Beware of the Jade God

by sparklingice

Summary

When clumsy exolinguist Jared’s ship crashes on a planet classified as uninhabitable, he is prepared to find his death there. But what he discovers in Saxet-d’s vast jungle gives him a new take on life instead.

"Jared can’t believe what his life has narrowed down to. Stranded on an alien planet while possibly carnivorous creatures fight over who gets to chomp on his bleeding wounds. And to make matters worse, the dotted one won’t stop staring with those neon green eyes of wild fascination."

Notes

I’ve wanted to write a sci-fi for ages, but I didn't have the courage to start it before I joined this fandom. I'm so glad I finally get to start a story in this setting! My inspiration came mainly from Star Trek. :)

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I also commissioned some art for this fic, and the lovely kamidiox made me an awesome picture that I absolutely adore. Go check out her other pieces here if you haven't done that yet. :)

Disclaimer: None of this is real. The characters in this story are inspired by real people, but they don't reflect their real-life counterparts.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Jared may have gone insane in the course of a few minutes, but the first coherent thought that runs through his mind is *damnit, Prof Tenu has been right*. As his crumbling escape pod plummets to collide with Saxet-d’s copper-sage rainforest, he feels frozen in place and time, Tenu’s words on a loop in his ears.

*“You’ll die shooting at the wrong target, boy.”*

You know how every student has a course they just totally flunk at? Well, for Jared that was SURV101: Starship Emergencies. He failed it twice, died six times in simulation and once in the theoretical questionnaire, then made it through his final practical exam with a busted engine croaking on its last leg. You can say that he is a complete klutz at handling ships and weapons. But nowadays who needs emergency photon phaser engineering anyway? Not Jared, that’s for sure. He is a harmless geek of an exolinguist, nothing more. All his abilities are summed up by saying he speaks a lot. Ever since he hit puberty, his two distinctive features were his big mouth and bigger body. He has never been outstanding in anything, but languages. Which is completely fine by him. Only heroic
idiots like Jeff want to spend their lives in ‘Fleet, one nitrium wall away from instant death. No, thanks, Jared is just going to conduct his research on the peaceful Sigma Tama IV, write his thesis on the Tamarian culture, then hightail it back home and live his life in peace one town over from his parents.

At least, that’s what he thought.

Crashing into an uninhabitable planet wasn’t exactly in his plans.

The damn thing doesn’t even have a name. It still holds its ancient designation from the 21th century nomenclature and has been classified as lifeless after a batch of space nomads tried to set up a colony in its star system and disappeared without a sign. Apparently, nobody bothered to revise its status in the past two hundred years, because the sight that welcomes Jared through the cracked window of his capsule is sure as hell not a desert. He can see deep green treetops and the reddish surface of a lake, and he thinks, with the first tears springing into his eyes, that’s a pretty view to die to.

Chad should be here too, he reminds himself bitterly. They were supposed to hop over to the Tamarians together and shack up in a small hut the university rents for them near the capital, but Chad is a moron who doesn’t listen to Jared’s advice and goes to the Kalikaa tribe’s party just to stare at enormous lilac bosoms and spend the next day in potassium vodka coma. If Chad wasn’t such a douche, then this disaster wouldn’t have happened at all and Jared would be eating the second shalna stick of his life.

“Fuck!” He cries out as another beam hits his capsule from an unidentified source on the planet’s surface. Saxet-d seems not only inhabited, but occupied by organisms that are sentient enough to protect themselves from an intruding starship.

Jared shouldn’t have come close enough to even see this star system. In fact, Sigma Tama is in the total opposite direction. It’s the fault of his stupid curiosity that he is going to die today on a planet where no one will be able to find him. To put it simply, he wanted to go sightseeing, since Chad oh-so-predictably bailed on their study trip. King Hopi Dufi decided to go big on his son’s wedding present and built him an artificial moon made of lapis lazuli, which is said to be the gaudiest celestial body currently in orbit, so, of course, Jared had to venture over to check it out. He didn’t make it.

No, he was feeling adventurous, and used his non-existent instincts of navigation to find the right wormhole to drive through with his old cruiser. He ended up in the wrong system, so he pulled out his holomap, but he has been too dazzled by the beautiful places the map listed nearby to pay proper attention to where he was going. Jared gets easily enchanted by pretty things - he would like to say he is a connoisseur, but in reality, he is just easily distracted. It looks like that will be his demise too, because in his distraction, he entered Saxet-d’s sphere of influence and next thing he knew, he was being fired at.

Which leads back to Prof Tenu and his ominous words. Jared is a lousy shot, he knows - it stems from his reluctance to hurt another being, he is sure. So he did try to end this peacefully first, flashing his white flag signals and research ship certification, but no one listened and he ended up hitting a button he thought was the phaser beam controller. It was not.

Basically, he ejected himself out of his wreck of a ship in a capsule that has neither an engine, nor brakes, because Jared is broke, and all his stuff is prehistoric.

He is going to die.

“Nooo!” He shrieks as the ground rushes up towards his face and his pod smashes into it with too much force, the flimsy walls of it ripping away. Something warps inward from the sudden pressure
and encloses his right shin in a vice. Even through the deafening noise, he feels like he even hears it when the metal snaps one more time and his leg breaks in half.

He screams his throat bloody and passes out long before the capsule stops moving.

When he comes to it, the sun is setting and he is caught in a tree by the straps of his seatbelt, limbs hanging into the void below. He can’t see the remains of his pod, but at least they aren’t crushing his body at the moment.

I’m alive, his mind whoops first in joyous relief, then the initial happiness shatters as the pain hits his senses. “Aaah… fuck…” He moans, damn near delirious from it, and promptly throws up into the thirty feet of vegetation under him.

He has an open fracture in his leg. An open fracture. The bone broke through the skin and his spacesuit. He is stuck in a tree in the middle of nowhere on a planet full of hostile beings, and he has an open fracture. He is going to lose his leg. Well, he is going to lose his life even sooner if the amount of blood dribbling down his calf is anything to go by, but, details. The agony and the fear racing through his veins make him vomit again until it feels like his stomach itself is the next thing coming up and he loses consciousness again.

Miraculously, he finds himself awake again in pitch black and sweltering heat. Disoriented, he moves his head the barest of inches, trying to get a look at his leg. It doesn’t hurt that much, but that might be the shock - or is it the first stage of dying? He should have paid more attention to the material during Survival Training 101 instead of the hot-ass teacher everyone wanted to be banged by.

There’s something soft and wet caressing the area surrounding his wound, moving around in a wriggling motion and smearing some sort of slime all over his clothes. Is that a snail? A hyper-fast snail? A fat snake that has crawled out of a swamp? Jared has no idea. All he knows is that every corner of his body hurts. Now that he isn’t quite as horrified by the fracture as he was the first time around, he realises there are bloody scrapes on both sides of his hands and he feels bruised from head to toe. He can’t see more than the faint outline of his palm. How the hell is he going to get out of this mess?

“Grrw.”

Jared goes so still that he feels as though he managed to freeze his bloodstream too. Something growled up at him from beside his ankle. There’s an animal there, a freaking carnivore probably, just his luck.

“Mrrrg.” The creature tugs at the twisted binds around Jared’s middle with sharp, forceful jerks. Trying to get at the flesh, no doubt. To their right, there’s a high-pitched sound and the noises of something stumbling through the woods bound closer toward them. A pack. It must be a pack. The yanking intensifies. Something pointy bumps into Jared’s thigh. The motions on his leg get sloppier by the second and seem to lose some coordination. Shit. It’s a tongue, and the slime is the saliva dripping from it. The feast has already started.

“No” Jared whimpers, every word a sandpaper chafing his throat. “No, no, no, please don’t eat me…”
“Nyyy!” The predator yelps, and Jared is blinded by the sudden beam of neon green eyes, wide and startled on a humanoid face. Some kind of glowing feathers flare around the creature’s neck and flash light at the smear of blood around its hungry mouth.

Jared screams.

He can’t help it, the panic bubbles up in his chest and his insides tangle into knots, staring at those inhuman features painted with his own blood. Out of nowhere, another three shining alien heads pop up around him, shades of red and blue, feathers straightening into spikes. They are a little further back, but undeniably waiting for their turn to get at the prey. The green one, who must be the leader of this group, crawls back to him tentatively. It reaches out for Jared’s scraped arm, then snatches its paw back. Repeats this a couple of times until it realises Jared’s not going to move, that he has no energy left to do it, then pulls at the wounded limb to raise it close enough to lick.

