer again.

“Telepathically,” Papa confirmed. “Do you want to go for a ride?”
“Really?” Trunks waded closer at his father’s nod, and placed his hand on the giant beast’s flank. Its skin was silky smooth – not slimy like he’d expected. The smaller creature popped up in front of Trunks, its dark eyes blinking slowly. It blew water at him through its teeth, making Trunks laugh in surprise.

Before Trunks could ask Papa how he was supposed to ride an animal like this, Papa picked him up and plonked him up on the Y’raemak’s back. “Hold onto his neck,” Papa instructed. Then he grinned. “And hold your breath!”

Trunks barely had time to take a gasping breath in as the Y’raemak took off, diving under the water and blasting through it faster than Trunks ever thought imaginable. He didn’t think he could even fly this fast!

The animal’s scales shimmered and glowed, casting a dull light in the water that allowed Trunks to see the blur of plants and other river life beside them. On the left side of the Y’raemak, its baby kept up, occasionally leaping out of the air and landing next to its mother. Then the adult creature did the same, allowing Trunks time to take another breath before landing back into the water with a resounding splash.

He couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out of him at the joy of racing for no other purpose than fun. It blew bubbles in the water and the Y’raemak slowed, then rose to the surface.

“Thank you,” Trunks said with a grin. In the distance he could see his father’s flame-like figure on the riverbank, making him realise that they’d somehow done a circle.

“Not that slow after all,” Papa commented as Trunks climbed off and joined him on the bank.

“No. I think her name suits her,” Trunks admitted.

Papa produced a blanket and wrapped it around Trunks shoulders, then they both sat down, watching the two mysterious creatures play before they glided away, disappearing into the darkness as the slow-moving sun finally slipped below the horizon.

“It occurred to me the other day that if we had not come to this time, you would have turned nine by now,” Papa said. “On Vegetasei children at such an age were sent to a planet for three months to fend for themselves.”

“But then Freiza would have looked for you, and found this planet.”

Papa nodded, his eyes still on the now still water in front of them.

“You still could have turned this planet over to Frieza,” Trunks said quietly.

“I could have. I should have,” Papa replied. “But even back then, I knew that some things were not meant to be destroyed.”

Trunks leaned into his father’s side for warmth, knowing that was all he was going to get out of his father on that topic, but also aware that some things didn’t need to be put into words.
At Trunks’ movement, Papa didn’t pull him close, didn’t wrap his arms around him like an Earth father would have. Instead, he raised his ki and pushed it out towards Trunks, embracing him in an entirely different, but still completely perfect way.

Getting himself entangled with the woman on a frequent basis was a mistake, Vegeta realised even as he pinned her to the wall of the Briefs’ kitchen while he ran his hands through her hair and kissed her lips, her neck, the hollow of her throat... anywhere he could get to with the unfortunate amount of clothing she currently wore.

“I need to go,” Bulma murmured, throwing her head back with a gasp as his hand found its way up her thigh and under her skirt. “I have... a meeting.”

“You can be late,” Vegeta said as he manoeuvred his hand higher still. Yes, this was a mistake, a distraction from his training, but every time he set his sights on her all rational thoughts seemed to leave his head. “Or cancel it. You’re the commander of the company.”

“That would be my father.”

“Please, he’s a figurehead. Everyone knows you run the show.”

“Damn straight I do,” Bulma replied, sliding her fingers into the waist of his jeans - jeans that were now uncomfortably tight in the front. But instead of unbuttoning them like he’d been hoping she would, the feisty woman ducked under his arm and made an escape, letting out a bubbling laugh. “Which is why I need to go.” She smoothed down her skirt and glanced over her shoulder with a wink as she strolled towards the front door. “I’ll make it up to you later.”

“I might not be here later.” And it wasn’t a complete lie. He had been thinking about training for a few days in the wilderness.

“Yes you will,” Bulma called back before closing the door.

And damn her, she was right.

Vegeta let out a low growl and decided to hunt through the cupboards for some food. It had been his original reason for entering the kitchen after all, but then he’d seen Bulma bending over as she hunted through the lower shelf of the fridge and he’d... He’d lost all his sanity, that’s what. Just like every other time.

It was worse now, not being able to fuck her properly. Gods, it was all he could think about sometimes. He wanted to take her - anywhere would do, on a bed, against the wall, on the damp ground outside, he didn’t care - and drive into her until he had her screaming so hard her throat hurt and until he had thrust every haunting thought of her from his mind.

She’d suggested a condom a few times, even produced one for him to consider but the smell had made him gag and he knew that wearing one wouldn’t satiate the need burning inside him. He wasn’t sure anything ever would. It was almost too late for her to conceive the boy now - the risk would be very low assuming his knowledge of Saiyan gestation was correct - and once he finally caved he knew he wouldn’t stop, wouldn’t ever stop wanting to make the woman his in the most intimate way.

Vegeta poured himself a bowl of colourful cereal, grimacing at his first mouthful as the sugary taste made his tongue tingle. He stared at his spoon, wondering if he wanted to risk a second, before a loud bang echoed through the street outside, making the walls of Capsule Corp shake.
He stood up, knocking over the cereal and immediately on high alert. Were they under attack? He felt several ki signatures spike nearby, and instinctively sought out Bulma’s. When he found it and felt its level, raised and tinged with the ragged edge of fear, he burst out the front door and sped down the street.

It didn’t take long to find the source of the commotion. A truck had overturned on a nearby highway, knocking into several cars. Vegeta spotted Bulma’s small, cream automobile immediately, the side of it scratched and dented, but she wasn’t in it. Where was she?

He had a moment of panic as he tried to sort through all the foreign ki signatures of the humans who had come to help. He couldn’t sense her… where the fuck was she? Taking a sharp breath in, Vegeta took to the sky to search from above. The wreckage was worse from up there. The truck had sent several cars careening into the concrete road barriers, and a large, smoking vehicle was turned on an angle against a lamppost, trapping its occupants.

Then Vegeta saw her. Lying on the road in between the lamppost and the smoking car, blue hair strewn around her.

A sound he didn’t recognise ripped from his throat, and he dropped to the ground beside her, grabbing her shoulder and turning her over.

“Hey!” Bulma snapped and yanked herself away from him. Her eyes softened when she saw him, but all Vegeta could see was a trickle of blood running from her left temple and down her cheek.

“Can you help me?” she asked him.

It was then that he noticed the high heeled shoe in her hand and the shattered glass around her. She’d smashed the car window with it to get the passengers out of the car. But cut herself in the attempt too, but the looks of the red soaking her hand.

Without a word, Vegeta hauled Bulma up off the ground and held her in one arm against him, then used his other hand to push the vehicle, righting it enough to rip the door off. One by one three pale, terrified humans scrambled out of the car and ran towards the waiting medical professionals who had just arrived at the scene.

“You’re hurt,” Vegeta said, inspecting her hand carefully.

“What, this?” she said in a gruff voice that was an obvious but terrible imitation of himself. “A mere flesh wound.” When he glared at her she gave him a watery smile. “Okay, it hurts like a bitch. Take me home? Looks like I’ll have to cancel the meeting after all.”

Vegeta nodded, but didn’t move for a moment, taking her in. She was the most reckless, foolhardy woman he’d ever met. She was just like a Saiyan. So as the sirens wailed around them and the smoke in the car next to them began to crackle and flare into flames, he pulled the woman closer to him and kissed her.

The robot got in a sucker punch to his gut while he was busy destroying the other one. The hit would have done nothing in standard gravity, but at the chamber’s current 400g setting it sent him into the wall before he crumpled to the ground with a hacking cough that splattered blood on the white tiled floor.

With a harsh cry, Vegeta recovered and lunged at the bot, managing to get a strong enough grip on
one of its limbs to fling it across the room. The other machine was worse for wear, but sent a stuttering beam of ki towards Vegeta, singeing the hand that the Saiyan was forced to raise for protection.

The burn stung, and when Vegeta looked at his hand, the red rivulets running down his skin reminded him of the hand Bulma had so bravely let him bandage only hours ago.

As the two bots flew towards him, intent on completing their directive to demobilise him, all Vegeta could see in the red glow of the room was blue hair fanned out as she lay motionless on the road. Gods, he’d thought her dead. Dead like the thousands upon thousands of people he’d slain. He’d never regretted killing others. Even the deaths of his people hadn’t broken him. It was an honour to die fighting and he knew that death called his name, knew that one day he too would join the ranks of dead Saiyans, and it didn’t bother him.

But thinking, even if only for a moment, that the woman who had shown him that there was more to life than death had succumbed to her own mortality… he’d never felt such terror, such pure fury inside before. He felt it now even, as the two bots came towards him, ki firing and limbs in attack mode, all he saw was blue as he screamed the rage building inside him. It bubbled up and exploded outwards in golden waves, disintegrating the two bots completely before everything around Vegeta faded away.

The last thing he remembered before all his energy drained away and he hit the floor was the faint scent of green apples.

Bulma cursed in frustration at the bandage on her hand as she tried to solder the wire to the circuit board. The damn thing was bulky and restricted her movements. She’d have taken it off if her hand didn’t still hurt. Besides, Vegeta had been so unusually sweet wrapping it for her that she would have hated to undo his handiwork.

She couldn’t help a smile at the memory. His face when he’d shown up at the crash site had worn an expression she’d never seen on him before. If she didn’t know better, she’d have said it was fear. And then he’d rescued those humans, and then kissed her like a drowning man who needed saving. In front of people too! Not that anyone was actually watching them, but Vegeta was so opposed to any form of public affection that the kiss had completely taken her by surprise.

The soft swish of her lab doors made Bulma look up, and she saw the man in question walk in. He looked beat up, which wasn’t unusual, and since he was wearing only those tight training shorts she had to assume he’d come from the gravity room.

Vegeta seemed pale though, and a little dazed. She cast her gaze over him, looking for wounds that caused severe blood loss, but he seemed okay - for a Saiyan.

“What’s wrong?” She asked, putting down her soldering iron.

“…” Vegeta glanced around the room, looking almost confused. “I think I…” He blinked then shook his head, as if to clear it. “You film me. In the gravity room.”

“Uh…” Bulma frowned. “Yes? So the bots can learn and adapt… You’re not mad are you? I thought I told you that.”

“Yes, yes.” Vegeta waved his hand impatiently. “Do you have today’s footage?”

“I should.” At Vegeta’s raise of his eyebrows, Bulma moved to her laptop and pulled up the footage. “Here you go.”
“Can you go to the end and play it backwards?”

Bulma nodded and did as she said. The footage showed an empty gravity room, and as she played it backwards at high speed, she saw Vegeta walk backwards into the chamber then lie on the floor. He lay there for a while, much to her horror, clearly knocked out. He was there for about fifteen minutes before she saw the explosion that had done it.

“Stop,” Vegeta said, peering at the screen over her shoulder. Play that part forwards, and slowly.”

“What are you looking for?” Bulma asked as she did as he said.

Vegeta didn’t reply. He didn’t need to. She could see for himself exactly what he’d been wanting to see. The two bots came towards him on the screen, and Vegeta’s ki erupted, first with his usual violet colouring that was so unusually beautiful on a man like him, and then growing brighter still, flickering with gold along with his hair. The golden ki didn’t last long, and when it exploded, destroying the bots, the Vegeta on the screen collapsed to the floor.

“Holy shit,” Bulma breathed. She turned to Vegeta expecting him to look elated. His expression was blank though, as if he didn’t quite believe what he saw. “Vegeta…” she put her hand on his and he started. “You did it.”

“I…” He straightened and looked down at his hands.

Bulma let out a laugh and threw her arms around his neck. “You did it! You became a Super Saiyan! Oh I know it was only for a moment, but you’ll do it again, and I-”

Vegeta cut her off with a searing kiss. His hands cupped her face and she could feel them trembling. His whole body was trembling actually, as if he was in shock. And maybe he was, but as his ragged breathing mixed with hers and he backed her against her desk, his hands moving from her face to roam her body, she felt herself get lost in his almost desperate neediness. The Prince of all Saiyans - a Super Saiyan - needed her, and damned if she wasn’t going to help him.

He twisted them both suddenly so she had her back to the wall, and he used his hands to both push her skirt up around her waist and to bring her legs around his.

“Vegeta,” Bulma managed to gasp out as he began to fumble with the button of his jeans. “It’s too soon.”

“It’s not. It would be almost impossible to conceive the brat now,” he mumbled into her ear as he pressed his lips to her skin.

“For Saiyan gestation, yes, but for humans - oh fuck, there - for humans it’s not-”

“I know there is always a chance of conceiving, even if it isn’t the boy. I wanted to avoid the fate that had been decided for me.” Vegeta slid her panties to the side and moved them both so the tip of his cock sat at her entrance. “Fuck fate,” he gasped out. “It doesn’t decide what I am, or what I will be. But Bulma, if I don’t have you now I’m going to combust.”

Bulma wrapped her legs tighter around his waist, forcing him to inch deliciously further into her. “Do it then,” she said, issuing the challenge with a whisper in his ear. “Show me exactly how a Super Saiyan fucks.”

Vegeta let out a groan at that, a sound that was both a complete surrender and a claim of what was rightfully his. Bulma Briefs had never felt more powerful.
He drove into her relentlessly, sliding one hand behind her back to keep her from hitting the hard wall over and over, but Vegeta never backed down from a challenge and she knew she’d be sore tomorrow, cut hand aside.

Vegeta tilted his hips slightly, adjusting the angle, and Bulma couldn’t help the cry that ripped from her throat as he hit a spot inside her that had the pressure building. He didn’t stop, continuing his onslaught with a ferocity she hadn’t seen before. Normally Vegeta was the epitome of control, even in bed, but this time his eyes were wild and he breathed in shuddering gasps, coming apart more and more with each exquisite thrust.

Bulma found herself writhing against him, seeking the type of release that could only come from him, and when it finally arrived she shattered against him, tears falling as she collapsed forward, clinging to him as she screamed.

Vegeta followed her soon after, letting out a shout that the entire city would have heard if she didn’t have top of the line soundproofing. He sank to the ground on his knees, her legs still wrapped around him. They were sweaty and sticky and really it was the least romantic position to be in, but as Bulma pressed her ear to his chest, hearing his rapid heartbeat, and as the alien prince clung to her as tightly as she held onto him she honestly didn’t care.

Vegeta growled at the navigation system in front of him. He’d set the ship to autopilot, but at some point in the night it had malfunctioned and brought them off course. He was guiding back manually towards Fardarna while attempting to tinker with the nav, but so far he hadn’t had any luck.

The bridge doors swished open, and Vegeta felt his son’s ki approach. “Can you look at the navigation?” he asked without looking up from the controls. They were about to enter a region of space debris that included out of commission satellites and rogue asteroids and it needed all his concentration.

Trunks came over and sat in the chair next to him, his hair damp and smelling of soap from the shower. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Don’t know,” Vegeta replied shortly, making a sharp manoeuvre up to avoid a space rock. “It’s not locking onto Fardarna.”

Trunks grunted in reply and got to work, typing away frantically in what Vegeta assumed was an attempt to fix it.

“Harness on,” Vegeta instructed as he forced the ship up in a sharp twisting motion to avoid a broken satellite.

Trunks, who’d been jolted out of his seat at the movement scrambled to clip himself in. “Do you know where you are going?” he asked once secured, pushing his hair out of his eyes. It had grown much longer on their trip and Vegeta made a mental note to cut it for him. “I don’t remember going through here before.”

“That’s because we didn’t. We’re coming in from another sector.” Vegeta cursed as he had to dodge a large hunk of metal. It looked like someone else travelling through here hadn’t made it through unscathed. “I know where I’m going. I spent years travelling through the universe without getting lost. It’s not far away. I only want the nav system back up so I can go back to autopilot for landing.”
Trunks frowned but continued his work, tinkering with the wires before putting the panel back on it. “There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with it.”

As Trunks started muttering to himself about why it could be malfunctioning, the debris that Vegeta had been fighting his way through cleared momentarily. Just ahead, where Fardarna should have been was a scattering of giant rocks that had exploded out into a spiral pattern.

Vegeta’s breath caught in his throat and he felt sick and dizzy all at once. The sight before him was eerily familiar, and all at once he knew that it was because he’d seen it before, years ago in his own timeline.

Hardly aware of his own actions, he placed his hand over Trunks to stop him fixing the navigator. “Set course for Earth,” he managed to choke out.

Trunks glanced up from the nav and frowned at his father in confusion. Then he shifted his gaze to the ship’s window and saw the sight in front of them. “Papa…” His voice sounded so young, his scratchy tone obviously desperate for Vegeta to tell him that what he saw wasn’t what he thought it was.

But Vegeta could offer no such thing. Breathing in ragged gasps, he pushed Trunks’ hands out of the way and set course for Earth himself.

“Papa, it's not… is it?”

With the autopilot reengaged, the ship shifted towards Earth’s trajectory in a smooth line. Vegeta fumbled for the seatbelt strapping him in, claustrophobia setting in and making his breaths come in short gasps. He rose to his feet and headed towards the door, not really sure where he was going, but needing to escape the devastation he could still see in through the window.

“Papa!”

The boy’s shout stopped him short, the sound haunting in its terror. Unable to turn around and face his son, but unwilling to leave him either, Vegeta sank to his knees on the floor of the bridge, thinking through all the constellations he knew in his head to ground himself.

Small arms came around his neck and suddenly he was embracing his son - or rather, Trunks was embracing him - and while the floor felt like it was slipping out from under him he held onto the only constant he’d had in his life for the last eight years.

“They’re dead,” Trunks said quietly, clinging on tighter still. “The whole planet is gone. Seria… Ara…”

“Yes…” Vegeta replied. But really, that wasn’t what had him on his knees, unable to bear the thought of moving again. In a universe with dragon balls, anything seemed possible, but if Fardarna was destroyed, just as it had been in his own time, it could only mean one thing. Changing the future was impossible.

The androids couldn’t be defeated. They would come, and they would destroy Earth as they knew it.

Bulma would still die.

Vegeta didn’t understand why he couldn’t turn Super Saiyan again. The time he had achieved it felt like a dream, and if the footage didn’t exist he would have begun to believe it didn’t happen at all.
Bulma had asked him lots of questions about how it had happened. When she’d asked him what he’d been thinking about he’d outright lied. He didn’t need the woman getting any funny ideas about what she meant to him - which was nothing other than a (admittedly good) fuck when he needed one. Which, okay, had been several times a day lately, but that didn’t mean anything. The fact that he’d been thinking of her, thinking of her dying, had been a coincidence. It had to be. The alternative was… impossible.

He needed to see the footage again to try and figure it out. Bulma was out with her parents and some event that she’d actually had the audacity to ask him to join her on. He’d said no of course - even if he wanted to go on outings with the Briefs, which he didn’t, he wasn’t going to let anything distract him from the task at hand.

Vegeta made his way to Bulma’s lab, hoping he could figure out her computer to have a look at the footage once more. The lights turned on automatically as he walked in, and he settled down into her chair. The laptop wasn’t on her desk, so he began looking through her drawers. It had to be here somewhere. Surely she wouldn’t have taken it with her?

One of the drawers was locked, but it wasn’t strong enough for Vegeta’s brute force. It didn’t look like the laptop was in there, but Vegeta found himself pausing when he saw the photograph at the top of the drawer’s contents.

The picture was of Bulma. Her hair was straight, but that was the only real difference. Other than the baby in her arms. Vegeta picked it up, staring at the creature in her arms. Clearly this was a photo of the other Bulma, and the baby must have been Trunks. The brat looked so… vulnerable. He was a pudgy thing who looked all human. If he hadn’t seen the boys power in this time, he would have thought the baby in the photo had no Saiyan in him at all.

His stomach roiled as he flipped the photo over and saw the notation on the back. *Eleven days late.* What the heck did that mean? Eleven days late for what?

When he glanced inside the drawer again Vegeta saw another piece of paper with the same scrawling handwriting he recognised as Bulma’s. On it were a series of notations that included dates and marks commenting Saiyan versus human gestation. He picked it up stared at it blankly for a few moments before it sank in.

She’d tried to work out when Trunks would be conceived. She hadn’t told him that humans had different gestation periods. She hadn’t told him that if the brat could still have been conceived in the last week.

Vegeta dropped the photo and note into her desk like they burned. Bile rose in his throat and he pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose, trying to slow his breathing.

She’d planned it. She’d planned to get pregnant. Clearly the woman didn’t give a shit about him, she just wanted a baby. All that she’d done - giving him the house, telling him that he would be the one to defeat the androids, being proud of him becoming a Super Saiyan… it was all a fucking act.

How hadn’t he seen this coming? No one had ever given a shit about him in his life - he shouldn’t have thought it was any different with her. After all, his own father sold him into slavery, Nappa and Raditz only tolerated him because he was stronger than him, hell, Frieza told him every day of his miserable life in his care that he was a worthless piece of crap.

Laughter started to bubble up out of his throat. All it had taken was for one person to give him a taste of affection and he’d lapped it up. He’d fallen for it completely. But the woman - he refused to even think her name - had *used* him. Used him for sex to get a baby. Used him like he was
fucking whore! Of all the people in the universe who had tortured and humiliated him, this - this pain lancing through his chest even as he kept laughing so hard his eyes began to burn and water - this was the worst thing anyone had ever done to him because it had actually given him a slither of hope that the universe wasn’t a complete black hole of suffering.

What a gods damn joke.

He should kill her. He should kill everyone on this fucking planet. But the worst bit was, despite all his internal insistence that the woman meant nothing to him, he knew deep down that was a big, fat lie. She meant more to him than anyone else in the universe ever had.

No, he couldn’t kill her. Instead, Vegeta decided to do the next best thing and get the fuck off this backwater planet.

She was driving home with her parents when she saw it. The spaceship above Capsule Corp. At first she thought it was Vegeta and Trunks arriving back from their trip - she’d seen their coordinates a few days ago and it looked like they were heading back. Then she realised that the ship was going in the wrong direction.

She drove back to Capsule Corp at the vehicles top speed, ignoring the shrieking of her mother, then rushed to the room with the spaceship she’d recently finished building. The bastard had blasted the thing right through the roof, not even bothering to use the button that retracted it!

Swearing to herself, Bulma ran to her lab, intending to patch a communicator through to the ship to see exactly why her alien lover - for who else would have stolen it? - had left.

She pulled her laptop out from her bottom drawer and started it up before her eyes fell on the photo on the desk. “Shit,” she whispered as she picked it up, seeing the notes she’d made months ago on the possibility of Trunks conception date. When she flipped over the photo, there was another note there, written in block letters just above the eleven days late comment.

*If the androids kill you all, I hope the chance to have your baby was worth it.*

Chapter End Notes

You didn't think the romance could last forever, did you?
Even if her computer hadn't warned her, she would have known that the ship was arriving imminently. First, there was the high-pitched whining noise of the spaceship hurtling through the atmosphere that echoed through the thick walls of her lab. Then there was the fact that those same walls trembled, along with everything on her desk, shaking a shower of white dust from the roof and sending pens rolling away.

As the rattling intensified, Bulma stumbled upstairs and out into the front yard to watch.

"Oh honey, they are back," Bulma's mother exclaimed with unashamed glee as she joined her, clapping her hands together and grinning up at the sky.

The shadow of the ship blocked out the sunlight, and as it came in Bulma had a panicked thought that it might land on the house instead of the lawn. The jets of air slowing the ship's descent kicked up dirt and grass, forcing her and her mother to shield their faces as it splattered them with debris.

Despite her concerns, Vegeta seemed to be an exceptional pilot, fitting neatly into the space allocated for the ship and docking smoothly. But of course he was. He'd spent his whole like flying around in space ships, Bulma reminded herself. He could probably fly one of them better than she could, and that was saying something.

She'd noted the markings on the ship as soon as it got close enough to see, for even though she'd known it was the future Vegeta thanks to her computer's tracking of his coordinates, a small - very, very small - part of her had clung to the hope that it was the younger Vegeta returning to apologise.

Of course, it wasn't. That stubborn man would probably rather become best friends with Goku than ever swallow his pride and return.

The ship finished docking with a hiss, the metal claw coming up automatically to steady the spherical ship. The door slid up, and out stepped a tired and dirty looking Vegeta and Trunks. Trunks had grown a little taller since he'd been gone, and his purple hair had as well, falling in straight locks around and in front of his face.
"Welcome back!" Bulma said rushing forward to give Trunks a hug. He stiffened in her arms but didn't pull away. In fact, he didn't say anything at all, and when she let go and looked at him, she noticed a dullness in his eyes, as if all the boyish excitement he'd had before he left had evaporated from his body.

The moment she'd let go of Trunks, her mother stepped in, fussing over the boy, ruffling his hair and exclaiming over how much he'd grown. Trunks barely reacted to her as well, putting up with the attention but not looking either of them in the eye.

Worried, Bulma turned to Vegeta, but he was too busy lugging out large tanks of what she assumed was the fuel.

"Go shower, then we will eat," Vegeta barked at Trunks. He finally looked at Bulma and she saw the same glaze to his stare that Trunks had. "Get the ship ready. I want to leave after we've eaten."

"I'll get food on the table," Bulma's mother said. "I started cooking the moment I knew you were coming back. I've made all your favourite foods!" She ushered Trunks inside, pushing him gently along.

"Leave?" Bulma tried to ask Vegeta as he bought out another tank and placed it before her. "But I can't-" she let out a growl of frustration as he left the tanks in front of her on the grass and strode into the house. "I can't get it ready that fast!" she called after him.

The only answer she got was the slamming of the front door.

"You invented the time machine," Vegeta snarled, slamming his fist down on her lab desk and making the pens that she'd just tidied up jump around her desk again. "How hard can refuelling it be?"

Bulma pushed the hair out of her face that had stuck to her forehead with the sweat she'd gained from lugging the fuel tanks to the lab and shoved down the wave of irritation threatening to bubble up. If this had been the younger Vegeta she wouldn't have been surprised at the venom in his voice, but the future version of the man had always seemed so much calmer.

Not anymore. He'd showered and eaten, but the haze in his eyes he'd returned with had been replaced with rage that he was directing at her, even though she had the feeling it was meant for someone else.

"I didn't invent this machine, another version of myself did." She waved the spanner in her hand about in exasperation. "I need to run tests, Vegeta. I'm not sending you and Trunks through time without being damn sure that the machine isn't going to explode."

Vegeta growled in response, clenching and unclenching his hands into fists at his side.

"It will only be a few days." Bulma placed the spanner on her desk and put her empty hands up as she stepped towards him, nervous of the wild fire in his eyes - not because she thought he'd harm her or the machine, but because he had the same look the younger Vegeta had whenever he got upset before disappearing for days on end. "I'll refuel it and set it up for you to return when the androids arrive."

"No." Vegeta made an odd choking sound as he ground out the word. "I want to go back to my timeline. To when I left."

"Your timeline? But I thought-"
"You thought wrong." Vegeta pressed his lips together, drawing a white slash across his face that Bulma found all too familiar. This wasn't something he was going to back down from easily.

"Don't you want to defeat the androids here? To figure out how you can do it in your own timeline?"

"No! I don't…" Something in his expression cracked as he struggled to finish his sentence. "I don't want to be here when they come. I don't want to see them…"

"It's okay to be afraid," Bulma said, placing her hand gently on his arm.

Vegeta recoiled at her touch, disgust at her words on his face. "I am not afraid! But my being here will not change this timeline."

"You are a Super Saiyan. We need all the help we can get, and you can help us-"

"No!" Vegeta roared again, his ki bursting around him in wild lashes that made the hairs on Bulma's arms stand on end. "Just fix the fucking machine!"

At his shouted words his ki exploded out, sending a pulsing wave through Bulma that tossed her back into the wall and made her gasp as the wind was knocked out of her. There was a crackle of electricity and the lab fell into darkness as all the electronics shut down.

Vegeta's ki waves vanished instantly and as Bulma drew in a wheezing breath she felt him at her side, grabbing her arm.

"Bulma, I didn't… shit, are you…?"

If she hadn't been so furious, the concern in his voice would have been sweet, but she was sore, tired and now he'd set her back an evening's work. "I'm fine," she gasped out, slapping his hand away as she struggled to right herself. "Don't fucking touch me! You've done enough, you idiot. Now the machine will take even longer to fix."

"Bulma, I-"

"Don't." She raised her hand, knowing that with his Saiyan vision he'd still be able to see her. "I don't know what your fucking problem is, but I'm not interested. If you want to have a proper, adult conversation later, come find me, otherwise I'll let you know when the time machine is ready."

Without waiting for a reply, she left the lab, blinking back burning tears, unwilling to cry over any version of that damn man.

The humid air weighed down on her, sticking to her skin like a layer of plastic wrap, choking her pores. Bulma leaned back in her outdoor chair on the balcony with a sigh, taking a languorous sip of her lukewarm water before placing the glass against her forehead in an attempt to cool down. It didn't help much, but with the power out she would take what she could get.

Thanks to Vegeta's little temper tantrum, the power wouldn't be fixed until tomorrow. The cut couldn't have come at a worse time with a sticky monsoon thunderstorm rolling in.

Thunder grumbled in the distance, followed by brilliant flashes lighting up the night sky. As a child, Bulma had always hidden under her bedcovers during a storm, but she'd since learned to enjoy watching Mother Nature pour havoc on the world. Nature was indiscriminate in its
destruction, unlike the real dangers of the universe who wielded even more power in their hands and aimed for maximum destruction.

Dangers like the man currently exiting the back door, hands in the pockets of his loose grey pants and shoulders hunched. If she didn't know better, she wouldn't have thought this man to be a threat. In the dim lighting his small stature became more apparent. But Bulma wasn't fooled. She knew exactly how dangerous he was, because his younger self had shattered her heart when he'd left.

The man in question made his way over to the balcony rail and leaned his elbows on it with a heavy sigh.

"Is Trunks asleep?" Bulma asked after a moment's silence, feeling an urgent need to fill it. Her anger at his power-cutting ki explosion had faded, but it was still hard to be around this man, this constant reminder of the person she had only a week ago been naked and romping in a bed (on the floor, on the table, anywhere had been acceptable) with in the most intimate way possible. She couldn't help but appreciate his rippling back muscles as he shifted slightly, visible even under his t-shirt. He'd filled out during his time in space, and no longer looked half starved. Unfortunately, it had the unwanted effect of making him look even more like her Vegeta.

_Her_ Vegeta. She started when she caught her train of thought. Since when had she started thinking of him as hers?

Vegeta hadn't even responded to her question, his gaze set on the stars not quite hidden by the clouds above them. Even from behind he looked deflated and exhausted, and Bulma knew instinctively that something in space had happened that had shaken him.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She asked, setting down her glass and hauling herself out of the sunken chair to join him against the rail.

Vegeta shook his head, not taking his eyes off the sky.

"Things were… interesting while you were gone," Bulma said, deciding that he wouldn't have come out if he didn't want company. "Vegeta - uh, young you - and I… um…" She flushed as she stumbled over her words, not sure how to explain to this man that she'd slept with his younger self. And not just slept with. Fucked. Royally and completely fucked in almost every room of Capsule Corp over the course of their tumultuous relationship.

"Are you pregnant?" Vegeta asked flatly, finally turning his gaze in her. She was shocked by how cool it was. Both Vegetas had always looked at her with eyes like molten lava, burning with an undisclosed need.

"No. Maybe. I don't know… it's too soon to tell."

"I assumed that is why he is not on Earth."

"No, he didn't leave because I was pregnant." Bulma placed her hand on her stomach self-consciously. "He left because he's an idiot."

Vegeta actually laughed at that - a sharp barking sound that didn't seem at all like there was any humour behind it. "I can't argue with you there."

"He thinks I only slept with him to have a baby," Bulma said. "But I didn't. I admit, I didn't tell him human pregnancies were different from Saiyans, but I thought he changed him mind - he said he didn't care about the risk… but now he thinks… oh, he is arrogant and rude and sometimes I wish I was one of his bots so I could smack him but I can't help it, I think I love him and now I've… I've
ruined everything between us!"

Vegeta was silent at the end of her rant, his dark eyes unblinking in their stare. Slowly he reached a
hand towards her and wiped a tear that she hadn't realised had fallen from her cheek with a rough
thumb. "If I know my younger self, I'd wager that nothing is permanently ruined."

"How can you think that?" Bulma asked with a sniff, missing his touch already as he pulled his
hand back. "He's left the planet."

"If my younger self felt so slighted that all feelings he may have had for you were gone, you would
not be here." Vegeta pressed his lips together, perhaps sensing her confusion at his words. Finally,
he let out a huff of air then continued. "He would have killed you, destroyed the planet, then left."

Bulma stiffened. "He would never do that."

"Wouldn't he?" Vegeta cocked his head, dark eyes boring into her.

She swallowed the lump forming in her throat. There was no one in the universe who could know
Vegeta better than himself, but even though his words rang truthfully in her ears, Bulma knew that
there were no circumstances that would make Vegeta - her Vegeta - kill her. "No," she said quietly,
pulling her gaze away to the stars that somewhere out there held the man she wished was beside
her now. "No, he wouldn't."