Jared isn’t too keen on Old Earth religions, but his mother raised him to be aware of their traditions, to keep the fragile connections they have with their pasts. That’s all he has in mind now, his Mom’s gentle voice teaching him the long dead language of his ancestors, and the memory of sunny afternoons spent reading books on her lap. With tears streaming down his face, Jared gives himself over to fate. He has nothing left to fight with.

“Hrm.” Green Eyes hums, satisfied by his inertness, and sticks its tongue out. It laps at Jared’s blood with disturbing delight, making soft, pleased sounds and slurping into the injured flesh. The torn skin lights aflame in pain, and Jared knows with immediate, blood-curdling clarity, that he is going to be the main course for a pack of scavenging bright neon aliens on a planet millions of parsecs away from home.
As the night progresses, Jared keeps drifting in and out of consciousness, each time trying to figure out a way to escape from his predicament and coming up with a bunch of bad ideas. He has a pocket knife in his spacesuit, thank Fate for his collection of antique trinkets - perhaps he could reach it and pull it out before one of these aliens rips out his throat, but even then, it doesn’t seem likely that he can make the thirty feet climb down with a broken leg. Suffice it to say, his chances of survival are pretty slim.

But he has to try. He has to.

The green one is still preoccupied with the injured leg that has long since gone numb, mouthing at it with its eyes closed. It’s perched on a thick branch, Jared sees it now, and there’s a sharp-looking spear tucked under its arm. What a pity that they met this way - even with a terror-addled brain, Jared notices the rough beauty of this lithe predator. Besides its feathers and ethereal eyes, it has faintly gleaming sea-green dots sprinkled on its limbs and face that remind him of human freckles. It’s hard to guess its gender, given the lack of information about its kind, but its dimorphic traits suggest it might be a male. One of the others, the red, lazy one two trees over, appears to have breasts, which supports Jared’s half-assed theory.

Such a shame that he’ll have to hurt this being to get free.

As stealthily as he can with his long arm stiff from his contusions, Jared slips his fingers into the side pocket of his spacesuit and grabs the knife. This is no drill, no survival training. It’s his life on the line and he’s got one shot at saving it. Only one.

“Mrrr.” Green Eyes purrs, and sways in place, grabbing onto Jared’s legs with both of his paws. Jared doesn’t know what’s wrong with him, and he feels a twinge of regret about what he is about to do, but he won’t get another golden opportunity like this.

He flips the knife open and swings it through the air, going for the creature’s throat, the most vulnerable strip of flesh he can reach -

And a deep blue male catches his wrist so hard that the joint cracks and the knife falls away. Jared
yelps in pain and watches its descent, a curtain of dread falling on his mind.

“Wrrgi!” Blue Guy snarls at Jared and raises a muscled arm to strike him and claw away his face.

Jared squeezes his eyes shut, but the blow doesn’t come. He hears scuffling and a series of lilting noises that he finally recognises as the language these creatures use. Some of their words sound vaguely Uto-Aztecan, but he can’t be certain, maybe it’s a trick of his traumatised mind, trying to latch onto even the tiniest familiarity in his panic. However it is, the hit doesn’t reach him, nothing comes, and his wrist is released. Jared peeks through the fingers he covered his face with and catches a glimpse of the male aliens shoving and swatting at each other. They must have grown impatient and now they all want to get at him and tear him apart.

His body must be such an interesting delicacy to them.

He can’t believe what his life has narrowed down to. Stranded on an alien planet while possibly carnivorous creatures fight over who gets to chomp on his bleeding wounds. And to make matters worse, the dotted one won’t stop staring with those neon green eyes of wild fascination. He seems to have claimed Jared as his personal dinner plate tonight.

By the way… are they drunk? They sure can’t stand straight for more than a minute. One of them staggers over to the end of the branch it’s crouched on and pukes down into the abyss. At least, Jared thinks it’s puke. In reality, that could be anything from ectoplasm to some sort of venom. The others stop tussling and make a series of high-pitched chirping sounds that Jared identifies as the equivalents of laughter for this species. One burps - that’s unmistakable - and bumps its nose into the irritated female’s shoulder. The action earns him a snarl and a threatening flare of ruby feathers.

Somehow Jared gets the feeling that these are not adult specimens of their kind. Which means, basically, that he is at the mercy of a ragtag group of teenager aliens. Promising. The blue guy points at Jared with his spear, licking his lips.

Time to share the game, its gesture implies. Devastated, Jared starts crying and passes out again.

When he opens his eyes this time around, it’s dawn and most of the creatures are gone. Only Green Eyes and one of his friends are around, kind of… giggling and swaying on their feet. Friend tugs Green Eyes towards the wall of leaves that hides the rest of the forest from sight, but he shrugs him off and chirps until his companion gives up and leaves him alone.

Are they actually leaving Jared alive? Could that be true?

Green Eyes glances around, then comes up to Jared and blinks at him with eyes wide as saucers. He makes a hesitant sound.

“H-Hey, buddy.” Jared stammers, a tentative bud of hope growing in his chest. Could it be…? Is this truly happening? “You gonna let me go?”

Unsurprisingly, the alien doesn’t understand a word, but he tilts his head, the feathers around his neck rippling in a wave. He looks curious. The blood is gone from his face and in the brightening light, Jared spots caramel lines of tribal patterns on his nose and forehead. What a captivating, gorgeous face. It’s obvious now that this guy has a human physique except for the feathers and the weird coloration. He’s wearing a cape and a headband, combined with something that looks suspiciously like the lovechild of a loincloth and a skirt. The swirling indents on his earrings gleam gold in the dim grey morning light.
After a moment of silence, he reaches out and grabs Jared’s wounded arm to raise it between their faces, ignoring Jared’s fearful trembling, then he butts it with his nose and - Holy shit!

Holy freaking shit!

Jared’s arm is completely healed. It’s healed! No scars, not a scratch visible on his skin, the bruises have vanished. Heart racing, Jared’s eyes jump to his leg, expecting that horrible, nauseating injury, but -

No. Way.

It’s healed, the fucking open fracture is healed without a scar. Green Eyes healed a compound fracture over one night. He healed it. Jared laughs, eyes filling with tears of relief, and tries to make a cautious kick. The limb moves, bends the way it should, feels good and strong and - Holy shit. He won’t lose his leg here, he won’t lose it.

“Is that - Is that why you kept licking me?” He grins, weeping like a Dalorese in a closed space but not giving a single crap about it. This alien didn’t eat him but saved his life! “You wanted to heal me?”

Green Eyes blinks, then nuzzles Jared’s arm again.

“Thank you. Thank you.” Jared sniffs back his messy tears and reaches out to stroke the creature’s head - or what counts as his hair, probably - in gratitude, but the guy jumps back and the feathers around his neck flare up again in fright. Jared squints at their metallic green arrangement. When they tense up, their edges seem to firm into razor-sharp blades, poised to stab an attacker if it dares approach. A built-in protective armour.

“Sorry, sorry.” Jared raises his palms in a placating gesture. The last thing he needs is for Green Eyes to think Jared wants to hurt him after this encounter. Well, he did try that before, but he had no way to know that the saliva of this species contains a healing component…

He waits for Green Eyes to come back closer again, then lowers his right hand on his head as slowly as he can manage. The alien doesn’t look too happy about it, though, eyes rolling up in an attempt to track Jared’s palm. His shoulders rise to his ears and Jared can’t stop himself from grinning at the sight. If he had a recorder at hand, Green Eyes’ expression could go viral just like that Cardassian wompat with the tribble sitting on its head. How could he think this cute thing was a predator just a few hours ago? “Thank you so much.”

In the distance, a loud wail splits through the busy morning of the jungle. Green Eyes’ head whips around, spine going rigid. He chews on his paw - or rather, his hand - glances back at Jared, then darts into the dense foliage and disappears from sight.

By the time Jared manages to wriggle out of the twisted belts of his seat and makes it down to the ground, his spacesuit is wet enough to act like slippery shark-skin in water. He tries to lever himself against a dirty yellow tree trunk, but his body loses traction and he takes the last few feet sliding ass-first into the litterfall. Evidently, if its inhabitants won’t kill him, Saxet-d’s stifling hot average temperature will sure do the trick. He is sweating buckets in the suffocating heat and humidity and
has started longing for Green Eyes’ outfit, despite how comfy these suits are nowadays.