"Because he loves you," Vegeta replied.

"Loves me?" Bulma laughed out loud at the sheer absurdity of it. "Cares for me, maybe, in his own
way, but I don't think he is even capable of actual love!" At Vegeta's hurt glare she stumbled over
her words. "That is… I mean… well not now anyway. Anything is possible in the future - look at
you. But I promise you, the depths his of feelings for me do not equate to love."

Vegeta stayed silent for a moment. When he finally spoke, it was so softly that she had to strain her
ears to hear him. "Why did he leave then?"

"Because… because he's an asshole who only thinks of himself. Because he was angry with me,
and he thought I'd wronged him." Bulma rolled her eyes at the notion, her fury at the man bubbling
in her chest and making her want to slap the Vegeta beside her because he looked so damn much
like the man she really wanted to take it out on.

"I have been betrayed more times than you can imagine. One would think I'd be used to it, even in
my younger self's youth. The only reason a betrayal would hurt a man like him… a man like me - is
if I actually cared."

"I…" Bulma started to argue, then closed her mouth, unable to find the words. Damn him, he had a
point. "If you cared you'd help us with the androids," she said instead, knowing that it was unfair of
her - he had no obligation to this timeline - but needing to say it nonetheless.

"Don't," Vegeta replied, his voice almost a whisper. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to see it all again." He turned to her and touched an errant curl, wrapping his finger
around a lock. "I can't bear to… I can't watch you suffer through this once more."

"I won't. We are going to defeat the androids."
"But you won't," Vegeta said, and Bulma was shocked to see pain in his eyes glistening in the dim evening light. "I can't change this timeline. The past can't be changed. Everything will happen as it did and there is nothing I can do to change it."

"What are you talking about? You are here. That's proof enough that time can be changed."

Vegeta shook his head, his face crumpled in abject misery, and he dropped his hand away from her hair. "You don't understand."

"Then make me," Bulma whispered fiercely, before wrapping her arms around his waist and planting herself against him.

Vegeta stiffened at first, then his arms returned the embrace, holding her close. He began breathing in ragged breaths as he buried his face in the side of her neck, letting out a shuddering breath that whispered through her hair to caress her skin.

They stayed like that, locked together tightly for a few minutes, their chests rising and falling together in time, so in harmony that Bulma was sure their hearts were beating at the same time.

Being here in his arms should have been a comfort but it only made the hole in her heart that had formed when her Vegeta left for space more apparent. Still, she held on tight, clinging to him like a lifeboat whilst knowing that he was doing the same.

"Gods, I miss you," Vegeta mumbled so quietly against her that she had to strain to understand him. "I am lost without you."

Bulma knew that he wasn't really talking to her, but to his dead lover, the version of herself that Bulma still struggled to see herself becoming. Regardless, she pulled back from him and placed her hands on either side of his face, glaring at him.

"You are not. You've raised an intelligent, strong son, built a freaking time machine, got yourself and Trunks out of an impossible situation, vanquished your enemy, and saved an entire timeline."

"But I haven't." Vegeta took her hands in his and pulled them away from his face. He kept holding her hands, his thumbs gently rubbing her palms. "It would seem that even though I can influence little things, I cannot change big events, like who will live or die."

"What?" Bulma started and tried to pull away, but his grip on her hands was strong. "But you killed Frieza."

"Who would have been killed by Kakarot if I hadn't got there first." He peered at her earnestly and began to tell him about the people he and Trunks had gone to in space. "In the end, I couldn't save them," Vegeta said as he finished. "Their entire planet was demolished. There was nothing left."

"I don't believe that means you can't change the future," Bulma said, an anger rising in her that she wasn't sure if was because of his claim that things couldn't be changed, or at the horror that this man had gone through time and time again. She ripped her hands out of his and began pacing back and forth. "It's scientifically impossible for you to come here and not change things."

"You don't believe in fate?"

"No. We make our own fate." She stopped again in front of him and placed her hand on his chest. "I refuse to believe that the future is set. We will defeat those androids, I am certain of it, but we could use your help, especially if... if other you doesn't come back."
"He will," Vegeta said.

"And so will you." She dug her fingers into his t-shirt desperately. "You owe it to yourself to do everything in your power to save this timeline. You aren't a coward, Vegeta. You won't run away from this."

Thunder and lightning hit at the same time as the air began to speckle with raindrops. Vegeta looked down at her hand. "I am not afraid of dying. I am terrified that I will never see you - my you - again."

"You can't bring her back without defeating the androids in your time," Bulma pointed out. "There is a way to do it. There has to be."

"I wish I had your confidence in this," Vegeta replied.

"I have enough for both of us." Bulma smothered a grin, sensing that she'd won. "So you will return."

She phrased it like a statement, but was relieved when he replied to confirm it.

"I will return."

Bulma smiled openly at his words and pulled him into a tight hug once more, enjoying his warmth as the cool rain set in properly, soaking them through. "Things will be different here. You'll see."

Vegeta didn't respond to her hug like he had the last time. He just placed one hand on top of her head and clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Yes, we will see."

Bulma lay on a mechanics trolley under the time machine, attempting to unbolt one of the fuel tanks without stripping the thread. Sweat dripped down her forehead and into her eyes, making them itch, but she grit her teeth and tried again.

The door to the lab swished open just as she finally got the bolt undone.

"Finally, you fucker!" she exclaimed in glee as it came loose, and she twisted it out. "It's still going to be a few days," she called out to who she assumed was Vegeta. No one else would dare enter her lab when she was in the middle of something - not even her father.

To her surprise, it was a small face that appeared beside her, tilting sideways as he peered under the machine.

"Need a hand?" Trunks asked, the ghost of a smile on his lips a stark contrast to the wide grin he'd often sported before going into space.

"Oh!" Bulma started, embarrassed at having been caught swearing to herself by a child. She used her feet to wheel the trolley back and out from under the machine. She sat up, wiping the sweat and grease from her face with the sleeve of her overalls. "Sorry, Trunks, I didn't realise that was you."

"You thought it was Papa," Trunks replied glancing at the tools in her open tool box. He looked cleaner than he had the day he'd arrived back from space, and his hair had been cut - sloppily which made her assume Vegeta had done it - but he still looked tired, his movements lethargic.

"Yes," she admitted. "He has been making his presence known frequently. Trying to hurry me along, I think."
"We had to use a combination of metric and imperial bolts." Trunks handed her a different wrench. "That might be why you are having trouble."

"Thanks," Bulma took it from him and stood up to set the other one down. "It's hard to see under there. Tight too."

Trunks gave her a slightly wider smile at that. "I did most of the fittings underneath. Papa couldn't fit." His smile wavered suddenly and he looked down at the ground. "Except in the last month. There wasn't enough food and… he said that Mama would have called it a silver lining."

A heavy pang hit Bulma in her stomach. Kami, the things that those two had been through were universally unfair. She was struck by a sudden urge to gather the boy in her arms, hold him tight and insist that everything would be okay. "Are you okay?" she asked instead. "Your father told me about…" She trailed off, unwilling to put to words the horrors that he'd described.

Trunks shook his head, and when he looked up, his eyes were shining with unshed tears. "When I came here I thought I'd be safe."

Bulma knew that he didn't mean safe from physical harm, but from the kind of hurt that only the loss of a loved one could bring. "I'm so sorry, Trunks."

"And now Papa…" Trunks dashed away a falling teardrop angrily. "He doesn't believe we can get Mama back."

"Has he said that?"

"I know he is thinking it." Trunks glared at her then, as if daring her to continue arguing. He looked so much like Vegeta - her Vegeta - in that moment, with his knitted brows, and scowling lips drawn into a thin line across his face.

"And what do you think?" Bulma asked.

His scowl faded away at that, replaced by something closer to bewilderment. "I don't… I don't know."

She gave in and hugged him then, and to her surprise her sank into her, wrapping his small arms around her waist and burying his face in her greasy overalls. "Believe it or not, your father isn't right about everything," she said softly, placing one hand on his head to soothingly stroke his hair. "You know, there was a time when he was actually convinced that he was smarter than me. Can you believe it?"

Trunks let out a wet laugh against her, gripping even tighter.

"He only has you." Bulma pushed him back and slid to her knees in front of him, going down to his height to look into his bloodshot eyes. "Trunks, everything that man does is for you. If he really has given up hope, then you need to hope for him. Because as long as you believe, your father will never, ever give up trying to make it so."

Trunks stared back at her, then broke into a grin - a real one this time. "You will make a good Mama."

Bulma's hand instinctively went to her stomach. "It's too soon to tell," she said, repeating what she'd said to Vegeta.

He cocked an eyebrow at her with a Vegeta-like smirk before carefully removing her hand and
replacing it with his own. He shut his eyes, eyebrows furrowing in concentration. When he opened them he let out a little laugh. "I can feel its ki. My ki."

"Are you sure?" Bulma gasped and looked down at her stomach. She didn't feel pregnant. Not that she knew what feeling pregnant felt like, beyond throwing up because of morning sickness, but still. She'd always assumed she would just know.

Trunks threw his arms around her neck, almost knocking her backwards with the force of it. "I know that Papa will think that this is more proof that you can't change the past," he said in a fierce whisper. "But thank you."

Bulma opened her mouth to tell him that she didn't get pregnant on purpose. But didn't you? A small voice in her head said, shutting her mouth. Didn't a part of you want this boy in your arms to be born? She couldn't deny her traitorous thoughts - not completely. Oh, she'd made some effort to tell Vegeta, to explain that she could get pregnant, but she could have stopped him, could have made explicitly sure that he understood that if they had sex then it would have been lining up perfectly with the timeline she'd calculated. If she had said something, then maybe Vegeta would still be here, on Earth. But then maybe her womb would be empty and this small boy would be shedding tears for yet another loss.

Bulma squeezed her eyes shut and held Trunks tighter.

"Make sure you ease it open when you take off," Bulma instructed as Vegeta and Trunks climbed in the machine that would blast them almost two years into the future. "Not letting it warm up is what caused most of the damage on your last trip."

She wrung her hands, revealing her nervousness, and Vegeta was tempted to climb back out of the machine and grab her hands to steady them and reassure her that they would be fine. He had complete faith that the machine wouldn't blow up. Unlike last time when he'd been almost certain they would die.

"I had other things on my mind when coming here," Vegeta reminded her, recalling how desperate they'd been to escape their time. He'd been half dead when he'd left, and Trunks had been injured. He couldn't hide a proud smile as his son climbed in next to him. The boy was as reckless as he'd always been, but he'd done well on this trip, especially considering it wasn't the holiday they'd thought it would be.

They buckled themselves in - a new safety feature Bulma had installed - and closed the glass window, immediately muffling the outside sounds. It was suffocating and more claustrophobic than his old space pod, and Vegeta was thankful that the trip wouldn't take long - for them at least.

He stared up the machine, powering it up slowly until the high whirring noise steadied.

"Bye young Mama!" Trunks yelled out, making Vegeta wince as the sound reverberated off the glass and around the small chamber.

Bulma lifted her hand in response, keeping her other hand on her stomach, and Vegeta felt a pang that he couldn't stay. After all, of his younger self didn't come back, she would be left alone.

Before he could change his mind, he set the machine to full throttle and lifted them into the air, before clicking the button that sent them hurtling through space and time.

They were gone.
One moment they hovered in the air in the egg-shaped machine, the next… nothing.

It was as if they'd never been here.

Bulma crumpled to the ground with the weight of it all, one hand over her mouth, the other settled on her stomach as she finally let the tears she'd been holding back fall. Knowing that they were gone somehow made the absence of the younger Vegeta more painful. He was meant to be here! He was supposed to stay.

She let herself cry, hot ugly tears pouring out, until finally they dried up and all that was left were the remaining sniffles. Wearily, she made her way to the lab that had a communicator set up with the ship young Vegeta had stolen.

She'd left a few messages after he'd first gone, begging him to come back, trying to explain that it was just a misunderstanding. He hadn't replied, and there was no way of knowing that he'd even seen them. The bastard was probably wilfully ignoring them. He had the self-control of a saint, despite being the devil incarnate most of the time, and she doubted he would ever succumb to the urge to see them.

Still, she had to try. She had to let him know exactly what his past self had encountered in space. She shuddered to think what would happen if he encountered Zersa. If Vegeta's older self couldn't defeat her, then his younger version with no real control over his Super Saiyan abilities wouldn't stand a chance…

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Vegeta had no self-control.

The woman had stolen it with her pouty mouth, fruity perfume and biting words.

He'd just finished a round of five hundred push ups in the spaceship's training area when the message came in. He'd rushed to the screen but had been standing in front it, his finger hovering over the button to bring it up, for five minutes.

He'd made the mistake of listening to her other messages and the result had been days spent thinking about how much he hated her and nights spent dreaming about burying himself inside her and fucking her until the collapsed with exhaustion.

In his dreams she wound her limbs around him after sex, holding him close and whispering words that promised to stave off the desperate loneliness that haunted him, the loneliness that had caused him to seek her out in the first place. But when he awoke, he was alone and painfully hard, and all that rage came flooding back.

"Fuck it," he muttered to himself. It wasn't like seeing her face or hearing her voice could make his obsession - because that was what it was, consuming his every thought - any worse.

He hit the button.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for all your reviews on the last chapter! If you are interested I
recently published a Vegebul one-shot called Variable.
Absorption

Chapter Summary

The androids arrive. Bulma refuses to sit back and do nothing.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

Recap: Yikes, it's been a while since my last update! Last chapter future Vegeta and Trunks left in the time machine, leaving a pregnant Bulma behind.

Dust billowed out in clouds below her as Bulma touched down her helicopter on the rocky outcrop where all of the Z Fighters had gathered. It overlooked a small, bustling city that future Vegeta had claimed to be the first place the androids were supposed to attack. It didn't look like anything out of the ordinary. She could just make out the snails trail of cars snaking through the streets, their occupants blissfully unaware of what might be about to unfold.

The Z Fighters all wore matching frowns as they watched her helicopter power down.

"Hi, guys!" She waved cheerfully as she climbed out of the vehicle, purposefully ignoring their sour looks. Only Goku seemed happy to see her, returning her wave with a gleeful twinkle of his own fingers.

"Bulma! What are you doing here?" Yamcha looked her up and down, his brow furrowing. "Don't tell me you brought the kid with you."

"Of course not," Bulma snapped at her ex, guiltily pushing aside the fact that she had considered it. She'd had a vague hope that Vegeta (present, not future) might actually show up so she could forcefully introduce him to his child. But then she'd thought about how the other Vegeta would have reacted if she'd so recklessly endangered Trunks and had quickly decided against bringing him. She reached into the back of the helicopter, produced a bag of senzu beans and waved them. "I brought supplies."

"It's dangerous, Bulma," Krillen said, looking as worried as Yamcha. "If the androids are half as bad as Vegeta said they were you really shouldn't be here."

"I can look after myself," Bulma retorted, pulling out a large but lightweight gun and holstering it at her side before capsulising the helicopter.

Goku glanced from her to the rest of the Z Fighters. "She held her own at Namek."
"See?" Bulma grinned triumphantly. "Thank you, Goku. At least someone has some faith in me."

"Is that what you've been working on?" Yamcha asked, eyeing up her gun. Despite their messy breakup, Yamcha had been a regular visitor to Capsule Corp since he'd found out she was pregnant. He seemed to accept her "little fling" as he liked to call it, and while he'd made no move to get back together with her - perhaps suspecting the reaction he'd get if he tried - he'd been oddly helpful, even babysitting on occasion so she could work on her weapons.

"Yep." Bulma couldn't help but bounce on her toes in excitement. Perhaps because this was one of the few times she'd actually got out of the house since becoming a mother, but things had been so damn boring since Vegeta had left that she couldn't help the thrill she felt at being here. "This baby will overload any electrical signal it hits. If you boys don't manage to defeat the androids straight away then this sucker will at least give us a fighting chance."

"We're not going to need a gun," Goku said, matching her grin with one of his own as he punched his fist into the palm of his other hand. "Those androids won't know what hit them."

Yamcha sidled closer to Bulma and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I really think you should leave before it's too late. The androids are supposed to attack any minute. You're a mother now, B. It's not just yourself that you need to think about."

"And I really think you should worry about yourself," Bulma replied, shaking him off. "I'm not the only parent here. I've come here for my child, thank you very much. If you and the others can't defeat the androids then I need to find out as much about them as I can to defeat them myself."