“Okay. Now what?” He mutters to himself and takes a cautious step away from a rock that has pulsing orange blisters on its surface. It must be a plant’s mimicry. Or maybe a weirdass fungus ready to blow its spores into an unsuspecting animal’s fur. Either way, the substance in those blobs are more likely than not toxic for Jared’s physiology, so he had better keep his distance.

The logical thing to do would be searching for the wreck of his capsule and retrieving a phaser gun. However, Jared is a fool whose big heart is going to be his downfall, because he didn’t pack any. Well, he only owns the one, but he left even that home, thinking he would be back from his quick trip before lunch.

“So smart, Jared. Jeff would be bursting from pride.” He grumbles, the image of his brother’s dismay a bitter taste on his tongue.

Jeff would disown him for being even more useless than usual, smearing his impeccable reputation at ‘Fleet. “Padalecki, was that your little bro they had to launch an intragalactic search mission for?” “What? No, I don’t even have a brother.” Yeah, it’s not hard to picture. Jeff doesn’t hate him or anything, but ever since... ever since Jared’s childhood dreams have been crushed, the two of them turned from joined at the hips to barely-speaking-to-each-other distant. It’s not Jeff’s fault, nothing is. It’s all on Jared. Nothing new under the sun.

From the corner of his eye, Jared spots something glittery in the heaps of platter-sized red leaves the neighbouring tree shed from its thick boughs. With the tip of his boot, he kicks the litter away and realises the shiny object is the pocket knife he dropped last night. There’s a giant striped slug next to it, snacking on a creature that has far too many legs for Jared’s liking.

“Thank Fate.” He heaves a sigh of relief and grabs the knife before the disgusting mollusc could coat it in its slime. Upon closer examination, though, he has to conclude that something did get to it in time to eat its blade, judged by the teeth marks left in the handle. Which leaves him with only the various screwdrivers to use, plus the nail file his pocket tool still contains. Great. He can probably stab a charging squirrel now. “Still better than nothing.”

Armed with this remarkable weapon, he takes off in a random direction, flinching at every noise he hears. There’s a meager chance that either his comm or the navigator survived the fall in his capsule, he should probably try finding those. He knows jack shit about engines, so looking for his damaged ship wouldn’t do him much good. He needs to send out a signal that the cargo ships transporting goods one system over would be able to catch - that’s the only viable option he sees.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he curses the day he decided to leave his homeworld and study at Jeff’s school to prove some sort of dumb equality no one cares about. He should have known there was no way to change what’s encoded in the most basic parts of him. Filled with even more vitriol, he berates himself for sleeping through half of Prof Tenu’s lectures. This is the spectacular result. He’s lost, helpless and vulnerable. It's a miracle in itself that the planet’s atmosphere seems to agree with his human respiratory system. His mind is a completely blank sheet. He doesn’t even remember those super crappy retro holovision shows where they dropped a bunch of guys down on Class M planets and filmed them as they tried to survive in an unknown environment to win the race with nothing but their laser knives. Worse, he doesn’t even have a laser knife, because in his fondness for antique knickknacks, he bought this shitty tool that can’t withstand a metallophage alien’s attack.

“You hit rock bottom, Jay, congrats.” He gives himself a figurative pat on the back with a dark smile that morphs into a frightened gasp a second later.

There’s a rustle on his right.
He jumps, strikes up a defensive pose, nail file ready for stabbing. Who knows what lives in these woods, the thing behind those plants could be anything from a levitating rabbit to a gargantuan marrow-sucking monster. The possibilities to execute Jared’s swan song are endless. The bushes shake and buzz, crackling with electricity that he would stop to admire if he wasn’t scared shitless by whatever is coming at him. He has a split second to contemplate running for his life before a green and tawny blur jumps over the miniature lightning bolts the weird bushes generate around themselves.

“Oh my God!” Jared’s exclamation bursts from him unbidden at the sight of his new friend, the green-dotted alien with the remedial saliva. He’s not glowing neon this time, but his mesmerizing appearance is still recognisable. “You scared the hell out of me.”

Green Eyes flashes his dazzling white teeth at him in response and touches the top of his head.

“Is that a smile?” Jared asks, not expecting an answer.

He freaking hopes that’s a smile and not a warning sign or an invitation to a fight for dominance. Jared’s height has landed him in those kind of situations with other sentient races before, and if Green Eyes recognises him as another humanoid intruding on his territory… But yet again, this is the guy that saved Jared’s ass last night. He’s probably trying to mimic Jared’s friendly gestures from this morning.

“You are a curious one, aren’t you?” Jared grins back. “Where are your buddies?”

Green Eyes ignores him in favour of poking at Jared’s boots with the tip of one finger. He seems to be much bolder, now that he is alone, feeling up Jared’s calves and sticking his thumb into Jared’s suit where it ripped from - from his own broken bone. Fuck, he still can’t believe he got out of that injury unscathed.

“Hmk.” The alien makes a quiet sound and bites the shiny line of the spacesuit’s design.

“Oh, okay, that’s enough.” Jared pushes him away before one of them gets hurt.

Green Eyes looks confused. He runs his fingers over the feathers around his neck, gaze fixed on the hole in Jared’s suit. They start glowing and ruffling up and down, and suddenly, it clicks in Jared’s head. The guy thinks Jared’s epidermal covering is damaged and not working properly.

“No, these aren’t like yours.” He waves his hands at the pants of his suit. “These are just clothes. I promise I’m not hurt anymore.”

Green Eyes blinks and straightens up from his crouch. He is almost as tall as Jared, which is kind of a surprise given how agile he was thirty feet above ground compared to Jared’s graceless mass of destruction. He can no doubt move like a panther too, Jared thinks, envious. His own booming voice and oversized limbs would prevent him from being inconspicuous even if his life depended on it.

“I think I should stop calling you Green Eyes in my head. Though it’s kinda fitting.” He muses and taps his chest.

“Jared.” When all that gets is a frown, he does it again. “Jared.”

Green Eyes’ focus flickers between Jared’s hand and face for a few silent moments until his cogs turn and he flattens his hand on his own chest to thump twice. Then he bares his teeth and touches the top of his head again.

Jared purses his lips. As surprising as it is, they don’t teach you how to make unassisted first contact
at school. All instructions start with *you and your delegation*. Nothing about one-on-one encounters. Also, he is pretty sure a student isn’t supposed to meet a non-Federation race before it’s even discovered. He doesn’t know any regulation that covers communication with a species you know nothing about. Not even their basic array of gestures.

He is left to his own devices.

So, primitive sign language it is. He repeats his name, taps his chest, then reaches towards the alien guy’s cape-covered pecks. He has to do it twice more before Green Eyes catches on and says something that would constitute three sentences in English based just on length, the agglutinative characteristics once again apparent.

“...quetzalitzli-jsen.”

Jared’s eyebrows disappear under his bangs. “That’s a mouthful.”

There’s no way he can learn to pronounce that today. He clears his throat and glances at the watch sewn into his suit that still shows the time of his homeworld. It’s barely past five in the morning over there. “Er, I think we should work on it once I found my capsule, how about that?”

After two hours of trekking and a close call with another electric bush, Jared finally finds a path in the trees that his escape pod burnt out. He claps in joy and startles when his alien friend lets him know he’s still around and still intent on replicating Jared’s gestures.

It’s ridiculously cute and a little disconcerting.

“You don’t have to follow me around.” Jared mumbles as they set off side by side towards the ruins of his pod.

Realistically, he knows talking is redundant. The guy won’t start comprehending civil languages all of a sudden after one magic word. But Jared is so shaken by the experience of teetering on the brink of dying that only talking gives him a sense of normalcy and calm.

“Ugh, I hope blood drinking isn’t part of a transformation ritual around here.” He wonders, because Green Eyes looks like he is waiting for something to happen anytime soon. “I know you don’t understand me, but I’m grateful, really grateful. I would thank you properly if I could. I have nothing to give you, though, so you shouldn’t waste your time hanging around me, buddy.”

He pauses, turning to face the guy again. “Unless you are after my blood?”

Could be, since he spent last night licking it up... Jared peers at his figure, the dots and tattoos adorning his face, the cherry pink curve of his lips, the too-long lashes framing his eyes. They look… perfect. Well, perfectly human, not - not *aesthetically* perfect, because… Anyway, no elongated appendage is visible.

“I don’t see a bloodsucking mouthpart. Perhaps it’s retractable.” He comments to himself, his training in xenobiology kicking in. “Is that it, dude? Are you hiding a proboscis somewhere?”

Green Eyes is staring back with disturbing alertness, the colours of his eyes shimmering. “God, stop that.” Jared groans. “It freaks me out. Your iris looks… Jesus, it’s iridescent. I wonder if you have some chitin in your body.”
“I once dated a lepidopterist, she’d have a field day just looking at your eyes.” Jared thinks of Genevieve and her lovely, incredible butterflies and a great idea occurs to him. “Hey, maybe I can name you after her.”

Then he remembers that Green Eyes is most likely male and wouldn’t be pleased to find out he has been named after a petite brunette who dumped Jared when she heard of… of why Jared isn’t in the Fleet.

“Or maybe not…” He mumbles and racks his brain for a suitable boy name. He could play around and make one up himself, but it would be nice if something around here reminded him of his homeworld. And perhaps it’s egoistic, but he likes how easily the sound ‘J’ rolls off his tongue.

“How about… Jensen? That sort of sounds like the last syllables of your name, doesn’t it? So. Jensen.” He points at Green Eyes’ - Jensen’s chest. “Jensen.”

Bemused, Jensen dips his chin to stare down at Jared’s finger. Jared pokes him with it between the flaps of his cape. “Jensen.” He points back at himself. “Jared.”

Jensen’s lips curve upward. Does that mean he is amused? “Jzsrt.”

“Jared - Jensen.”

“Jzs.” Jensen tries to repeat the words according to which of them Jared points at. “Jensen.”

“At least you got your own name right.” Jared grins. That’s progress!

Jensen shows his teeth and touches his head.

Jared snorts. As hard as communicating without a common ground is, Jensen seems to be a quick learner. Perhaps even too quick. “I’ll have to teach you not to do that.”

“Jzs.”

Okay, saying ‘Jared’ is too much of a challenge for now. Maybe, they should try something else. “Jay. J-a-y.”

“Jae.”

“Jay.”

“Jay.” Jensen grins so wide the corners of his eyes crinkle up and his irises flash neon for a second. He touches the top of his head again and claps, showing off his repertoire. For the first time since he stepped foot on this godforsaken planet, Jared’s laughter is full of genuine delight.

He isn’t quite as happy when he discovers that his navigation device is nothing but a handful of ash and his comm is falling apart from the cracks in its material. He tries reassembling it with a roll of tape he found in the capsule’s wreck and the screwdrivers in his pocket tool, but the screen doesn’t light up however hard he tries. If he can’t get it to operate, he’ll have to search for the rest of his ship, and that wreck could be anywhere. Hell, it might have fallen into a lake or down into a chasm. If Jared can’t repair his comm, he might as well off himself.
In spite of the cultural, language and... well, species barrier, even Jensen seems to sense how deep his mood has sunk into dejectedness. He chews on the back of his hand for a while, which must be a nervous gesture as far as Jared is able to determine, then goes over to the escape pod’s shell and putters around with the wires sticking out of its shredded front.

“No, Jensen, don’t play with that -” Jared sits up in alarm, rushing to warn him, but it’s too late and the shot of electricity sizzles into Jensen’s outstretched hand. “Damnit.”

Jensen jumps back and snarls at the wires, then falls over the transparent aluminium hull and cuts his palm on its shards. His feathers go rigid and to Jared’s utter astonishment, a pair of them shoot straight at the offending objects.

“Really? You can use those as projectile weapons?” Jared gapes, itching to examine the fallen feathers in his hands, but he’s not sure what the protocol is with those. The opportunity slips away fast, because Jensen hisses, stands back up and picks them up to tuck them back into his collection. He looks just as pissed off as a human would.

Is it a bad thing that Jared finds that endearing?

Also, there’s dark blue blood running from the gash across his palm.

“Oh, Jensen?”

Jensen’s eyes flick up, then he realises without further prompting that the fluid dripping on his feet is his own blood. He closes his eyes and begins licking at the wound.

“Do you have hemocyanin in your blood?” Jared asks, stashing the information away for later. Blue blood caused by a copper-based oxygen transporter. It’s quite logical if he thinks of all the pinkish-orange rocks and the electric plants scattered around here. “Makes sense, copper seems to be in abundance in this jungle.”

Jensen looks up again, hand and mouth wiped clean, and the cut seals shut right before Jared’s eyes. Jared whistles. “Man, I wish I was an exobiologist.”

In the next half an hour, Jensen looks wary to touch the capsule again, but he strays close to Jared, sometimes watching the forest with vigilant eyes, sometimes sneaking behind Jared’s back to prod at the mystery of the glowing, yet inert lines of his suit. He doesn’t seem to get it that those aren’t part of Jared’s hide.

At one point, he jolts up and runs into the thick undergrowth without any warning.

The panic that floods Jared’s body is instant and debilitating. He hyperventilates and the broken comm almost drops from his hand. Why did he run away? Is something coming? Is there an actual predator around the clearing Jared’s shipwreck burnt for itself?

Before he could do something stupid and cause himself a heart attack in the process, Jensen trudges back out of the woods. He has a spear - where the heck did he produce that? - and on the tip of it, an assortment of... something. Jared has no idea what. It looks like a garland of eyeballs and the
intestines of an octopus, arranged in an artful clash of colours.

It’s the most disgusting thing since Chad’s pitiful attempt at a Bajoran pie.

“Jay.” Jensen chirps and crouches beside him again, touching his hair (why the hell did he learn that?) and offering his find. “Jay.”

Jared resists the urge to retch. “Er… Looks tasty, but I uh, I can’t try it out right now.” He shakes his head and makes a face, leaning away.

The expression on Jensen’s face looks positively crushed.

“Aw, come on, don’t pull that on me.” Jared’s shoulders droop. That’s so not fair. He doesn’t want to eat that shit, even though he’s hungry and will need to find water before nightfall. Those berries or whatever might contain deathly toxins or parasites, he can’t eat them without a working device to check their edibility. “I used to watch that holoshow where the warp field engineer killed her ship’s crew by feeding xenobacteria to them. I know enough not to eat random fruits in a jungle.”

“Jay.” Jensen tries again, raising the repelling mix toward Jared’s face.

“No.” Jared replies firmly and pushes the spear away. “No.”

For a second, he thinks he might have disappointed his alien friend too much to recover from it, but then Jensen grabs the berries and wolfs them down himself, chewing contentedly.

“See? That’s much better. You had a nice snack, I got to live a little longer. Win-win.” Jared smiles and goes back to working on his communicator. He needs to get the device online before the day ends or he’s screwed.

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As the sun begins to set, Jared’s fears are on the rise again. The comm fails to switch on. He took it apart and put it back together multiple times, but nothing helps, and he won’t have time to find the rest of his ship before dusk. He will have to barricade himself in the remains of his pod to survive another night, and he’s not sure even that will be enough. It’s too hot to move, speak or do anything but dropping into the detritus left behind by the crash and give up. Jared is so thirsty. He should have found a spring first, before doing anything else, he knows now, but it’s too late and he is too dry to hike.

Jensen is getting agitated too. He has been talking to Jared non-stop for a few minutes now. It’s confusing because it has been years since Jared heard a language he didn’t recognise at all, but the lilt of Jensen’s speech is nice and relaxing. He keeps flitting back and forth between the edge of the clearing and Jared’s slumped body, offering new berries once in a while that Jared just can’t accept without risking metal poisoning. He’s pretty sure the stuff Jensen likes contains copper.

It feels like he watches it looking down from the treetops as Jensen’s hesitancy evaporates and he grabs both of Jared’s wrists in his hands, dragging him to his feet and further into the forest. Jared sees another of those blistering rocks as he staggers forward, and he almost drops to his knees to suck on it just to see if those globs contain some water too. He needs to drink.
“Jay.” Jensen flashes his pearly teeth, but it’s more of a grimace than a smile. They need to learn how to communicate better.

Abruptly, the grip on Jared’s arms tugs and he topples over, dumped under a huge fern that has odd, thick beads stuck to its leaves. There are holes in its stems that keep blowing gusts of cool air into Jared’s face. It clears his head enough that when Jensen’s hand closes around his jaw, he resists, but he is too exhausted to keep it up. His lips open and his mouth is immediately flooded with a sticky fluid that pours out of the frond Jensen squeezes in his fist.