Yamcha actually looked hurt at that. "You don't think we can do it."

Bulma pursed her lips together. "I don't think I should chance it."

"Shush," Piccolo said suddenly. "It's a little late now. It's begun."

Everyone watched the city below, but there didn't seem to be any chance to the scenery. Bulma had been expecting something more dramatic - exploding buildings perhaps - but the city seemed to move as normal. "How can you tell?" she asked.

"Ki signatures," Yamcha replied. "They are dropping like flies."

"Let's go," Goku said, all trace of humour gone and replaced by grim determination. "Bulma, stay here."

And all the Z Fighters took off in streams of ki, leaving Bulma and her gun alone on the outcrop. So much for Goku supporting her decision to come.

"You forgot the senzu beans!" she called out. The only answer was a cool wind whipping around her.

Men. They were all the bloody same. Even Goku, who stuck up for her initially, left her behind without a second thought. And all because she was a woman. A mother. Well, Goku was a father and that didn't stop him! She refused to accept that it was because she wasn't a fighter. After all, Yamcha might be strong for a human but next to the likes of Goku he would be no more helpful than a fly out there.

Bulma paced on the outcrop, growing more worried, and more furious as the minutes dragged into hours. The city began to look like the war zone she'd envisioned, and none of the Z fighters returned. They seemed to have forgotten all about her. "They've probably defeated the androids and
are off celebrating without me," she muttered to herself, gripping her gun tight. But even as Bulma ranted she knew that the fight wasn't over. The once vibrant city burned below, plumes of thick black smoke rising up and choking the sky. And the booming sounds hadn't stopped. No, the androids were toying with the city like a child and a house of wooden bricks, and it didn't seem like any of the Z fighters had been able to slow them down.

She stopped pacing as she saw a figure rise up in the city and fly towards her. Holding her breath, she didn't let it out until she saw the orange gi. Yamcha landed roughly, skidding on the ground before falling into her arms with a husky gasp.

Blood trickled down his face from a gash on his forehead, running in a river into his scar. One arm was at a strange angle, clearly broken, and his gargling breaths indicated a punctured lung.

"Senzu," Yamcha managed to choke out.

Bulma lept into action, yanking the bag of senzu beans out of her pocket before plucking one out and thrusting it into Yamcha's mouth. He began to chew, and the pain that had been etched onto his face smoothed away.

"Better?" Bulma asked, helping him sit up.

Yamcha nodded then ran a hand through his hair. "It's mad out there, B. Those androids… they don't look much older than kids but they are strong, fast, and don't seem to tire. Goku is fighting the boy and it… it isn't going well. I hate to say it, but I think Vegeta was right. I don't know if even Goku can defeat them."

"Truer words were never said," a smooth, low female voice said. Bulma gasped as a girl stepped towards them, flicking her straight blonde hair out of her face. She was pretty, but the expression she wore was pure ice, even with her mouth curved into what was probably supposed to be a smile. "Your boyfriend is right," the girl said, her mouth curving even more. "You are all going to die."

The last time he'd been flung through space, Vegeta had been losing consciousness and in far too much pain to take note of the experience. This time though, he was completely alert and well aware of the dangers of using a machine that had only been tested in full once.

He had complete faith that Bulma had done her best to make it as safe as possible, but the fuel he'd acquired was powerful but extremely flammable. There was a reason not all parts of the universe used it. While it gave ships serious speed, it did have the nasty effect of blowing them up on occasion.

Outside the machine, everything was both white and black at once - an odd visual illusion that made Vegeta's stomach churn. He gripped the controls to steady his increasing dizziness, then glanced at Trunks to ask if he was okay.

Before he could even open his mouth to get the words out, there was a loud rumble and Vegeta held his breath, waiting for a fiery inferno to explode.

Instead, white and black turned the green and blue, colour popping around them before the machine neatly landed on the grass.

"That was so cool!" Trunks let out a whoop and pushed the button to release the glass top. He jumped out of the machine, dancing with glee on the grass. "It was more fun than a roller coaster!"

Vegeta climbed out a little more gingerly, fighting the urge to throw up. Taking a few deep breaths
of fresh air, he took in their surroundings. They weren't anywhere near Capsule Corp as far as he could tell, so it seemed that Bulma hadn't fixed the navigation system. Of course, he hadn't told her it was buggy, so that was his own fault. Judging from the cluster of Z Fighters' ki to the west, it seemed like they had at least arrived on the right day.

As several ki signatures spiked, Vegeta frowned, recognising Kakarot's ki flare into one of his traditional attacks. Perhaps they'd arrived a few hours late because it seemed like the battle had already begun.

"Son," Vegeta said tersely.

Trunks stopped bouncing around and straightened, his face growing serious. "It's started, hasn't it."

Vegeta nodded. "Let's go."

Bulma gripped her gun tighter and aimed it at the girl's chest. "He's not my boyfriend," she snarled, squeezing the trigger.

A blue beam shot out and hit the android square on her chest. The force of it knocked her back, off the outcrop and into a nearby cliff, and in the split second between the beam hitting its target and the android getting pushed away, Bulma saw her expression melt into confusion before a flash of genuine fear.

"Damn!" Yamcha actually had the decency to look impressed. "That's the best hit anyone has got on them all day." He turned to her then, grabbing her arm. "You need to get out of here though. That won't keep her down. Get in your helicopter and leave. I'll hold her off if she recovers before you get the chance to get away."

"But I can-"

"Listen to me!" Yamcha cut her off before she could argue. "You were right. If we don't… if we don't defeat them today we are going to need you. You are more valuable alive and perfecting your weapons than you are dying out here today. Stay safe and go. Now!"

Shocked into silence by Yamcha's admission Bulma just nodded. She knew that her blast hadn't killed the android, but it had caused some damage and she could work with that. Quickly, Bulma threw her helicopter capsule then climbed in.

"Hey Yamcha," she yelled out the window as she took off.

He raised an eyebrow at her, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

She was about to offer something cheeky, like telling him not to die… again… but then movement in the cliff in the distance behind him caught her eye. "Look out!" she called out instead.

A golden orb of light hurtled towards Yamcha, leaving a white tail in its wake. Yamcha turned to look behind him, but the ki blast hit the area around him, sending up a cloud of red dust and blocking Bulma's view of him.

Cursing, Bulma turned her helicopter to try and spot Yamcha or the android girl. When she couldn't see Yamcha but noticed the android flying in at a speed even Bulma's helicopter couldn't outfly, she grabbed her gun and propped it on the ledge of the helicopter window. She held off until she could get an accurate shot, then squeezed the trigger.
The beam hit the android, but not dead on. Instead, it nicked her shoulder, sending her spiralling backwards. As the android let out a screech, Bulma used the distraction to manoeuvre over the cliff when she’d last seen Yamcha.

"Shit," Bulma muttered to herself. She couldn't see him, and without that handy ability to sense ki, she had no idea if he was alive or dead. Either way, she wouldn't be any good to him if she got blown up by the android, so she put her helicopter into full throttle and sped away as fast as the machine would take her.

Unfortunately, it probably wasn't going to be fast enough. A golden light lit up her rearview mirror, closing in fast. In desperation, Bulma twisted the machine to the left, but the beam was too wide and too fast. As she began to feel the heat of it, Bulma held her breath then slammed her hand down on the eject button.

With a whoosh of air, she rocketed upwards, pushed even higher by the inferno below her the engulfed the helicopter. Knowing she was still not in the clear, Bulma used her parachute steering lines to keep herself obscured by the smoke, hoping that the android wouldn't be able to sense her ki. Smothering a coughing fit, she peered through the haze, searching for any sign of the blonde girl.

Then something grabbed her, warm arms scooping around her and the parachute ripped away. Letting out a shriek of surprise, Bulma swung her fist at her abductor and tried to twist to face them.

"Hey!" A gravelly voice snapped, it's tone achingly familiar and one that had been haunting her dreams for nearly two years. "Would you rather I dropped you?"

"Vegeta?" Bulma gasped and finished twisting to fling her arms around his neck, letting out a choked sob. "You came back!"

"Of course." He sounded surprised as he held her a little closer in response. "I said I would."

At his words, Bulma reached her hand up to the back of his head and nearly grabbed him by his unruly hair to pull him in for a kiss. But his eyes widened in what looked more like horror than lust... and she realised that he wasn't alone.

"Hi Trunks," Bulma said, looking over Vegeta's shoulder to give the older version of her son a weak smile. "I'm glad the time machine worked."

Trunks gave her a twinkling wave in return, oblivious to the golden ki beam heading straight for them.

"Duck!" Bulma said to Trunks as she grabbed the gun still strapped to her and aimed it at the blast. It hit with an explosion that sent all three of them sliding back through the air.

Vegeta quickly dropped to the ground amongst some rock formations and set his narrow gaze on her. "What was that?"

"The girl android," Bulma said. "No one has had any success in defeating them yet but my weapon holds her off temporarily."

"No, I mean that." Vegeta grabbed the gun off her. "You used it to stop a powerful ki blast in its track."

"That," Bulma snatched the gun back with a scowl, "is an energy scrambler. The androids don't
have discernible ki which made me suspect that they use electrical energy that has the appearance of ki. This gun homes in on clusters of electrical energy and reverses the polarity."

"Neat." Trunks reached out and stroked the gun like it was a family pet. "Can you make me one?"

"You don't need a gun," Vegeta growled out. "You are perfectly capable of using your own ki."

"Yeah, but this gun looks badass." Trunks pouted at his father. "You owe me a birthday present."

Bulma chuckled at Vegeta's exasperated expression, before realising that she'd been so caught up in their return that she'd forgotten all about... "Yamcha," she said, not missing the way Vegeta's face scrunched into an immediate scowl. "Is he alive?"

Vegeta closed his eyes for a moment, then nodded. "For now."

"She's coming back," Trunk said, lowering into a fighting stance. "You should hide, young Mama."

"I can help." Bulma aimed her gun at the incoming figure.

"The boy and I have got this," Vegeta said, placing a warm hand on her shoulder. "Keep yourself and the gun safe."

And then he and Trunks burst into the air, leaving Bulma on the rocky ground. Alone. Again.

Fucking men. As if she was going to wait around in the middle of nowhere!

Cursing to herself, Bulma reached into her pocket for a capsule. When she found the right one, she threw it, and with a puff of smoke a small, brown electric motorbike appeared. Bulma got onto it with a grin. It was perfect. Quiet, and the colour blended in with the ground.

No, she wasn't going to wait around for the Z Fighters to get themselves killed. She was going to get all the data she could on those androids, and kill them herself if need be.

Vegeta powered up to Super Saiyan and flew straight towards the android, years of fury and despair making his ki boil to a brink he'd never felt before. The androids had killed his Bulma, and now they'd tried to do away with the Bulma of this universe too. They had to be stopped.

The android floated in mid-air, arms crossed in front of her as she waited for him, a cocky smile curving her lips. When Vegeta hit her, his fist sliding between her arms to hit her chest square on, her eyes widened and she let out a gasp. But she recovered quickly, fighting back with a sharp energy attack. Vegeta dodged it and attacked with his own ki reply, this time with Trunks beside him, their energy combining into a wide blast that the android would have no hope of dodging.

It hit her hard, exploding in the air and driving her back down towards the earth. When the smoke cleared, the android still stood, but it had clearly had an impact as she held her arm gingerly. That didn't stop her though. She retaliated with her own attack, firing with an incredible amount of energy that needed both Vegeta and Trunks to keep it at bay.

"She's... so... strong..." Trunks gasped out, putting more energy into his ki.

"We've got her pinned down," Vegeta replied. "When I say go, drop the attack and go get her from the side. Ready... Go!"

Trunks pulled to the side, and Vegeta poured as much energy into the attack as he could to hide the
fact that Trunks had moved. He couldn't see through the brightness of the energy blasts pulverising
the air, but he sensed Trunks speed towards the android, and couldn't help but grin in pride as the
boy summoned up an impressive energy blast.

Vegeta felt the blast release, and when the blast attacking him stuttered, he pushed the last of his
energy into his own, sending it hurtling towards the android.

His chest heaving as he gulped in air, Vegeta sank back to the ground, unable to summon any
energy to remain airborne. He hit the ground harder than he'd intended and his knees buckled.

"Papa!" Trunks was at his side in an instant, grabbing his arm and checking him over.

"I'm fine," Vegeta ground out, staggering to his feet. "Is she…"

"She has to be." Trunks glanced up at Vegeta before turning back to the cloud of dust where the
android had been. "We put everything we had into that."

But when the smoke finally cleared, the silhouette of a figure still stood. Slightly bent, clearly out
of breath, but standing nonetheless.

"Is that all you've got?" she asked, straightening and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand,
streaking blood across her face.

Vegeta clenched his fists. "Get behind me," he commanded Trunks. He didn't have any energy left,
but he'd be damned if he didn't protect his son with everything he had.

"No," Trunks said quietly, bending his knees into a defence position. "It's all gone to hell, Papa. I'm
not letting you face this alone."

Vegeta growled in annoyance but dropped into the same position beside Trunks. The boy was right,
after all. They'd survived years battling the androids in their universe, only to likely perish in this
universe today. What better definition of hell was there?

"Sorry boys," 18 drawled as she walked slowly towards them. "A nice performance, but now it's
my turn…" She began to power up, energy crackling around her with such intensity that even
though Vegeta couldn't actually sense any ki from her, the pure power of it made his skin tingle.

And then it stopped. 18's energy dissipated, and she glanced into the sky, her mouth slack.

"17," she said, her voice barely more than a hushed whisper. And she took off into the sky, leaving
father and son wondering how in Kami's name they got so lucky.

Bulma sped around the perimeter of the city, hammering stakes into the rocky ground every
kilometre and attaching sensors to each of them. She could only hope that she was giving the city a
wide enough berth to avoid detection, whilst getting close enough for her tech to do the job.

"What exactly are we doing?" Yamcha complained as they stopped at another points.

Bulma sighed, wishing he'd gone on without her like she'd tried to make him do after she'd found
him and given him (another) senzu bean. He'd been insistent on staying with her 'for her safety', but
Bulma was sure he didn't want to have to face the androids again after two solid ass kickings.

"I'm setting up a sensor ring," she said, slamming the hammer down on the stake. "If they use their
attacks within it, it will give me the information I need on the androids to improve my weaponry."
"And if you die out here?" Yamcha folded his arms, rapping his fingers on his biceps.

Bulma began to attach the sensor, ducking her head to hide the roll of her eyes. "It's linked up to the cloud. Dad will get all the information as well."

"Seems risky to me."

"Don't pretend that you understand enough of this to determine a risk," Bulma snapped. "You never paid attention to my work when we were together. I highly doubt you've gone out and got a PHD in electromagnetic technology since then."

When she looked up at Yamcha after attaching the sensor he at least had a decency to look chastised.

"I don't want to see you get hurt," he mumbled.

"And you think I was happy when you'd run off into the wilderness and train by yourself?" Bulma felt her temper rise, and let out a sigh. "I know you're worried. But this needs to be done." She placed a hand on Yamcha's crossed arms. "Will you help me?"

Yamcha looked surprised at that, but uncrossed his arms and nodded.

Truthfully, Bulma had hoped to avoid this in the first place. She'd held onto a sliver of hope that the Z Fighters would defeat the androids, or that her gun would work first time. Being a scientist who calculated failure rates on a daily basis, she had of course come up with a backup plan. A way to get the data she needed on the androids to improve her weapons.

"Here." Bulma handed Yamcha a sensor kit. "Fly ahead to the last sensor and work your way backwards. We'll meet in the middle and see if this works."

Yamcha did as she said, thankfully forgetting about his need to stay close to keep her safe. With two of them doing it, it didn't take long to get the other sensors up.

"All done," Yamcha declared, landing beside her as she set up the last one.

Once Bulma had finished, she turned the system on, grinning as the screen came to life. "There you are," she crowed as she saw two blips on the screen, indicating where the androids were. No, not two. Three. Three androids?

Bulma frowned in puzzlement but began running diagnostics. Either her machine was incorrect - a probability of 0.034% - or Vegeta coming back in time has changed things somehow. A much more likely scenario. But Vegeta and Trunks had barely survived in a world with two androids. How were they supposed to defeat three?

"What's going on?" Yamcha asked, peering over her shoulder.

Bulma didn't reply, focussing on running a quick system check. No, her system wasn't logging any unusual errors. She looked back at the screen. Before her eyes, two of the blips merged, then became one larger one, leaving onto two blips on the screen. Either one of the three androids had died, or something strange was going on out there...