This drink might cost him his life, but Jared can’t stop swallowing it.

After, when the fern’s orange bead is nothing but a wrinkled raisin, Jensen sits beside his hip, looking worried like a teenager nursing a sick tribble back to health. Maybe he truly is a teen, who knows.

“Don’t you have to go home?” Jared mumbles. He is getting dazed, but he watches it with half-lidded eyes as Jensen grumbles something in his language and unfolds his cape from his shoulders to wrap it around his pulled-up knees. It’s the perfect camouflage, Jared notes, the fronds of the fern they are resting under have the exact same colour and pattern. Are they settling down for a nap?

There’s no way he is going to relax enough to fall asleep, but he doesn’t dare get up yet either - there must be a reason why Jensen chose this time and this spot to lay him down. He will - He will just rest his head for a moment. Just for a few minutes. Just until Jensen gathers him berries again.
A Solstice resolution

Chapter Summary

Jared's weirdest Solstice starts with a comb.

Chapter Notes

Christmas delayed me a little bit, but I think I made up for it with the word count. :) I hope all of you had a nice time these past few days and that this chapter will be a good read after the holiday. The next part will be posted only in January, so happy New Year in advance! :)

The first time Jared saw purple vomit, he laughed himself silly in schadenfreude because it happened after a secret party Jeff threw without the permission of their parents and he knew they were going to be livid when they saw the state of the carpet. He hated Jeff more than anyone that year, envied him with a ferocity he never felt before, and seeing him dishevelled and frantic was like a Solstice present come early.

Seeing purple puke again isn’t quite as much fun.

“Jay.” Jensen whines next to him, anxious as all get out, but unable to communicate with anything other than the inflection of that one little word. Watching as Jared convulses on all fours must be like giving a kitten cow’s milk thinking it’s nutritious, then seeing her suffer because she can’t digest it.

Only, this is a bit more serious than a kitty with a bloated stomach.

Metal poisoning is even worse than Jared initially thought. The fern’s secretions did contain copper, just as he predicted after his cursory assessment of this jungle. His blue vomit mixing with blood and turning ugly purple is a sight to behold, but he can barely keep his eyes open long enough to see where it ends up. A pair of arms snakes under his waist, holding him up, then he hears a wail similar to the one from last night. It makes his ears ring and he groans, wipes his mouth with a trembling hand. There’s nothing more in his stomach but acid. If it won’t stop coming out, he’s going to die of dehydration pretty soon.

“Jayjayjay.” Jensen shushes him, and it makes Jared wonder if he understands the function of the word after all or just keeps repeating it for the sake of saying something in Jared’s language.

A few feet ahead of them, there is a plant with doormat sized green leaves and lethal-looking thorns along its veins. With growing horror, Jared realises there are hundreds of six-legged, starfish-shaped creatures sliding down those leaves and running straight in his direction, a swarm of alien ants. They are either precognizant and smell the scent of death on him or they are hungry for the contents of his stomach pooling on the ground. He has a sort of morbid interest in finding out the answer, but the opportunity is quickly taken away from him as two pairs of hands manhandle him up and around.

Oh.
“Don’t let him kill me, please.” Jared mumbles as Jensen turns him around by the shoulders to face the blue-eyed buddy of his who must have been the one to answer Jensen’s call. He’s the same one who intercepted Jared’s attempt at stabbing Jensen in the neck, so odds are he isn’t all that keen on rescuing Jared’s sorry ass. His expression looks hostile enough to support that assumption.

There’s a quick exchange of rhythmic words, then something soft is pushed under Jared’s sagging body and he starts floating.

He is suspended on some sort of stretcher, but it doesn’t have a frame. He can’t imagine how it could be sufficiently firm to hold him up, yet plush like a duvet under his head. His palms feel around on the material - it has a texture that’s furry and smooth at the same time. When he presses down with his fingers, the fabric undulates and sprouts furs, otherwise it stays hard and silky. It must be the hide of an animal, perhaps an amphibious one. Fur to battle the weather on land, sleekness for optimal speed underwater.

It’s funny how his mind keeps whirring even though he lost all his energy to move.

Jensen and his friend keep hissing at each other as they struggle to climb up a tree with Jared hanging as dead weight between them. Blue Guy must be thoroughly fed up with the situation, because he grabs Jared’s ankle and moves to tip him out of the stretcher. That results in an awkward, sluggish flail on Jared’s part and an outraged snarl on Jensen’s. They make it up to the first thick branches without another incident, but both aliens’ hackles are raised from that on. Quite literally too - Jensen’s lovely metallic feathers are so tense they could cut glass.

Jared can’t figure out why they are adamant on carrying him on the canopy layer instead of the forest floor. They could overbalance themselves anytime and the fall from this height would guarantee fatal injuries. At least, for Jared it would. Jensen’s species might have thicker bones than he does.

*Maybe they are avoiding the electric bushes,* he muses, then he forgets he is even supposed to think about something, because the view above him takes his breath away. A net of boughs looming over them are covered by an epiphyte that has dozens of flowers in orange-red bloom, a living wildfire. Its petals are connected by strings of gossamer that lights up each time an insect flies into their trap. A pair of pink-transparent butterflies descend towards Jared’s face, but Jensen bats them away with a vehemence a human would preserve for pesky mosquitoes. Perhaps they truly are bloodsuckers. Through the dead leaves of a tree shot by lightning - or possibly electricity from below - Jared gets his first glimpse of Saxet-d’s night sky. It’s much brighter than he’s used to due to the three moons reflecting Saxet’s light at the same time, but without photopollution, the stars are still visible, constellations of an unknown system spread out over a rapidly darkening canvas.

*What a complex tide effect those moons must cause,* he thinks as his eyes trace the curve of the smallest’s waxing crescent. Another one is full and sits deep red in the cradle of a thin cirrus cloud, passing through the planet’s shadow. Jared hasn’t seen a full lunar eclipse since he moved to the moonless New Earth colony to study and he didn’t even realise how much he missed it until the first teardrops roll down his cheeks, clearing tracks in the dirt coating them in all likelihood. He feels Jensen’s fingers under his ear, wiping up the salty wetness gathering there, then he hears sniffing. Even though he must be on his deathbed here, he feels the itch of a laugh in his chest he doesn’t have the energy to let out. Jensen doesn’t know what tears are.

“You’re a lucky one.” He mumbles and blinks away the blur only after they pass the gap in the dense foliage, not wanting to miss a second.

Drifting through this jungle on this impossibly comfortable stretcher feels like swimming, gliding along in a beautiful ocean, submerged without having to surface for a breath. The world seems to be drizzled with glow-in-the-dark glitter. Blue Guy stops and puts his end of the hide down for a second.
to devour a squishy fruit on an overhanging branch. Jensen lowers the other side and leans over Jared’s head, peering at his face with his round, phosphorescent eyes. His neon camouflage melts into the background with shocking excellence in this new section of the forest, where he must have come from in the first place. Jared averts his eyes to block out some of the brightness emitted by the feathers, the sea-green freckles and those irises before his head gets split open by the headache pulsing in his temples. He needs to drink, but he can’t, because anything he touches might be chock-full of metal or toxins. It’s a catch he won’t be able to scramble out of without the divine intervention of a spaceship stumbling upon him.

He might not see the sun rise again.

As they resume their climb, Jared’s mind slips into an altered state of consciousness where he can’t fully comprehend what’s going on anymore, but he appreciates the stunning wonders that keep popping up in his dream all the same. Because this is just a dream, right? A hallucination of sorts. Jared must have gone with Chad and smoked Orion weed at that campus party. He is now passed out in his bed and the egg-shaped structures he sees on the other side of the clearing Jensen is lowering him down to are the manifestation of his growing hunger.

“Jay… Jayjayjay.” Jensen coos at him and drags him off the stretcher.

Bristling, his friend rolls it up and puts it in the bag slung across his shoulders. Jared has just enough time to admire how practical that equipment is before he’s lifted by Jensen’s straining arms, his body crumpling in on it itself as his boneless limbs loll around like a ragdoll’s. The faint sounds of that chirping laughter wafts over to them from the cathedral-sized creepy eggs they are approaching, and Jared swears he is going to kill his best friend if he wakes up to Orion chicks drawing dicks on his growling stomach.

Then Jensen stumbles and falls on his face.

“Shit…” Jared mumbles as his head hits the ground and he already feels a lump forming.

Blue Guy is fighting with Jensen again, probably about leaving Jared here to the Saxet-d equivalent of vultures because he’s too fucking heavy to carry. Blinking at them with bleary eyes, Jared decides he’s going to call him Tom because Jeff had a friend by that name who hated when Jeff’s loser of a little brother tagged along just like Blue Guy seems to be pissed off by Jensen’s insistence to keep him around. It’s an apt name, he thinks.

Lying in the off-white grass of the clearing, he sees nothing but the brick-red sandals and toga-type dress of the alien that has run over to them until it leans down to prod at the neon line running along the side of his spacesuit. Of course. Jared would roll his eyes if he could keep them open long enough. Dehydration makes him seriously sleepy. The alien seems to be a girl, and a very young one at that, with tawny hair similar to Jensen’s and glowing lilac eyes and feathers -

- and she has Jared’s portable food tester in her tiny hand.

The food tester.

Jared’s reaction is instant and desperate, emerging from the deepest roots of his survival instincts, overruling every higher cognitive function - he lunges at the girl. Burning the last ounces of energy in his system, he wrenches the device out of the poor kid’s grip and clutches it to his chest as Tom’s alarmed blows rain down on his back. The little girl wails, pinned down under his massive body, then something hits the back of his skull and the world fades into darkness.
When Jared starts stirring again, he has a bitch of a headache behind his eyelids and waves of nausea rolling in his stomach. *I did go to that party then,* he notes with relief, thinking about the soothing glasses of water he is going to drown himself in as soon as he can get up, when he realises the incessant beeping noise above his head isn’t part of the normal sounds of a dorm room. His eyes open to slits, an anvil of dread settling on the center of his chest.

“No.” He almost sobs at the sight that greets him. He didn’t wake up from his nightmare. He might not be asleep at all. He might be in a hospital, laid up in a coma he will never recover from.

Jensen, his alien friend and apparently his savior, is sitting cross-legged by his shoulder and frowning at the green feather he must have plucked from the plumage around his neck. The beeping comes from the duranium box in his hand that makes a warning signal whenever the copper-heavy fluff comes anywhere near its sensors. Unsurprisingly, Jensen’s feathers aren’t edible for humans.

Jared needs to drink. In his sickness and the smoldering heat, he lost too much water to make it through the night without replacement.

“Jensen…” He mumbles through his parched lips, his mouth full of cotton.

He can’t see much without raising his head, but they have definitely moved into some kind of building. There’s a dome-shaped thing beside Jensen’s thigh that provides them light. It makes the dust around Jared’s body glitter - and he realises it might be sawdust, if Jensen’s people cut those intriguing trees that grow in the area. Judging by the lack of platforms he could call a bed or a couch, he figures he’s in a barn or garage of sorts instead of a room.

At the sound of his ghostly voice, Jensen startles and puts the tester aside.

“Jay?” He makes a quiet sound in the back of his throat, then pulls a transparent glass-sized pearl out of a sack similar to Tom’s. He bites the tip of it, then raises it to Jared’s face to pour its contents down his throat.

Jared barely has the strength to push it away and reach for the tester.

Uncomprehending, Jensen puts the feather into his hand and tips Jared’s head up with his long fingers. It seems to take forever to get it across that Jared needs the device first, not the drink, but when it finally registers in Jensen’s brain, there’s a clicking noise behind his back, metal shifting over wood and dirt. Jensen jumps and shields Jared from the newcomer, dropping the pearl to the ground.

“Mack!” He hisses and Jared can see just enough to spot the little girl from before hanging around by what he presumes is the entrance of the barn. Her lilac eyes flicker on and off, probably from fear, but she strays closer until Jensen whistles at her. They start a rapid-fire conversation then that Jared doesn’t even attempt to follow. Instead, he digs his nails into the dirt and moves himself inch by excruciating inch until his hand closes around his device at last. With his heart pounding in his throat, he directs its sensor at the pearl in the dust. *Full analysis.*

The tester chimes and spews out a bucketload of data Jared doesn’t care to understand after he reads the first three words. *Sodium-rich water. Potable.*

It’s water. Waterwaterwater!
A drink, a consumable drink at last. Thank Fate and God and the goddamn Bovian Emperor, whoever it is nowadays.

Almost tearing up again from the sheer amount of relief streaming through his veins, Jared grabs the pearl and damn near swallows it whole in his haste to get at its contents. The fluid gushes down his throat like a flood of salvation, cool and thick and wet, so wet. His esophagus expands and constricts as he swallows huge gulps of it and he feels it in his chest as the burn begins to settle. Never in his life did he love water more. He doesn’t want to drink anything else from now on, only this manna from heaven. Just let him drink it all day and he’ll be happy.

“Jay…” Jensen gasps with something akin to wonder and fishes out two more of the lifesaving pearls from his bag, piercing each of their weird coverings with the sharp tip of his canines before helping Jared empty them into his mouth. Jared closes his eyes and lets it fill him up, head supported by Jensen’s hand, until he hears the shuffle of feet creeping closer.

The girl - Mack, Jared is going to call her Mack - flinches when Jared’s eyes open and rest on her dead on, but she growls in a surprisingly adorable way when Jensen lowers Jared’s head to the ground to shove her back towards the door. They must be related, Jared concludes, because their features are similar, and they make the exact same presumably rude gesture at each other, snapping their fingers beside their right ears. Mack’s small lilac fluff tenses up and shoots at Jensen, a pair of feathers bouncing off his waist without as much as scraping the skin. Jensen snorts, staring with an unimpressed look at Mack’s stormy face.

Jared chugs down the last drops of his third pearl and slumps, grinning up at a ceiling he can’t see, in spite of his now bleeding lower lip that split a little from the dryness. He has taken an enormous step away from the Reaper, thank fucking Fate. With the tester in his possession now, he might even find something to eat, once he regained some of his strength. He flips his hand over to feel around in the glittery sand and he bumps into Jensen’s lone feather discarded next to his supine body. Unwilling to waste the opportunity, he grabs it and tucks it into the pocket of his spacesuit to examine its structure later. The variety of uses Jensen seems to have for it is nothing short of amazing.

Fed up with his - sister? cousin? - Jensen turns back to him, rambling in that lilting voice of his with the occasional teeth baring and head touching thrown in for Jared’s sake. Mack comes closer again and stretches out a wary hand until it traces a lock of Jared’s hair. She snatches it back, just like Jensen did the first time Jared laid eyes on him. For a brief moment, Jared wonders what it must feel like to grow up thinking you are alone in the universe only to have a ball of fire drop down from the sky with an unknown creature trapped in it. It must be insanely terrifying. He can’t even imagine what kind of crazy theories his new friends’ minds are conjuring up right now. He hopes they won’t mistake him for a god, because if there’s one person who shouldn’t be in that role, it’s him. Especially since he knows that… Anyway. Suffice it to say that Jared isn’t a suitable candidate for a divine position, not at all.

Jensen touches Mack’s elbow, tells her something, then says “Jay.”

“Jay.” She repeats, getting it almost perfect at her first try. Then she touches her head and bares her teeth.

“Seriously?” Jared levels a tired look at Jensen’s very literally beaming face. His voice sounds weak as hell, but at least his vocal tract isn’t dried stiff anymore. “I hope you didn’t teach the whole village that shit.”

Abruptly, Jensen’s gaze turns intense again and he leans forward, pupils dilating as he starts closing in on the corner of Jared’s mouth.
“No, no, no. No.” Jared intervenes, thumbing the blood away as fast as he can before Jensen lathers his mouth in healing saliva. That would be one hell of a way to top off this spectacular day. Slobber-kissed by an oblivious alien. If Jared gets out of this alive, he’ll have to write a book under that title. “I’m okay.”

The barn door bangs open with a loud thud, and there stands a guy who couldn’t deny he’s related to Jensen even if he tried.

He marches in without a hint of hesitation, his blue plumage tense and quivering to shoot off, a spear in his hand. Jared has no doubt his weapons would cut far deeper than little Mack’s fuzzy feathers could ever. The guy seems furious, clenching and unclenching his fist until he reaches Jensen and hustles him across the building despite his vehement protests. Strangely enough, he doesn’t seem to care about getting Mack away from Jared, lest he hurt her - no, he just whisks Jensen away into a corner and pats him up and down, examines every last body part and feather until they tense up so much that one actually nicks his finger. Only then does he draw back and loosen up, practically collapsing against the wall with his eyes closed.