Despite being weary, Vegeta and Trunks followed 18. She seemed to be heading into the city, towards the other Z Fighters. She must have known they were following but didn't seem to care, as she flew at breakneck speed.
The two time travellers landed early, suppressing their ki as they made their way towards 18, and what looked like a cluster of Z Fighters. In the centre of them, stood a tall, green creature, more alien than anything Vegeta has seen on Earth. It was insectoid, with a bird-like beak, and like the other androids didn't seem to have a ki signature. His long, thick tail had a large bulb on the end, that soon shrank back down.

"Delicious," the creature said with a gritty laugh. "What's for dessert?" His gaze landed on 18 who landed in front of him, her face stricken.

"What did you do to my brother?" She balled her fists, energy exploding around her.

"I absorbed him," the creature said proudly. "Dr Gero made me to become the perfect warrior, and you and your brother are the keys to unlocking that. There's no point in fighting it, girl. Let me absorb you and together we can defeat these idiots and complete our master's work."

"He's no master of mine," 18 spat out. "Give me back my brother!"

The creature laughed at that. "Choosing the hard way, I see?"

"You won't be absorbing her, Cell," Kakarot declared, stepping in front of 18, much to Vegeta's surprise.

What the heck was going on that had that clown actually defending the one thing they were supposed to kill?

"You'll have to go through me first," Kakarot continued, his face alight with the thrill of an impending battle.

"Have it your way then," Cell replied, letting out a decidedly creepy chuckle that reminded Vegeta all too well of the kind of sound Frieza would make before settling on a punishment for one of his soldiers.

Kakarot crouched into an initial fighting stance, but only Cell's tail moved in response. Vegeta watched in horror as the tip of the green creature's tail skewered Kakarot's chest, making the warrior cry out. As the Saiyan struggled, grabbing the tail and trying to yank it out, Cell's beak-like mouth curved at its scaly corners, and his tail began expanding and contracting in lumps, like a snake swallowing a nest of rodents.

Shit. this wasn't good. Even if the creature wanted to defeat the androids for them, Vegeta had a sinking feeling that this creature was much worse. Gathering all his strength, he powered up to Super Saiyan, rose into the air, then sent a ki blast straight for Cell. It exploded around him, but when the dust settled, the monster let out a cackle, revealing himself as unharmed. Kakarot's movements meanwhile had begun to slow, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Goku!" Krillen cried out, his voice cracking with desperation.

"Hey!"

A rock flew at Cell's head, and the creature twisted to look at the thrower. To Vegeta's horror, Trunks stood on a ledge not far from Cell, his hands balled and hair glowing gold.

"Eat dirt, slug brain!" Trunks called out, picking up another rock and hurling it at Cell.

Cell chuckled and dropped Kakarot, who lay twitching on the ground making small gasping sounds. "Looks like I need to teach a brat some manners." He brought his hands to his chest,
drawing in a ki blast.

Vegeta began to run towards his son, knowing that if Cell could do that to Kakarot, then Trunks didn't stand a chance. But he wasn't going to make it - Trunks was too far away and Vegeta could already feel the heat of the blast as it built and began to release.

"Trunks!" Vegeta screamed as his son disappeared into blue light and dust. When he made it the ledge, he expected to see his son on the ground, but Trunks stood still as if it hadn't affected him at all.

And it hadn't, Vegeta realised. For another figure stood between Cell and Trunks, with hair of gold and an energy signal that matched his own.

"Pathetic, all of you," Vegeta's younger self growled out, his lip curling in disdain as he looked at the battered Z fighters. "Why don't you leave this to a real warrior?"

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone, thank you for all the lovely comments asking if I'm okay. I've been fine, just struggling a little with some personal stuff and I needed to take a break. I get writer's block when my head's not in the game! Fortunately I know exactly what plot points I have left in this fic, I just need to break through and actually figure out how I want to write it!

Also thank you to everyone who voted for this story in The Prince and the Heiress annual awards! Out of Time came third for Best Character Development. Thank you so much!
Young!Vegeta takes on Cell. Eighteen complicated things. Some friends from the past show up.

I don't own DBZ or the characters, that honour belongs to Akira Toriyama. I use British English spelling.

Recap: Last chapter, the androids arrived, along with Cell, and Young!Vegeta showed up, ready to kick ass.

Relief washed through Vegeta as he reached his son and checked him over. Trunks was fine. Other than ruffling his straight hair and giving the boy a light coating of dust, the blast hadn't touched him. Vegeta turned to his younger self, a thrill rushing through him when he felt the power radiating from his ki signature. He'd not only attained the legendary power, but honed it. How his younger self had done it in such a short time, Vegeta didn't know, but he suddenly felt less doubtful about their chances.

Vegeta drew in a sharp breath as a small figure dropped from the air and landed next to the young Vegeta, crouching into a fight stance that looked eerily similar to his own. It was difficult to see the them clearly. The sun had dropped, casting a red glow behind them that shadowed their faces, but Vegeta knew that ki signature - and it was one he'd never expected to feel again.

"We just defeated an empire," the new fighter boasted. "You're just a green bug waiting to be crushed." Then she burst into golden flames alongside Vegeta's younger self.

"Seria," Trunks said, the name barely coming out as a whisper. And then he let out a whoop, jumping and fist pumping the air before flying over to her, nearly knocking her down with a hug.

"Did you think you could start the fight without us?" Ara asked as she landed beside them on the outcrop, dressed in full battle armour and holding an energy gun that was almost as large as her.

"You're alive," Vegeta said, proud that his flat tone didn't portray just how relieved he felt.

Ara of course wasn't fooled, and she flipped her long yellow braid over her shoulder with a grin. "You can't get rid of me that easy, asshole."

Vegeta finally allowed himself to crack a smile. "I should have known you are too tough to kill by merely blowing up a planet."

"Hopefully we don't need to blow up a planet to kill this creep." Ara frowned in the direction of the
insectoid. "Your younger self tells me he has a family here now. Let's slaughter our enemies then you can pretend to be interested while your younger self regails you with tales of how we defeated Zersa."

"I can't wait," Vegeta said with a dry chuckle. Then he followed her lead and flew over to the other Saiyans.

"You may as well sit this one out," the younger Vegeta said as he landed, barely sparing him a glance. "I've got this."

Vegeta clenched his teeth in annoyance. Had he always been this arrogant? "He dropped Kakarot like he was nothing. It's going to take all of us to bring him down."

"Please." His younger self rolled his eyes. "Kakarot is nothing. This is what I've been training for." He set Vegeta a grim look. "Get in my way, and I'll take you down too."

"That… monster killed my brother."

Vegeta actually jumped as he heard Eighteen's voice behind him. Her lack of ki meant he'd forgotten she was even there. The moment he set eyes on her, he felt a dark, writhing fury as the memory of Bulma, covered in blood in his arms, came flooding back. "He deserved that end, as do you," he hissed, clenching his fists to keep from lashing out.

Eighteen screwed up her nose. "Geez, what did I do to get you so worked up? I'm going to take this green freak down, and then you and I can have it out, okay?"

Vegeta blinked in the face of her confusion. It wasn't actually her that had killed Bulma, he reminded himself. It was another version in another timeline. Still, pummelling her into the ground would give him great pleasure.

"If you're all finished arguing," the creature said with an air of boredom as he brushed imaginary dirt off his green, speckled chest, "can we get this over with? I have places to be, people to absorb, you know."

"Are you getting this, Dad?" Bulma grinned at her father through the video screen, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she wrote a script to decode the data.

"This is incredible." Her father's voice crackled through the tinny speaker, and he smiled back at her, readjusting the glasses slipping down his nose. "The sensors are collecting their vital signs, and analysing their genetic makeup. You were right, they are at least partly biological."

"They aren't in combat though." Bulma finished the script and glared at the results. "We aren't going to get the data we need if we don't see them in action. Keep looking into what we've got. I'll get what we need."

She shut the computer lid, ending the call with her father, then glanced at Yamcha, pasting her best pleading smile on.

"No," he said immediately.

"We need to get to the others. Convince them to engage the androids in combat so we can get the data we need."

"It's too dangerous."
Bulma scowled, giving up all pretence of being nice to Yamcha. "How cute. You think I'm asking permission to go?" She stood up, picked up her gun, and pointed it at him. "You saw what damage this baby did to the android. How well do you think you'll take it?"

"Whoa!" Yamcha raised his hands in surrender. "B, think about this. It's a battlefield out there."

"They aren't fighting," Bulma pointed out. "But we need them to. Now, you can either stay here, or come with me, or I can shoot you and save you the worry of deciding."

"Listen, this isn't-"

Bulma flicked off the safety and aimed.

"Okay, okay! I'll come with you!"

Smirking, she lowered the weapon and strapped it to her side, then climbed onto her bike. "Get on then. No flying, we don't want your ki warning anyone."

"We sneak in, get the intel from the others, give them ours, then get out," Yamcha said, climbing onto the motorcycle behind her. "Deal?"

Bulma kicked up the kick stand in reply, then engaged the throttle, speeding them towards the city.

Vegeta had sensed her pathetic power level the moment he'd landed back on Earth. What she was doing so close to the battleground, he had no idea, and he shouldn't - no, didn't - care. The woman could look after herself and unlike every other Earthing here (and he counted his older counterpart amongst them) she wasn't an idiot.

Kakarot still lay twitching on the ground, alive but clearly drained by the odd green creature. Vegeta had seen a lot of weird alien life in his travels, and this scaly monster certainly wasn't the most repulsive he'd come across, but it's ki made him... uncomfortable. Like he had bile in his throat that he couldn't swallow down. It wasn't a unified entity, but rather lots of ki signatures all battling each other out in odd harmony. Clearly the creature absorbed its victims, gaining their energy, but Vegeta didn't understand how it wasn't tearing itself apart from its own energy.

"Don't interfere," Vegeta said to Seria, knowing that she'd wear a disappointed pout without having to look. She'd do what he said though - he'd trained her well in the last few months. "Stay here." He didn't wait for her affirmative response, and certainly didn't bother attempting to convince the others to do the same. Instead, he shot a blast at Eighteen - not one that would kill her, but one that would give him a head start - and then flew straight at the green creature, slamming his fists into it and propelling them both into a distant building.

"That tickled," the monster said, delivering a retaliatory blow, but Vegeta caught the wheeze in his breath and grinned.

"Listen up, vomit-breath," Vegeta said, grabbing the creatures tail before it could spike him, then using the grip to fling him into the ground. "I don't know who you are, but the only one killing Kakarot is going to be me. And I'm going to be doing that right after I've killed you and the blonde bitch."

"You think you can defeat the mighty Cell?" The creature burred with laughter.

"Talking about yourself in third person is the first sign of crazy." Vegeta grabbed his throat and squeezed, a thrill of pleasure rushing through him as Cell's breath hissed out and his eyes began to
"You… would… know," Cella gasped out, swinging his tail around and forcing Vegeta to dodge to avoid getting punctured. Cell dropped to the ground, gasping for breath, his eyes looking wildly from side to side for an escape.

Vegeta smirked and landed in front of him. "Ready to die?"

"This is hardly a fair fight." Cell took a step back towards to crumbled skyscraper behind him. "If you let me absorb the other android I might actually be a worthwhile challenge for you."

Vegeta cocked his head, pretending to consider. "And I suppose you'll absorb her power, become twice as strong, and kill us all."

"Ah…" Cell clicked his tongue, his beak-like mouth curving in the corners. "You are afraid you won't be able to defeat me. Understandable, really. After all, it wasn't that long ago that you failed to defeat Son Goku in combat, and I just dealt with him easily enough in this form."

Despite knowing that Cell was goading him, Vegeta couldn't help but bristle with anger. He was quite sure that he could take down Cell and the remaining android without any issues but he had an overwhelming need to prove that he could. A need that had absolutely nothing to do with Bulma proclaiming that she knew it would be him to destroy the androids, and everything to do with… something else. There was definitely another reason. Besides, the girl killed Bulma in the other timeline, so it-

Something hard slammed into his back, and he went sailing past Cell, straight through the broken building, and landed headfirst into the fifth floor of the one behind it. With a groan - he'd barely had his ki up, stupid of him but he'd thought his enemy was in front of him - Vegeta pushed a broken fluorescent light off himself, brushed off the coating of white plaster now covering him, and looked around, trying to gain his bearings. Cell had moved across the desolate city, and fighting him in furious hand to hand combat was the blond android. The one Cell intended to absorb to double his power.

Vegeta powered up to Super Saiyan, ready to pull the idiot girl away from Cell, when he saw Cell's tail open up wide at the end and cover the android's head.

"Well, shit." Vegeta sped towards them, but he already knew it was too late. It looked like he was going to get his challenge, whether he wanted it or not.

When Bulma saw the Z Fighters clustered around two strangers - one small, obviously alien woman with flawless dark green-brown skin and a badass gun that put Bulma's to shame, and a small girl who looked normal enough except for some facial scarring and her obvious glowing Super Saiyan hair - she forgot all about stealth, and skidded her motorbike to a stop next to them.

"Who's fighting the androids?" Bulma demanded, pulling out her phone screen as she dropped her bike on poor Yamcha's unsuspecting foot. "I came to tell you to engage them to improve my dataset but someone is already doing that." She looked around the group, suddenly noticing that Goku looked a little worse for wear, leaning oddly on Krillen's short shoulders. She didn't fail to notice that there wasn't anyone missing from their group.

"Vegeta is fighting the weird bug creature," Gohan said. "Or was. I think the girl android is fighting him now."

"Vegeta…" Bulma set her gaze on Vegeta and Trunks. "The younger, I assume?"
At Vegeta's sharp nod, Bulma pursed her lips together and dug into her pockets for the bag of senzu beans. The odd mix of joy that he'd actually come back, and fury that he'd dared to come back was strange, but she pushed it down and focussed on the matter at hand.

"Here." She threw Goku a bean, and he caught it neatly despite his injuries. "Now, on the off chance that my dickhead baby daddy doesn't do the job right, I'm getting as much information on these creatures as possible. Wait a minute." Bulma stared at the screen in disbelief. "There was two of them a moment ago. Now there's only one."

"He's absorbed Eighteen." Vegeta clenched his jaw before continuing. "His power... it's grown exponentially."

Goku's eyes widened. "Even Vegeta won't be able to take him down now."

He was definitely not going to be able to take Cell down now. Vegeta realised this as he crashed through four buildings thanks to a punch that had broken five of his ribs. And that was after the kick to the head that had made him drop his guard in the first place.

Suddenly, Cell was standing over him again, before hoisting him up by the front of his armour. Vegeta felt his head loll back as he struggled to gather his wits about him. Blood poured into his eyes from a gash on his forehead and the hacking sounds he made as he breathed in and out were definitely not a good sign.

"Ah Vegeta," Cell said with a dramatic sigh. "I could kill you right now, I suppose, but you are so much fun to play with. I'll tell you what. Let's go see your friends and play with them too."

Vegeta groaned and swung a punch at Cell's jaw. In his new form, Cell blocked it with his free hand and let out a low chuckle and he squeezed Vegeta's fist tighter and tighter, the fine bones of the Saiyan's fingers crunching beneath the thick white hands of the creature. Vegeta swallowed a cry of pain, only letting out a hissing breath as Cell released his hand.

Cell took to the sky, dragging Vegeta limply along with him before dropping him from a height. He hit the ground hard, all the air escaping his lungs, and Vegeta started coughing, blood splattering on the ground. He tried to get up, sensing the ki of all the Z fighters there next to him, but he couldn't move, not even when cool, gentle hands cupped his face and he knew that despite being the least stupid person on this planet, she was somehow idiotic enough to be there, with him... and would now probably die because of him.

When Bulma had imagined her reunion with Vegeta (the younger), it had mostly involved her yelling at him. Maybe getting in a slap or two if she was quick enough. Definitely a blast with her gun. Still, in none of her imaginings had she thought he'd be thrown at her feet, covered in blood and clearly dying. She barely noticed the peculiar insect-like man who flew down after him, and instead rushed straight to Vegeta's side, trying to assess the extent of the damage.

"What were you thinking, taking him on alone," Bulma hissed at him, trying to blink back tears, but failing as they streamed down her cheeks. She drew him into her arms, knowing that the recovery position would have been better but desperately needing to hold him. She touched his face carefully, trying to work out where all the blood was coming from. "You stupid, thick-headed, moron."

Vegeta blinked up at her, drawing in a wheezing breath, and recognition flickered in his gaze. Far from the angry taunting glares he's given her in the one video comms they'd had after he'd left, the look he gave was slightly lost, almost tender, and reminiscent of how he'd looked at her during
their visits to the lakehouse.

Bulma, he mouthed, before his eyes rolled back in his head and he lost consciousness.

"Vegeta!" The strange Saiyan girl sank to her knees on the other side of the prince, grabbing his arm and shaking it, babbling in an oddly melodic alien language.

"Calm down," Bulma snapped at her, even though panic was rising in her own throat as she frantically dug into her pocket for a senzu.

She was about to crush it and shove it in Vegeta's mouth when she felt Yamcha's hand on her arm.

"Don't," he whispered, nodding at the creature, who was currently declaring his desire to destroy Earth in some boring monologue. "He doesn't know we have them."

Bulma hesitated, trying to calculate exactly how long Vegeta would live. Knowing his freaky Saiyan genes, he'd probably survive a while longer. He was still breathing, although most of what he was inhaling was his own blood.

"So you see, not one of you has the strength to defeat the mighty Cell now," the creature was saying. "I may as well kill you all now to be done with it."

"But that's not what you want," Bulma blurted out as Cell began to draw in energy for a ki blast.

"No?" Cell paused and fixed his gaze on her. "Any what is it that you think I want?"

"Uh…" Bulma had only been half listening to his long speech, but she knew his type. Her and the rest of the gang had been fighting them since she was a teenager. "Recognition! You want the whole planet to know how mighty you are."

Cell raised his eyebrows, the corner of his mouth curving. "I'm listening…"

Bulma thought fast. "If you kill us all now, that's it, all your fun is over. No one will care that you are the strongest because they'll all be too busy running for their lives. But if you held a contest, in say, two weeks, Earth could send its mightiest warriors to challenge you, along with the television crews required to broadcast to the entire planet. Then, when you defeat us, the whole world will know that you are the mightiest."

As Cell stared at her, saying nothing, Bulma swallowed, worried that she may have oversold it. The Z Fighters were looking at her as if she was crazy. Well, all except Goku who looked positively thrilled at the concept.

Cell's face broke out into a grin, and he began to laugh. "What a wonderful idea! I say, have you given any thought into becoming a villain yourself? You have the perfect mind for it."

"I… uh…"

"You have three days." Cell interrupted her stuttering. "That should be enough time to get the camera crews and a venue sorted. And then, the Cell games can begin!"
Is anyone still reading this? Sorry it has been a while. I think I got my mojo back by focussing on a different fic (The Two of Us if anyone is interested) for a while.
Vegeta stood to the side of the garden party, close to the food table but separate from the Z fighters, keeping his eyes on all possible ambush points. They'd all gone back to Capsule Corp at Bulma's invitation with the purpose of coming up with some sort of plan. There wasn't much planning happening though, and instead everyone was either chatting away about the most inane of things, drinking, or eating. Vegeta however, felt to hyped to be bothered with it all, still feeling the effects of the senzu bean Bulma had given him after his humiliating thrashing by Cell. Senzu beans always made him feel odd, as if all his senses were heightened, adrenaline rushing through his body as if he were still in the middle of a battle. More than anything he wanted to punch someone hard in the face. Preferably Kakarot, but he'd settle for scar-faced weakling or the short one if they got on his nerves.

"At least the food's good," Ara said as she approached him, her gaze flickering across the Z fights, her nose wrinkled in disdain. "But are humans normally this… cheerful in the face of certain doom?"

"Unfortunately," Vegeta replied picking up a pork bun and taking a bite. Gods, it was good. Soft and fluffy, like a cloud melting on his tongue, before he got to the sweet, meaty centre. Mrs Briefs was a genius. Maybe he'd kidnap her when he left Earth. A personal chef in space sounded damn good.

"Han is repairing the ship," Ara said, even though he hadn't asked, and didn't particularly care. "Since you blew a hole in it in your eagerness to get back to your woman."

Vegeta choked on a piece of pork bun he was swallowing. Ara laughed and clapped him on the back as he coughed.

"To get to the fight, you mean," Vegeta said when he'd finally stopped coughing. "It was starting without me."

"Uh huh. She is very pretty though. And she seems quite taken with that handsome man with three
Vegeta jerked his head towards Bulma, who he'd been purposefully ignoring. She stood at the edge of the party, nowhere near Tien, a brittle smile fixed on her face.

"Made you look," Ara chortled.

"When I've killed Cell, you're next."

Ara just laughed harder.

Bulma poured herself another glass of champagne, then sank into one of the lawn chairs on the outskirts of the party with a sigh. Considering they were probably going to die in three days, the Z fighters were in good spirits, eating the food her mother had cooked, and catching up on the last few years, talking about everything but the androids and Cell.

Even Vegeta (the younger) was actually taking part. Well, sort of. He stood by the food, making what was probably snide remarks to the yellow-haired woman - who Bulma was not jealous of in the least. Even if she did own a bigger gun. And better technology. Ara had given everyone translators so they could all understand each other and to make things even worse, once Bulma was able to talk to her she'd found that the woman was perfectly nice. Ugh.

"Are you okay?"

Bulma glanced up to see Vegeta (the older) frowning down at her. He sat in the chair beside her without waiting for a reply then fixed his dark eyes back on her.

"Of course." Bulma waved her hand, forgetting it held the glass, and sloshed champagne onto the lawn. "Never better."

Vegeta gave her a grunt that clearly showed his disbelief of that statement. "You could tell everyone to go."

"It's not everyone that I'm worried about," Bulma replied, scowling in the direction of a certain someone who was actually cracking a smile (a smile! He never smiled!) at something the woman said. Okay, it was closer to an evil smirk, but still.

"Ah. You should…" Vegeta gestured in his younger self's direction. "Talk. Or something."

Bulma let out a dramatic sigh. "I don't want to deal with his shit right now."

Vegeta opened his mouth, then closed it. Then, apparently changing his mind about keeping his opinions to himself, he swivelled in his chair to face her properly. "Bulma, you have three days. If we don't defeat Cell… this might be your last chance." His brows furrowed together and his eyes, which were always drowning in sorrow, became even more mournful. "I would give anything to have my timeline's you back for one minute. Anything."

Kami, how was she supposed to disagree with that? She'd been tempted to snap at him and demand that he mind his own business until he mentioned his Bulma, and caught her with his imploring stare. "What would…" Bulma swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. "What would you do for your one minute?"

There was silence for a moment, then Vegeta shook his head. "I don't actually know. I've imagined her coming back a thousand times, but I can never think of what words I'd say." He shifted back
into his chair and tilted his head up, staring at the stars above them. They sat in companionable silence for a while before he spoke again. "What would you want me to say… if you… if you were her?"

Bulma chewed on the inside of her lip, considering his question. What would she want said if she had been parted from the man she loved for that long? Her gaze caught the younger Vegeta's across the yard. He stood almost frozen, one hand holding a pork bun, his eyes flickering from her to the man beside her in obvious jealousy. And behind that, Bulma saw something else. Something that had probably been there the whole time, but she'd been too stubborn to notice. It was a look of uncertainty, of confusion, as if he didn't know where he stood with her, or how to begin approaching her.

And he didn't, Bulma realised. That man wouldn't know the first thing about making up after a two year argument. As much as he looked like the man sitting next to her, the one who knew what to say because he knew her so well, he wasn't him. Yet.

"I don't think it matters what you say," she said finally, before standing up and flashing the older Vegeta a grin. "But you already knew that."

Vegeta smirked in response. "Don't make it too easy for him," he called out as she began to walk away.

"Oh, don't worry," Bulma muttered to herself. "I won't."

She marched straight over to him, ignoring all of the Z fighters. "We need to talk."

Vegeta looked her up and down, his eyebrows lifting. "Now?"

Even though that's what he said, Bulma knew what he really meant was here, in front of everyone? "Inside," she hissed. "Now."

Vegeta gave her a nonchalant shrug and picked up a bottle of beer. "I can't think of any reason to talk to you."

As he lifted the bottle to take a swig, Bulma snatched it from his hand then slammed it down on the long barbeque table. "Now, asshole." She grabbed his hand and turned briefly to Ara, whose eyes were twinkling with amusement. "Excuse us," she said.

Ara motioned them forward with her hand. "Go ahead. Good luck, Veggie."

Vegeta growled at the nickname, but didn't resist when Bulma kept her grip on his hand, trying to ignore the fact that his warm palm in hers sent tingles up her arm, and dragged him into the house. She didn't say a word as she led through the house, looking for the most neutral room possible. Not the kitchen - too much chance of being interrupted - and not her bedroom. Definitely no bedrooms. Finally, she picked one of the smaller media rooms on the opposite side of the house to the party.

Once inside, she let go of his hand, shut the door, then turned to face him.

Vegeta stood beside the theatre recliner chairs, his arms crossed. Even with his usual scowl on his face he looked decidedly uncomfortable. Nervous even. She could tell from the set of his shoulders, and the way he angled himself, back to the wall, facing the exit.

Bulma let out a breath she didn't realise she'd been holding as her own nervousness flooded away. He was still Vegeta. The same man who'd held her in bed for hours. Who had kissed her with such
sweetness and passion that it made her never want to be touched by another man again. Who challenged her mentally and physically with every waking breath.

"You left." The words blurted out before she'd meant them to. And with them, she felt her eyes prick as everything she'd been pushing down, all her feelings of abandonment, and how much she'd missed this asshole came flooding back.

Vegeta opened his mouth, and for a moment Bulma felt sure he was about to say something cutting in response. Something designed to both ignite her temper and push her away.

Instead, his scowl turned to a mild frown, and he closed his mouth, looking down at the plush carpet for a moment. When he looked back up, he met her gaze, and the intensity burning his them made her want to take a step back. He opened his mouth again, and… "Yes."

Bulma blinked, waiting for him to continue, but he just kept staring at her, his dark eyes implying that he either wanted to kill her or fuck her. She couldn't tell which.

"Is that…” Bulma cleared her throat as he words came out scratchy. "Is that all you have to say?"

Vegeta looked at her for a long while before letting out an aggrieved sigh and dropping his arms. "I left you a message."

A message? A *message?* Bulma felt her temper flare, and she clenched her fists. "You mean the one you sent from the ship?"

Vegeta rolled his eyes. "No, the one I left on the fridge saying the milk needed restocking."

"Oooh!" Bulma clenched her teeth at his pathetic attempt at a joke and fought the urge not to slap him. "Six words! *Six* words, Vegeta! I left you hundreds of messages-"

"-twenty eight messages, actually"

"All you sent me was six fucking words. *I'll return to defeat the androids.*"

"*Seven* words," Vegeta mumbled. "*I will* return. Not *I'll*…" He trailed off at Bulma's glare, and a flush crept onto his cheeks.

"I left you countless messages," she cut him off by raising her hand before he could insist again on the exact amount of videos she'd sent to his ship, "pouring my heart out to you, trying to explain things so you'd know I did not mean to hurt you, and you think sending me that message in return is appropriate?"

"I didn't…" Vegeta clacked his teeth together in obvious frustration before continuing. "I thought it would be better to say… things… in person."

"Well I'm right here, dickhead, so if you have any other *illuminating* words to share, now is the time."

Vegeta's brow furrowed and he rubbed one hand over his face. "Leaving was necessary. You were a distraction."

"A *distraction?* You mean you ran away like a coward!"

Vegeta's eyes narrowed, then had her pinned up against the wall in a split second, his hands locked around her wrists, pressing them into the wall, his torso against hers, trapping her. *"I'm the*
"coward?" he hissed in her ear. "You were the one who was too afraid to tell me the truth."

Bulma struggled pointlessly against his hold. He wasn't hurting her, his grip on her wrists loose, but there was no chance of escaping unless he wanted her to. "I tried to tell you."

"You should have told me from the beginning about the dates! You lied to me!"

"I didn't lie..." Bulma said, but the words tasted dry in her mouth. She licked her lips nervously, wishing she knew what to say that wouldn't make him erupt.

Vegeta's gaze dropped to her mouth, his eyes flashing with a familiar heat, and for a moment she thought he might kiss her. She closed her eyes, desperately wanting not to want him.

His warm breath ghosted over her cheek for the briefest of moments. Then all she felt was cold as his fingers slowly unwrapped from her wrists.

"A lie of omission is still a lie, Bulma," he said.

She winced at that, at the pure hurt echoing behind his anger. As she opened her eyes, he took a step back, releasing her completely. Bulma fought the urge to pull him close again. "I didn't mean to-"

"To lie? Of course you did."

"No! I didn't mean to hurt you."

Vegeta stood closed-mouthed before her, his jaw ticking the only sign that he was desperately holding back.

"I knew what I was doing, or rather not doing by not mentioning the difference in human and Saiyan gestation. But it wasn't because I wanted a baby. It was because I didn't want you to leave. I thought if you knew you'd stop... us... altogether, and I... I..." Bulma let out a bitter laugh and shook her head. "It didn't matter in the end. You left me anyway."

There was a long silence. Bulma tore her gaze away from Vegeta's hard one and stared at the floor. When his hand touched her cheek, his thumb brushing away a tear she didn't know was falling, she flinched and looked back up.

"I came back, didn't I?" he said roughly.

"But not for me," Bulma whispered, fighting back a bout of tears that she was afraid would never stop falling once they started.

"No, not for you."

His agreement should have hurt, but his palm still caressed her cheek and she knew that if things were really broken between them, he never would have taken her hand and come inside in the first place.

"Do you..." She paused, chewing on her lip, not sure she could handle a 'no' to this question. "Do you want to meet him?"

There was no question as to who she was referring to. Vegeta opened his mouth to say no, of course he didn't want to meet the brat. Gods, he'd left Earth at the mere possibility of the boy!
But somehow, he found himself nodding.

The look of relief that washed over Bulma's features was obvious, and the way her eyes lit up, like he'd given her a present instead of merely agreeing to see his own son, made the pit of his stomach curdle into something uncomfortably similar to guilt. But he didn't have anything to feel guilty about. He didn't want a child. He'd made that perfectly clear to her throughout their relationship.

He lowered his hand away from her face, and as she led him out of the room he almost wished she'd taken his palm in hers again. Touching her, holding her, even when he was filled with enough fury to destroy a planet, it made him feel as though everything else - the impending battle, his inability to defeat Cell - melted away, and all that mattered in that moment was her. He might have wanted to kill her, or maybe just fuck her, or more likely do both of those things, but at least it stopped the constant noise in his head screaming at his complete failure to do the one thing he'd promised he would. Win the battle.

They stopped outside a room with blue wooden letters spelling Trunks stuck to the door. The moment Bulma opened it, Vegeta smelled the sweet scent of milk, and the ki he'd been judiciously ignoring, the one that felt very much like another little boy's, sharpened and came into focus.

Inside the room was a plush rocking chair, a white set of drawers covered in a colourful assortment of what Vegeta assumed were children's toys, and a cage. Just as Vegeta was about to object to his son being placed in a prison cell, Bulma walked over and plucked a small bundle out of it. Vegeta clamped his mouth shut, realising that the cage didn't have a roof, and the bars were likely only to stop the child from rolling out.

Bulma sank into the rocking chair, and giving Vegeta a soft smile, motioned for him to come closer.

Vegeta hesitated in the doorway, not sure why he should suddenly feel afraid of something whose power level, while impressive for an infant, had nothing on his own.

A gurgling sound came from the child, who Vegeta still couldn't see thanks to the mass of blankets it was swaddled in. Slowly, he made his way across the room to stand beside Bulma, and peered down. The boy blinked up at him, his wide blue eyes filled with curiosity.

"Trunksie," Bulma cooed in a weird high voice. "This is your papa."

The boy looked from Vegeta to his mother, then back again, before sticking out his tongue and blowing, making a loud noise.

"I suppose there is no doubt that he is the same Trunks," Vegeta muttered. "Cheeky little shit."

Bulma giggled and stroked the top of the boy's purple head. "It is scientifically improbable that they are genetically the same, but they certainly look alike."

"The ki is similar. But something is different. I just don't know what..." Vegeta trailed off when he felt something soft touch his wrist, and then wrap around it. Sucking in a breath, Vegeta looked down to see what it was that felt so familiar. "He... he has a tail."

Bulma let out a soft laugh. "That came as a shock to me too."

The tail in question was covered in soft purple-brown fur, and as the grip on his wrist tightened Vegeta was impressed at its strength. The mere feel of it against his skin suddenly made him miss his own tail with such a powerful ache in his belly that he couldn't believe he hadn't thought about it for as long as he had. Not since... her.
Vegeta gently unwound the tail from his wrist and stepped back.

"You can hold him if you want," Bulma said.

"Gods no!" Vegeta replied, his words coming out more vehemently than he'd intended. At Bulma's frown, he added hastily, "Do you want your child to survive to his second birthday?"