_Babysitting gone wrong,_ Jared thinks and surprises himself with the amusement he feels as Jensen goes off on a disgruntled explanation. At least, he assumes this is what’s going on here. It could be something completely different altogether. And it seems like a bit of a glitch in his theory that Blue Relative doesn’t so much as bat an eye at the girl still playing with Jared’s hair.

“Jay.” Mack smiles at him and touches her head as he tries his best to sit up, however shaky his limbs are. Unfortunately, that brings the unwanted attention of Blue Relative back to them. Jack? James? No, Josh. Jared is going to call him Josh. He looks like one.

“Mack.” He makes the same word to address the little girl that Jensen did, but he sounds angry and dangerous. His arms are covered by scars, mementos of a hunter or warrior. He doesn’t seem much older than Jensen, but the differences between them are staggering. Jensen’s skin is smooth, pale and beautiful, his tattoos perfectly symmetrical. They look like they have been done with utmost care and precision. Josh’s, on the other hand, are darker and mismatched on a skin that bears the effects of a permanent tan caused by years spent working in sunshine. It’s possible that Jensen is more of the intellectual type, while his relative is Saxet-d’s stereotype of a jock, but it’s peculiar nonetheless.

When Mack refuses to come to him, he takes a few cautious steps closer and cranes his neck to examine Jared the best he can. Jared grits his teeth and pushes himself upright, glancing between Jensen and Josh when the little girl begins jabbing her fingers against his spacesuit again. Why the hell are those lines so enticing to these creatures?

He has no idea if it’s wiser to hold eye contact or to look away, but he doesn’t have time to decide before Josh raises his spear and points it at Jared’s neck, threatening. He makes a questioning sound.

“Dude. I don’t speak your language.” Jared clears his throat, then rubs at the bare sides of his neck. “I know. I don’t have them. I get that it’s weird. But - But I won’t hurt you, okay?” He explains slowly, forcing his tone to stay calm and steady. He has nothing but the cadence of his voice to pacify this dangerous guy.

Jensen growls and stirs into motion, skirting around Josh, but he is yanked back and away as soon as he gets closer than ten feet to Jared and the girl. Josh looks torn between piercing Jared with the spear but endangering Mack and pulling her away but risking an attack against himself and Jensen. Jared is helpless to watch how it pans out, but the eventual solution the guy chooses leaves him gaping and absolutely bewildered.

Josh grabs Jensen’s wrist and marches him out of the barn, pulling the door shut after himself.
He left Jared alone with the little girl. Isn’t he worried? Why did he take Jensen? Jared can’t make heads or tails of it.

“I’m sorry for tackling you.” Jared turns to her and holds up his open palms, intending it as a sign that he has no weapons or ulterior motives.

She ducks her head and stays alarmingly still. Waiting for a blow? Praying?

“I - I mean…” He doesn’t know what he means or how to get it across. It’s infuriating - he hasn’t been in this position since freaking elementary school. It has been years since he met someone who couldn’t understand any language or kinesics system he is able to express himself in.

He nudges Mack’s arm, trying to prompt her into reciprocating, but instead of earning himself a high-five, she jumps and roots around in her toga until she produces half a dozen gadgets from Jared’s escape pod, most of them ruined by the crash or useless by themselves, like his multifunctional comm charger. She whimpers, biting the back of her hand.

“Thank you. I didn’t mean to scare you.” Jared murmurs and takes his stuff away.

Jensen’s buddies seem to have found the wreck of his capsule and raided it if these widgets ended up here. Sadly, that doesn’t mean anything for his survival. He can’t build a new comm from scratch. But he can still make an effort to befriend the little girl who collected these things for him. For lack of a better option, he touches his own head and grins at her when she raises her eyes. He suspects smiling is an expression that exists with more or less the same functions in Jensen’s culture, based on how fast and often they seem to respond with it. What a fascinating example of convergent evolution.

The excitement on her face comes back lightning quick as she reaches for her plumage and plucks a feather, licking its base then pressing it against Jared’s bare neck.

“Oh.” Jared lets out a laugh and moves to give it back to her when the barn door bursts open again - and an entire group strolls in. Jensen, Josh, an adult female with Mack’s hair and eyes, and a blue male who looks about ready to kill Jared with his bare hands. Or rather, with the bigass gutting knife he’s holding. Marvellous.

Mack leaves Jared’s side to run over to the woman who picks her up and tucks her head under her feathers, covering her eyes. Jensen is bringing up the rear, sullen and irritated. He tries to slip through between Josh and the woman who Jared suspects is his Mom, but he is intercepted and held back by Josh’s tight grip. The old male at the front stomps with his left foot and kicks up a cloud of dust in Jared’s face.

Jared bursts into a coughing fit, hacking up half a lung while the guy - Jensen’s charming Dad, probably - advances on him and crouches down to examine his spacesuit more closely. He presses the tip of his knife to the rip in it and pulls, tears it further open, watching the reactions. Jared is frozen in place, afraid to shift a single finger. This one is a no-nonsense guy for sure. He won’t hesitate to peek under Jared’s skin if he wants to check what’s inside. It reminds him of a Nautican creature he had the misfortune to encounter in a simulation, affectionately dubbed “Alan” by his fellow strugglers. This “Alan”, if he’s anything like the Nautican predator, most likely thinks he’s cutting Jared’s skin clear off his flesh.

He’s not the only one to think so.

Jensen makes a desperate sound and twists himself out of Josh’s grip to fling his body at Jared,
pulling him away from his Dad and the knife. Alan panics and makes a grab for Jensen’s elbow, and to everyone’s apparent surprise, gets a feather into the center of his hand for his troubles. Jared stares in stunned silence as his probably insane friend launches into a ramble, petting Jared’s hair and pushing his head this way and that to show off his unprotected neck. To show how harmless he is.

“Jay.” He says and makes his usual friendly gesture, watching Jensen’s face.

Slow as molasses, Jared mirrors the motions and croaks out a tiny “Jensen?”

He doesn’t expect the instantaneous effect it has on the female section of this little family.

Jensen’s Mom and Mack rush over to him, cooing and stroking the lines of his suit, rubbing saliva along the edges of the tear in it. Alan growls as he picks the green feather out of his hand and licks the wound, but he is ignored by the ladies while Jensen just grins ear to ear at Josh, who must be his brother if Jared is right to assume this is the standard conjugal family unit that’s the most frequent among Federation races.

“Oh hell, no.

Jared is in the process of being adopted as a pet.

Two days ago, if someone told Jared he would survive a starship crash, a compound fracture, metal poisoning and a hostile alien’s knife, he would have snorted and said, that would be my brother, dude. Now, sitting in a round room in the tip of an egg-shaped house, he considers the possibility that some omnipotent being is playing an elaborate joke on him.

Jensen’s room is on the third… well, third level of the house, the single nook this high up. It’s accessible only by getting through a wrought-copper front door and climbing up a tree-like structure that makes up the beams of the building. Obviously, Jared couldn’t make it by himself, weak as he is, so he had to suffer the uncomfortable experience of being carried by the guy who wanted to flay him alive for touching his son.

It’s easy to see how Jensen grew to be so agile up in treetops, but aside from the exercise factor, the layout is absurd. All the other bedrooms seem to be on the second level with easy access through a ladder, while the ground floor is reserved for dining and everything else. It leaves Jensen with a ridiculously big place he can’t leave without someone else hearing it. There must be a reason behind this Jared has yet to understand.

In spite of its size, the room is pretty cozy and warm. There’s a round nest in it hanging from the ceiling that’s full of soft furs and has a light curtain around it for protection against stray insects. On the side of the room opposite the hole Jared had to climb through to get here, a large oval window provides a higher vantage point than most of the trees in the vicinity. Jensen guides him over to it as soon as his Dad leaves, pushing him down into the fur-covered nook and pointing at something in the distance. His night vision must be better than Jared’s, because for the life of him, he can’t see what the fuss is about. All he sees is a faint shimmering far behind the clearing’s edge that might be
some body of water. Is that the source of the lifesaving pearls Jensen is offering him again?

“Thank you, Jensen.” Jared mumbles and takes the gifts, chugging down another handful of them. His next problem is going to be a pressing one soon enough if he keeps drinking, but he tries not to think about that yet. He needs a breather first.