Bulma's expression softened and her eyes crinkled into a smile. "He's not a weak Earth baby, Vegeta. He's your son. You won't hurt him."

Maybe not physically. Vegeta took a step back and folded his arms to prevent her from thrusting the child at him. For even if he didn't drop the boy or crush him with his hands, he'd hurt the boy in every other way… that was inevitable.

Vegeta thought Bulma might have continued to push the idea, but after giving him a long look she stood up, Trunks in her arms, and strolled out the bedroom door. "Come on then," she called back over her shoulder. "We should probably encourage the others to actually start thinking of a plan instead of eating and drinking everything in my house."

Well that could have gone worse, Bulma decided as she headed back to the party. Vegeta hadn't said that he'd join her but she could hear his soft footsteps following. Even if she hadn't heard him she could feel his presence behind her.

When she got to the garden, she stopped short. Everyone was in an uproar, talking excitedly. Goku had an arm around a decidedly uncomfortable Ara while his other had scooped up her daughter. He was beaming, which wasn't an unusual expression on his face, but the pure joy radiating from him was a little unusual, even for him.

His gaze landed on Bulma, and even though it shouldn't have been physically possible, his smile grew even wider. Goku put the girl, who'd gone bright red with what Bulma suspected was embarrassment, down next to a grinning Trunks and Gohan, disconnected himself from Ara then rushed over to Bulma.

No, not to her, she realised as he blew past. To Vegeta.

She turned just in time to see Goku enveloping Vegeta, who'd frozen in obvious horror, in a giant bear hug.

Vegeta's instincts must have kicked in, because he burst into golden flames, slammed a fist into Goku's side, flipped the larger man over his shoulder, then stomped his boot down on Goku's chest to prevent him from getting up.

"What the hell are you doing?" Vegeta asked, his clenched fists trembling.

"Thanking you!" Goku smiled up at him, either oblivious to Vegeta's fury or ignoring it.

Bulma decided to step in before Vegeta put a blast through Goku's chest. She rushed over and placed a hand on Vegeta's arm.

He started at the touch, but after a glance at her and Trunks, powered out of his Super Saiyan form.

"What for?" Bulma asked, since Vegeta looked too flustered to form words.

"For them," Goku replied, pushing Vegeta's boot off his chest and scrambled his feet. He motioned
to Ara and the girl, then clapped his hand on Vegeta's back. "You saved them!"

Vegeta slapped Goku's hand away. "If you touch me again, I will end you."

"Aw, sorry man." Goku scratched the back of his head with an awkward laugh. "I'm just so happy. You saved my niece and my sister in law, then brought them here. I knew you weren't completely evil, even when you were working for Frieza."

"What?!"

Vegeta looked so insulted Bulma had to fight back a giggle.

"I… I didn't… I didn't do any of that for you, you idiot!" Vegeta spluttered.

"Oh, I know," Goku said, still grinning. "But you didn't do any of it for you either."

Vegeta threw Ara a furious glare. She just shrugged at him, a sly smile curving her mouth. Damnit. Now Bulma realised that the woman wasn't only nice, but she actually could grow to like her.

Every single Z Fighter was now staring at Vegeta and when Bulma shifted her gaze back to him she could spot the flush that had crept onto his cheeks. As the Saiyan Prince's stance lowered slightly, Bulma realised he was either going to explode into an attack or launch himself off and get out of there. She tightened her grip on his arm and cleared her throat. "Well, uh… now that everyone has caught up, maybe we should come up with a plan?"

"We have more Saiyans now, thanks to Vegeta," Goku said with a shrug. "We'll defeat Cell."

"Because you all did such a good job the first time?" Bulma pointed out, fighting to keep the irritation from her voice. Honestly, why was everyone so laid back about the end of the freaking world? "I managed to collect some data on the androids and Cell, so I can improve my weapons-"

"We only have three days," Tien snapped suddenly. Apparently he wasn't as relaxed about Cell as Goku was. "Even you can't think of away to defeat Cell in three days. And if your boyfriend had done his job properly, Cell wouldn't have transformed into an unstoppable creature!"

Next to her, Vegeta stiffened, and Bulma felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end her irritation rose into fury. "And what the hell were you doing? Not one of you managed to keep Android 18 away from that monster! Three days is better than nothing and if I hadn't talked to him you'd all be dead now!"

"All you've done is delay the inevitable!" Tien replied, his fists clenching as he stepped forward. "We are all going to die anyway."

Vegeta let out a growl and stepped forward as well, removing his arm from her grip.

"Come on Tien," Krillen said with a nervous laugh. "We've faces impossible odds before."

"Yeah!" Goku chimed in. "Remember Namek?" He beamed at Tien, seemingly oblivious to the three-eyed man's darkening face.

"I wasn't there," Tien replied through clenched teeth. "Remember? I was dead, because of him." He pointed a finger at Vegeta.

"Oh, right," Goku said. "Well, don't worry buddy, we'll get through this too."

"Uh… I'm not saying we can't defeat Cell," Yamaha said. "But how are we supposed to do that in
“Three days?”

“As I was saying,” Bulma said, shuffling Trunks on her hip. The boy was starting to get heavy. “I’ve collected some data and I think I can—”

“If we need more time we could go into the Hyperbolic time chamber,” Goku said, cutting her off.

“The what?” Vegeta of the future asked, melting out the shadows and making Bulma jump.

“The Hyperbolic time chamber. It’s at Kami’s. You go in and one day out here is a year in there.”

“You… you didn’t think that was worth mentioning three years ago?” Future Vegeta asked.

Goku shrugged. “We had three years. And to be honest, I’d forgotten about it.”

“How can you forget about—” The younger Vegeta shook his head. “Never mind, how does it work? Can we all go in?”

“No, there is only enough supplies for two a year, so six of us can go in and get a year each.” Goku counted on his finger with a frown before looking up with a grin. “And hey, there are six of us Saiyans!”

“What about the rest of us?” Piccolo asked, obviously offended. “If I fuse with Kami I’d be just as strong as a Super Saiyan.”

“And then we’d have no dragon balls,” Bulma pointed out.

“We could ask someone from New Namek to take over from Kami.” Gohan’s little voice said, making everyone turn to look at him. He looked down at the ground at the attention. “Maybe Dende?”

“That’s a… that’s not a terrible idea, kid,” Piccolo said, making Gohan look up again with a smile.

“I don’t care how the rest of you balance your time there,” young Vegeta said, “but I’m taking my year there now.” He looked at Seria. “You. Come with me.”

Seria grinned and nodded, but Ara grabbed her arm. “You seriously want to be trapped in a magical chamber for a year with Vegeta?”

Oh yes, Bulma officially liked this woman. Did aliens drink wine? She was definitely getting some drink wine, eat cheese and gossip about Vegeta’s sordid past vibes off Ara.

“He promised to teach me Galick Gun,” Seria replied, bouncing on her toes. “He’ll have to now. It’s going to be awesome!”

“Hey, why does he get a full year?” Tien asked.


“It’s the principle of it,” Tien muttered.

“Vegeta is the only one who has actually fought Cell,” Goku said. “He probably has the best chance of beating him out of all of us.”

“Right,” Vegeta said, sounding surprised. “So uh… how do I get there?”
Much to Trunks' relief, all the Saiyans and Piccolo decided to fly to Kami's to see Vegeta and Seria into the chamber. As they flew through the cool evening air, Trunks glanced at Seria. Her flying had improved since they'd fought together. She had full control of it now, and kept up with everyone. He could sense that her power level had grown too. If they sparred with each other now, he wouldn't feel confident about winning.

"Seria," he hissed as he flew next to her.

"What is it?" She asked, yelling slightly over the wind.

"Shh!" Trunks put a finger over his lips. "I need to talk to you."

"What about?" Gohan asked, coming up on the other side of Seria.

Trunks groaned in frustration. "Nothing to do with you!"

Seria lifted one eyebrow. "What is it then?"

Trunks opened his mouth to tell Gohan to buzz off, but then realised they were coming up to Kami's now. They didn't have much time. "It's about the chamber," he said. "I need a favour."

Vegeta touched down at what he assumed was Kami's. It was a strange half-dome building floating in the sky. He'd have picked somewhere more defensible himself, but humans weren't known for their survival instincts.

Excitement fizzed through him as the anticipation of getting an entire year's worth of training sunk in. He'd be able to defeat Cell when he got out, he was sure of it. He supposed his older self and Kakarot would insist on helping, but he'd be sure to claim the glory of defeating the villain.

Vegeta slowed his walk towards the white and gold buildings. When had he started thinking of Cell as the villain? It implied that he, Vegeta, Prince of all Saiyans, destroyer of planets, murderer of billions, was not one too. It wasn't true of course. No matter how much Kakarot and Bulma seemed to want to find good in him, Vegeta knew he was evil. Frieza had seen to that, and Vegeta knew from first hand experience that any good in the universe was soon snuffed out. It was better to be the villain and survive, than to be a hero and die. But if he really believed that, what the hell was he doing on Earth?

"Vegeta will go in first, with Seria." Kakarot's voice broke through his thoughts, and Vegeta realised that in his daydreaming he hadn't noticed that they'd stopped in front of a tall, wrinkled Namekian and a small, round man who was now speaking in an odd sing-song voice.

"The chamber is prepared for two for one year," he said, fixing round eyes on Vegeta. "You must not stay there longer than the year or you will not be able to return to this dimension, and no one else will be able to enter."

"Whatever," Vegeta ground out impatiently. "Can I go in already? Wasted seconds out here is hours in there."

The old Namekian let out a grievous sigh. "This way." He led them all to a curved archway with two large doors. "Enter in there. You will see a sand timer. Be out before it empties."

Vegeta rolled his eyes and headed for the doors, yanking them open and stepping in. Realising Seria hadn't followed him, glanced back. "You coming?"
She gave him a small shrug. "Have fun!"

"What-" he started to ask her what she was doing, when a purple blur flew past her and straight into the chamber, slamming the doors shut.

Trunks stood inside the now-closed doors, a smirk on his evil face. "Looks like it's just you and me, young Papa."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your comments last chapter letting me know that you were still reading it! It's definitely kept me motivated to keep updating :)
Lightning strikes twice

Chapter Summary

Trunks and Young Vegeta train in the chamber. Bulma and Chi Chi and drink wine and ask Ara some tough questions. What could go wrong?

Chapter Notes

Oh dear, this update has taken quite a while! At least me updating will give anyone who had given up home some comfort that I do intend to complete this!

If you have completely forgotten what has been happening, you could go back to Chapter 30 Absorption (which was a time jump) and read from there, otherwise, to summarise the last few chapters:

The androids and Cell all arrived at the same time. Future Vegeta and Trunks arrived a few hours late but just in time to help with Cell. Young Vegeta arrived back from space with Ara and Seria in time to make a dramatic entrance. Young Vegeta tried to take down Cell, but thanks to Eighteen who managed to get herself absorbed, didn't succeed. Bulma managed to convince Cell to delay his destruction of Earth and hold the Cell Games instead. The Z Fighters came up with a plan to use the hyperbolic time chamber to train. Young Vegeta and Seria were supposed to spend the longest in there but at the last moment Trunks swapped with Seria. Young Vegeta and Trunks are now in the chamber together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crash of a slamming door from the adjoining dining room behind her made Bulma jump, her flailing arm knocking her coffee cup and spilling the hot, brown liquid all over her notes of the new set of armour she was designing. "Shit," she muttered, grabbing a cloth to mop it up and save what she could.

When the culprit's footsteps stomped towards the kitchen she threw a glare in that direction. Vegeta entered - Future, she assumed since her Vegeta should have been in the chamber by now. He looked about as happy as she was, and she pushed away the instinct to blow up at him.

"That little shit traded places with Seria," Vegeta growled out, making his way to the fridge and yanking out a three litre bottle of juice. "When he gets out I'm going to throttle him."

"Trunks?" Bulma asked, even though it was obvious. Vegeta didn't care about anyone else enough to be upset by what they did.

Vegeta took a swig of the juice straight from the bottle, then sat down heavily onto one of the barstools next to her. "I don't know what he was thinking. Younger me won't hold back. He's just as likely to die in that chamber as he would facing the androids alone."
Bulma raised an eyebrow at that. "You - younger or older - are not going to kill your own flesh and blood." She started wafting a couple of wet pieces of paper in the hopes that they would dry and she'd still be able to see her notes under the stains. "Trunks will be fine."

Vegeta scowled in response. "Well, young me sure as hell won't put up with any crap from him."

"Why do you think he wanted to train with him, not you?" Bulma asked, moving her papers to lay them out on the dining table to dry. "It's obvious he adores you. I would have thought a year's training time would have been exactly what he wanted with you."

"I assume he's meddling in your relationship again." Vegeta stood up and went to the coffee machine. He picked up a mug and wiggled it in the air in question.

"Yes, please." As if she'd ever turn down Vegeta's barista quality coffees. Besides, he owed her a new one. "But I don't see how him training with Vegeta is going to help. If anything it will probably scare him off wanting to stay and be a father."

"Actually training is how I figured out how to do the… father thing." Vegeta started on the machine and waited for it to stop screeching before he continued. "Until we started training, I didn't have much - well, anything at all - to do with him."

"Why not?" Bulma asked, hopeful that she might get some insight into her own baby daddy's thoughts on parenthood.

Vegeta frowned as he poured their coffees, then slid hers over to her. "I think I was afraid..." he said, staring into his cup from the other side of the bench. "Afraid that I'd taint him somehow. That everything evil about me would rub off on him."

"But you stayed."

Vegeta shrugged. "The idea of not being here and something happening to him - to you - outweighed that fear." He took a sip of his coffee and when he put the mug back down, gave her a smirk. "I see now I had nothing to worry about. The precocious brat is all you and nothing like me."

"Like me!" Bulma snorted. "You wish, buddy. That boy is your very own mini-me - right down to the scowl." She laughed at Vegeta's expression. "Yes, that one."

"Whatever, woman. If he makes it out of the chamber alive I'm going to kill him myself."

"Don't worry about Trunks," Bulma said, reaching across the bench to pat Vegeta's hand. "I bet he's having the time of his life in the chamber."

Trunks had begun to realise that he'd made the worst mistake of his life.

Not only was the younger version of his father completely ignoring him, but his training was not going well. He and his father had always trained together. And when they went into space, he'd trained with Seria as well. But Trunks had never actually trained alone.

He hated it. Not only was it boring, just hitting the air without the satisfaction of crashing against a target, but there was no challenge without an opponent. He'd never get strong enough to help defeat the androids at this rate, and even worse he'd never convince young Papa that it was a good idea to stay on Earth if the man wouldn't even look at him.
Vegeta didn't seem to be having the same issues. They'd been here a month and Trunks could feel how much the man had improved. Vegeta seemed to do the same thing every day. Wake up, eat, then walk out into the depths of the chamber, where the air was so thick Trunks could barely stand, let alone train. Vegeta trained all day, before returning for a meal and then sleep.

Trunks had tried to do the same, but he got too hungry and needed to return for at least one full meal, plus some snacks. And if he was being honest, that far out away from the living quarters, the chamber was scary. The gravity grew heavier, and the white mist disorientated him, and even though he thought the chamber was inside, strange weather patterns seemed to take place, violent storms with lightning as strong as ki blasts.

Still, if his training wasn't going well, and his father from the past wouldn't train with him, he supposed the chamber itself made as good an opponent as any.

The next day, Trunks made up his mind. He packed a back and filled it with food, then trekked out into the chamber, in the opposite direction he'd seen Vegeta go earlier.

The further out he got, the more he felt the gravity weighing on him. His steps began to feel sluggish, and he needed to take deeper breaths to keep going. Thanks to the white fog swirling in hypnotic patterns around him, he couldn't be sure of his direction, but he knew from previous excursions that the heavier the air got, the further away from the center of the chamber he was.

Thunder grumbled around him, shaking the ground beneath his feet. He contemplated stopping where he was, but the distant flashing ahead gave him an idea.

After what felt like another half hour of trudging on, the mist finally broke to reveal a spectacular lightning storm. Flashes of blue, green and gold hit the ground, the static making the hairs on his arms stand on end.

Trunks dropped his backpack on the ground, and watched the lightning, trying to discern some kind of pattern to it. The strikes seemed to be random, and anywhere from three to seven seconds apart, but Trunks could taste the air change slightly before each one. It was metallic, a little like the taste of blood on his tongue.

He powered up to Super Saiyan, letting his own ki surround him in flashes to rival the lightning. He experimentally shot a blast at a shard of lightning hurtling down in front of him. The resulting explosion made a deafening boom and sent Trunks skidding backward.

With a grin, Trunks stepped into the lightning field. Finally, a challenge that was sure to help him get stronger! Using the subtle signs the lightning gave off - the static electricity and the odd taste in the air - to calculate where and when each strike would hit, Trunks began dancing around the field, firing at each strike before it touched down.

The explosions rocked the chamber, but Trunks met the lightning high enough in the air for them not to do more than ruffle his hair, or at the worst make him stumble. It was exhausting work though. The combination of the heavy gravity, thick air and inability to see with the constant flashes that blinded him had Trunks soaked in sweat and gasping for air within an hour.

It was definitely time for a snack break, he decided. But a lightning bolt slashed the air in front of him, landing before he had a chance to stop it. Trunks gasped at the close miss and staggered back, but another strike immediately landed on his right. They'd been less than a second apart. With a sudden sinking feeling, Trunks realised he couldn't see his backpack. Couldn't see the edge of the lightning field.
Exhausted, and with no idea which way to go to escape, Trunks desperately shot at the strikes boxing him in. One by one they barreled towards him as if he were their target, and one by one he stopped them.

Until he didn't.

It moved too fast, and approached from a blind spot to his left. Distracted by a large green bolt in front of him, he caught sight of it too late.

He felt as though he'd been sucker punched by a force greater than anything he'd experienced. Burning heat flooded his body and instead of getting brighter, it was as if the chamber faded before him, his vision dulling.

And then, suddenly, his sight returned and he was lying on the ground, pins and needles pricking his body. He didn't move, couldn't even blink as the next strike hit millimeters from his head.

This was it. All those years surviving the androids and he was going to die because of a storm!

He opened his mouth to scream, to wail at the injustice of it, but nothing came out, and all he could do was watch as a giant golden beam arced towards him, ready to do its worst.

The last thing he noticed before the world faded away, were warm hands scooping him up, a rough voice cursing his stupidity, and the oddest feeling that he was going to be okay.

Bulma didn't look up at the sound of her lab door opening, too busy looking at the components inside the breastplate of her armour prototype. "Can you pass me the needle nosed pliers?" she asked, assuming the intruder was her father. They appeared in her peripheral vision but when she took them she saw Ara's green-brown hand wrapped around them. "You don't have fingernails," Bulma said, using the pliers to move a resistor into place. She internally chastised herself for blurting that out so rudely, but it wasn't every day she had an alien in her lab. Okay, it was an everyday occurrence but Vegeta didn't look like an alien. Not like Ara did.

Task complete, she looked up to see Ara studying her hand. The woman was much less alien-like than some of the creatures she'd met on Namek - Namekians included - but somehow that was more disconcerting because so was sort of human, but not. She was short, maybe five feet, and carried a huge gun in one hand that managed to make her look even smaller than she was. When Bulma has first met her, Ara had been wearing blue and yellow armour, but now she wore a sunshine yellow dress that matched her hair perfectly. Where she's got it from, Bulma wasn't certain but she suspected her mother had something to do with it.

"No, I don't." Ara's small features scrunched up into a frown. "Seria does though. I never managed to figure out their purpose."

"They are good for picking up small objects." Bulma waggled her own red nails. "And for looking good."

Ara's thin eyebrows lifted - how strange it was that she had those but not fingernails! - and she lifted her gun up effortlessly and dumped it on Bulma's workstation. "I hear you are the best weapon maker this planet has to offer. Can you make my gun as good as yours?"

Bulma's eyes widened at the idea of getting her hands on the alien tech in front of her. She quickly schooled her face to a neutral expression and gave a nonchalant shrug. "I can see what I can do."

"Thank you." Ara stood there awkwardly, as if there was something else she wanted to say.
Bulma waited, fighting the urge to fill the silence. She didn't know a lot about Ara other than that what Future Vegeta had said when he'd thought she was dead. They were clearly friends, but they had the same easy camaraderie that she had with Yamcha, and that made her decidedly uncomfortable.

"Did you know I can read minds?" Ara finally said.

Bulma put down the pliers in her hand and twisted to face Ara. She hadn't known what the woman was going to say, but it hadn't been that! She felt her cheeks flame at the idea that Ara might know every uncharitable thought she'd had.

"I have to be touching the person," Ara added, to Bulma's instant relief. "And then I can access their memories."

"That must have made you an asset to Frieza," Bulma said, suddenly realising how a woman who had to rely on weapons had managed to survive in the Frieza's empire.

Ara's face darkened. "Yes. But I…" She purses her lips together as if deep in thought. "It is only you," she said finally, her face crossing with a strangely human expression of embarrassment. "For Vegeta I mean."

Bulma frowned, not sure she understood.

"For both of them. You are…" Her brow wrinkled and she tapped her ear. "It can't find a word that translates… you are their… only."

"So… you aren't going to steal away my baby daddy?" Bulma ventured.

Ara's face remained blank, then she burst out into a laugh that sounded almost like a song. "Oh no! Vegeta is not right for me." She smiled at patted Bulma's hand. "But I may have peered in him mind a few times. I know a bit about how he thinks if you ever want to talk."

With that she began to walk out of the lab.

"Maybe we could…" Bulma cleared her throat as Ara retreated. "…hang out tonight? I have a bottle of wine or two that needs to be drunk."

Ara glanced back, her eyes crinkling into what might have been a smile. "I'd like that."

Bulma was going to kill him. Vegeta stared down nervously at the unconscious boy lying on the bed in front of him. The brat had nearly killed himself, but Vegeta would get the blame. Bulma would say that he should have looked out for him. Should have been training nearby, instead of leaving him to his own devices.

And shouldn't you have been doing that? A little voice in his head accused him. If it had been Seria in here, as originally intended, he would not have let her wander out that far alone. But he had at least been keeping watch on Trunks' ki, even though he hadn't realised he was doing it until he felt it plummet.

Now the kid was injured, and they still had months left in here. What if he tells Bulma? What if he doesn't survive?

Vegeta shook his head. He'd checked the boy's wounds. He had a bad burn on his left leg, scorch marks on his left arm, and a welt on his right shoulder, but it wasn't anything life threatening. At least on the outside.
To his immense relief, the boy began to stir, his eyelids fluttering and a low groan emitting from his mouth.

"Don't move," Vegeta said, placing a hand on Trunks' chest to prevent him from sitting up.

"Wha… what happened?" Trunks slurred his words, his gaze unfocused.

"You were an idiot."

"Oh." Trunks closed his eyes and nodded at that. "Okay."

Vegeta snorted as the boy's breathing fell into the heavy rhythm of sleep. Great. Now he was going to be stuck looking after an invalid.

"Hold on a moment." Chi Chi leaned forward so fast the red wine in her glass sloshed dangerously. "You are telling me you can read minds? And you've read Vegeta's?" She shuddered dramatically. "Was it as traumatising as I'm imagining?"

Bulma, Chi Chi and Ara sat in a cozy reading room on the far side of the house, a coffee table loaded with cheese, crackers, and several bottles of wine between them. Bulma had invited Chi Chi at the last moment, desperately wanting some support in case Ara revealed something she wasn't ready to hear.

At Chi Chi's question, Bulma glanced at Ara, curious as to what the woman would say. The alien sat perched on a plush chair on the other side of the coffee table, wine glass in hand but back ramrod straight as if she intended to get up and leave at any moment.

She didn't leave though. Instead, Ara took a swig from her glass, then placed it on the table before leaning forward.

"Terrifying in parts, but I've seen much worse." She bared her teeth and let out a sharp laugh. "Vegeta genuinely believes he is a monster but he's got nothing on some of the twisted minds that I've had access to."

"So it's true then." Chi Chi took a large swallow of her wine, then topped it up with one of the bottles. "He saved your life."

"I wouldn't have escaped Frieza's empire without him."

Chi Chi glanced at Bulma, one perfectly groomed eyebrow raised. Bulma shook her head at her friend, knowing exactly what was going through the other woman's mind.

Chi Chi ignored her and gave Ara a slow smile. "So you and Vegeta were a thing?"

Bulma groaned, completely regretting inviting Chi Chi even though she'd known at the time that her friend would ask the questions she was too afraid to.

"A thing," Ara repeated flatly.

"Yes." Chi Chi waved her free hand in the air. "You know. An item. Romantically involved. Fuck-"

"Thank you Chi Chi, I think she gets it," Bulma cut her off, completely mortified but also extremely interested in the answer.
Ara picked up a cracker and a piece of cheese then put both in her mouth, obviously stalling. Bulma didn't know the woman very well, but she could tell that she was looking for the right words. Whether that was she needed to translate them or simply didn't want to say them, Bulma wasn't sure.

Finally, Ara spoke. "Vegeta is the closest thing Seria has to a father. She never met Raditz. We didn't see Vegeta very often, but Seria has always adored him."

"And you and Vegeta?" Chi Chi asked bluntly.

Ara looked decidedly uncomfortable. "When I escaped the World Trade Organisation everyone had to believe I was dead, Raditz included. But Raditz grew to suspect Vegeta. He thought he had killed me. I don't think the idea that Vegeta had helped me escape ever crossed his mind. Before then Raditz and Vegeta were… friends I suppose. And because of me… that was no longer the case." She paused for a moment, taking a sip of her wine. "I also had no one, other than Seria, so when Vegeta checked in on us he and I grew close."

"And you slept with him," Bulma said finally, feeling oddly ill even though she had no right to feel upset about Vegeta's past relationships. He didn't even know her then, and she'd had her own long-term relationship.

"Slept with him?" Ara's eyes closed and she tilted her head as if listening to something. Suddenly she opened them. "Oh! You mean sex." She laughed suddenly, the sound bubbling out of her like overflowing champagne. "No I don't think either of us were interested in that. Protecting one half Saiyan child from Frieza was hard enough. Neither of us wanted to risk another." She shook her head then refilled her wine glass. "Vegeta and I were more than what I understand the word friendship implies, but it wasn't sexual."

Bulma let out a breath she didn't realise she'd been holding. She didn't know why but she was sure Ara was telling the truth. There was something oddly innocent about her, especially considering the life she'd had before Vegeta helped her escape. Bulma took a sip of her own wine, the fruity, slightly acidic liquid sliding down easily, and decided that a change of topic was in order. "What was Raditz like?" she asked.

"Raditz was…" Ara sank back into her chair, letting out a heavy sigh. "He made me laugh when there was very little to be happy about. He could be sweet, but also cruel, and he was the most reckless soldier I've ever met." She laughed sadly and shook her head. "The only reason he survived as long as he did was because of Vegeta and Nappa."

"Was he good in bed?" Chi Chi asked.

"Chi Chi!" Bulma started laughing at the shocked look on Ara's face. "That isn't any of our business!"

"Of course it is. We've all been involved with a Saiyan at some point. Who else are we going to talk to about that. Besides, I'm curious as to why you'd tie yourself to a man like that… unless he was… you know…." Chi Chi gave Bulma a sideways grin. "After all, that's how you ended up knocked up with Vegeta's child, isn't it?"

Clearly someone had had too much wine! Bulma opened her mouth to deliver a sharp retort, but Ara spoke up.

"Raditz was a… competent bed partner." She gave Bulma and Chi Chi a wicked look. "Good enough to go back for more."
"It looks like all three of us have been susceptible to a Saiyan's charms," Bulma said with a sigh. "Damn them and their sexy muscles and stupid bad boy vibe."

Chi Chi snorted. "Speak for yourself. Goku's abs might be sexy but the only vibe that man throws out is 'hungry'. What I really want to know, and only you can answer..." Chi Chi narrowed her eyes at Ara, "is, did the tail get in the way or did it have a special purpose?"

Ara and Bulma, who had both been taking a deep drink from their glasses both choked on their wine. "Oh! Well..." Ara coughed and patted her chest. "It uh... the tail is an extra limb so... it certainly came in handy at times. Saiyan tails are very flexible."

The door opened suddenly, and all three of them went silent. To Bulma's surprise, Future Vegeta walked in with Han, who Bulma had only met briefly, and Goku, as if the three of them had been hanging out.

Bulma couldn't help but let her gaze fall to Vegeta's butt. Or rather, just above it where she knew his tail used to be.

Vegeta took one look at the empty wine bottles and raised his eyebrows. "Are we interrupting something?"

There was a pregnant pause and then all three women burst out into laughter. Laughter that only grew louder as the three men retreated hurriedly.

Trunks sat on his bed, his burnt leg propped up on pillows, and couldn't help but feel rather sorry for himself. He was supposed to be out there training, getting strong enough to beat Cell, and then the androids back home, but now he was bedridden. And the worst of it was it was his own, stupid fault!

The only upside was that despite the grumbled mutterings of "bloody idiotic kid" every five minutes, Vegeta has been surprisingly attentive with his care, checking in on Trunks frequently, bringing him food and water, and administering first aid to his various injuries.

Trunks perked up as the man walked into the room, but shrank back when he saw the first aid kit. Vegeta didn't say a word as he sat in a chair next to the bed then began to carefully remov the bandage on Trunks' leg, a deep frown on his face.

Trunks couldn't help the whimper that escaped at the peeling motion.

"Stop complaining." Vegeta twisted the leg at an odd angle, peering at the wound. "I'm not," Trunks snapped back, and he closed his eyes tightly, holding his breath his young father poked and prodded the area around the burn. He felt proud of his silence for the next few moments but couldn't help a hiss of pain as the man started applying cool gel to the hot skin.

"You're the one who snuck in here to get the extra time to train," Vegeta muttered. He started wrapping the leg in a new, stretchy white bandage. "I should have just let you deal with the consequences."

"Extra time?" Trunks blinked as the snide comment sank in. Is that why Vegeta thought he'd wanted to train with him? "I didn't swap with Seria because I wanted the extra time... I came because I wanted to train with you." Trunks scowled and crossed his arms, furious at both himself for bothering to come here in the first place and at his young father for making such stupid assumptions. "But you won't even look at me."
Vegeta stilled for a moment, confusion flashing across his face. "Why?"

"I don't know! You're the one ignoring me."

The Saiyan rolled his eyes, then picked up a clip from the first aid kit and fixed the end of the bandage in place. "No..." he said slowly, turning away to pack up the kit. "Why did you want to train with me?"

"Oh." Trunks swung his legs off the bed and stood up, tentatively testing the weight on his leg. "Because I knew you wouldn't go easy on me like Papa does. I felt how much you'd improved after we time jumped. I need to improve that much if I'm going to be able to destroy the androids in my own time."

Vegeta threw him an odd look, then left the room with the first aid kit. He wasn't gone long though, and when he came back without the kit, he stood in the doorway, his black gaze boring straight through Trunks.

"I don't train with others," Vegeta said finally.

"Why not?" Trunks dared to ask.

"Because when I fight I fight to kill."

Trunks sucked in a breath, taken aback. "You... you won't kill me."

"No, I won't. Because we aren't training together."

"Please..." Trunks said against his better judgement, knowing that his father never responded well to pleading. "I need to get stronger. I've hit a wall, I can feel it." Vegeta flinched at his words, and Trunks hoped against hope that he'd made him reconsider. "Training by myself won't help, and if I'd trained with Papa he would have held back too much. Only you can help me."

His young father let out a sigh, then walked out of the room. Trunks sank back onto his bed with a groan, sure he'd just blown it.

To his surprise, a minute later, Vegeta came back in, a glass of orange juice in hand. He passed it to Trunks wordlessly, and when Trunks didn't immediately drink it, he arched his eyebrows in a look so familiar that Trunks felt a sudden wave of sadness as he realised for the first time that it would be months before he saw his father - his real father - again.

"One day," Vegeta said as Trunks lifted the glass to his lips. "I'll train with you for one day. If you can't keep up, you'll leave the chamber."

Trunks set down the juice and the small table beside his bed, fighting back a grin. "And if I can keep up?"

Vegeta remained silent, staring at him unblinking. Trunks stared right back at him, recognising the challenge in his young father's eyes.

Finally, Vegeta clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Then I'll train you."

Trunks finally allowed himself to smile. "Yes! Thanks young Papa, I promise I'll keep up. This is going to be awesome!"

"Sir," Vegeta ground out. "You may call me Sir, if Vegeta is too strange. But you will not refer to
me as Papa, Father, Daddy, or anything else. I am not your father, and you should not do your own
a disservice by referring to me as such."

Trunks gave Vegeta a mock salute. "Yes, Sir."

Vegeta sighed again, a long suffering sound that Trunks own father often made. "Get some rest.
We start tomorrow."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! If you are still following along on this twisted tale, then please
leave a comment to let me know what you thought of this chapter!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!