Jensen putsters around in the room, tossing a bunch of copper plates on the round table holding the dome lamp that provides them with light. Teenage boy piling up his dirty plates? Jared suppresses a laugh, but then he notices the concentric circles of notches on them and his eyes widen in interest. Is that writing? Is this race literate? Oh, how he wishes he could be here to study them instead of trying to survive an unexpected accident.

Contradicting his suppositions, Jensen’s people have much more advanced technology than their tribal appearance suggests. They use electricity in complex and inventive ways, for things such as a sort of holovision set Mack showed him that allows projections to transfer touch and smells. How the hell did they figure that out, but not space travel? Was it their military that shot Jared’s ship down?

And then there is this thing that Jensen is frowning at, a round board and a set of pebbles that look like a modified, glowing version of the Old Asian go game. It’s also rearranging the playing pieces by itself. Does it work with some ancient wireless technology?

Jensen makes a ‘tsk’ sound when the pebbles stop moving, repositions a few, then presses something and shuts all the lights off at once. The darkness leaves Jared disoriented with nothing but Jensen’s neon light as guidance. He watches the sea-green dots dart from point to point around the room as Jensen goes about his nightly ritual, then he hears the rustle of clothes and a whole new bunch of freckles pop up in his vision. Ugh. He didn’t need to know the coloration spreads beyond Jensen’s chest.

Jensen’s eyes settle on him one more time, then he shakes himself and the glowing stops, leaving the room pitch black and silent.

“J-Jensen?” Jared gulps, doing his best not to have a panic attack. He knows he is safe. He should just lie down in this cot Jensen has appointed to him and get some normal sleep. Rationally, he is aware of the fact that he is at the safest place anyone could find around here. But his senses have been running in overdrive for almost two days now and they can’t stop. They can’t stop hallucinating starfish-shaped monsters crawling in from the window, or electric fur sending shockwaves into his fingers to stop his heart, or slimy slugs slithering towards him from the floor. He feels defenseless and so, so overwhelmingly alone that he can’t - he can’t take it. He can’t.

“J-Jensen?” He repeats and slides off the nook, shuffling forward while horrible scenarios play in his head like an old-school movie, of accidentally cutting his toes off with alien scissors or shocking himself with the go board. He bumps into something furry - the bed, it must be the bed - and he startles so bad that his gasp might have resonated down to the first floor too.

Jensen stretches and shifts closer to him to pull the drapes back.

A second invitation isn’t necessary at all. Jared holds back the pitiful sound that pushes at his throat and climbs up into the nest, curling up and hiding his face in the crooks of his elbows. He is pathetic.
A total failure. No wonder he isn’t… like Jeff. He should be put down by some merciful soul. How can anyone be this fucking scared in such a secure home?

Jensen grumbles something and makes a half-hearted attempt at pushing him off, then gives up and fiddles around with something instead. Curious despite himself, Jared peeks at him and sees him pull out a big egg-shaped thing from a cranny in the wall Jensen hasn’t noticed before. The thing emits a barely perceptible light - it might have been made of one of those glow-in-the-dark trees they passed on their way here. Jensen ponders over something, then his face lights up and he presses a finger to the thing’s surface. A drawer pushes out and… a freaking jellyfish falls out of it and onto the bed.

If it wasn’t for Jensen’s quick reflexes, Jared would have found himself plastered on the floor in one second flat.

“Get that away from me, throw it away.” Jared rasps, his heart threatening to crack his ribcage.

“Csitt.” Jensen shushes him in his lilting language and puts the jellyfish on his own head.

Turns out it isn’t an animal at all, but a comb. A comb that cards through hair without any further assistance, running on some kind of automatism. It’s harmless.

That doesn’t mean Jared is going to let Jensen use it on him.

“Jay.” Jensen makes a petulant whine at his resistance, but throws the tool away after all. He rests his head on a bundle of fur and watches Jared wheeze for a second before stroking his own fingers through Jared’s locks to calm him down.

Jared keeps his eyes wide open until the petting slows and the glow in Jensen’s eyes switches off again. He smells like rainwater and a sweet Arcadian flower whose name slips Jared’s mind, a mix of the wilderness and home. He’s the kindest being Jared has known in a very, very long time. Possibly ever.

Eyelids drooping from the sheer weight of exhaustion, Jared glances at the faint glow of the watch sewn into his suit and sees that the day of the Solstice celebration in his homeworld is just about to start. Presents, champagne and holo-trees, crowded transport ships, asteroid explosion show. Family discussions of Jeff’s awesomeness. His Mom asking about grandchildren again, about the genes he should choose in case he pays for their genetical engineering. Getting drunk on spiked Old Earth-style eggnog.

Lying here with Jensen’s soothing exhales as the only sounds to keep him company, he can’t say he misses it. This isn’t such a bad way to ring in the new Quarter if he banishes the memories of the last days to the recesses of his mind. He’s not the superstitious kind, but the gratitude in his heart pushes him into something he hasn’t done before. He makes a Solstice resolution.

Come hell or high water, he is going to get back home alive.
A mystery

Chapter Summary

Jared takes care of pressing matters, notices some strange anomalies, learns a new word and meets the big boss.

Chapter Notes

I hope all of you had a good start of the new year. :)

From now on, anything said in Jensen's language is going to be written in the font I used here.

Jared wakes up to an impromptu shave.

Okay, that’s not exactly accurate. He wakes up to the fluffiest, most comfortable pillow under his cheek morphing into blades that cut away stripes of his two-day scruff. He winces and scrambles back, swiping a finger across his cheek and frowning when it comes away red. It’s a lesson well-learnt - Jensen does not appreciate being mistaken for Andorian goose down.

“You nicked me.” He grumbles and glares at the deflating feathers mere inches away from his face. He feels like death warmed over and probably looks it too, but Jensen doesn’t seem bothered by the dirt covering him, he just leans forward and grabs Jared’s chin to lick his cheek in apology.

The only reason why Jared lets him is because an infection, even in such a small wound, could grow into a serious illness in this foreign environment, and he has no idea how well Jensen’s people are able to treat those. It’s much better to suffer through an uncomfortable lick and heal in a minute than dying from a fever two days later. And if Jensen doesn’t make a big deal out of it, why would he? Human etiquette doesn’t apply here. It’s apparent that this race doesn’t regard oral contact as intimate, Jared should get used to it as an everyday occurrence too. Jensen’s people might not even find it pleasurable. Do they ever kiss each other?

“Jaaaay.” Jensen snuffles and blinks at him with drooping eyelids. Not a morning person, huh?

He burrows deeper into the pelts on his bed, even though it’s hot enough that Jared feels droplets of sweat beading on his forehead. He looks lazy and serene with his tousled cowlicks standing up in all directions and some of his semiplumes bent in the wrong way. It must have been one of those that cut Jared’s skin, because they are stubbornly sticking up despite Jensen’s attempts at smoothing them down. He plucks one out and tries to toss it away, but it sticks to his fingers, refuses to fall. *Some kind of magnetism, probably*, Jared muses as Jensen peels the feather away only to have it stuck on his chin. That could be an explanation for the shifting tension in this species’ plumage as well.

When the fluff falls off at last, Jensen mutters a word so harsh that it can be nothing but a curse. For
some inexplicable reason, it pulls a snorting, graceless laugh out of Jared’s chest. After a second of wide-eyed staring, Jensen grins back, genuine and surprised. In the planet’s deep orange dawn, his smile blows a cooling lightness over Jared’s skin, makes the heat easier to bear. Something familiar stirs up an ache low in Jared’s gut that he hasn’t felt in an embarrassingly long time. He chooses to think it’s gratitude.

“Good morning.” He murmurs, pointless words tumbling down his tongue just to chase away the longing in his ribcage. Ironic, isn’t it, that he has been craving the normalcy of waking up with someone only to get it the least normal way possible. It should make him sad, but he can’t quite focus on how pathetically empty his life is when he can celebrate that he still has it. The exuberance he lost in the last few years hovers just an arm’s reach away - how tragic is it that it seems to come back now?

Before he arrives at one of his usual maudlin conclusions, his stomach growls like an outraged tiger awoken from cryosleep. Which is pretty damn loud - he had the misfortune to assist with an interplanetary animal transport for some bonus credits, and it left an impression, so to say. It’s only when he stops pressing on his abdomen that he realises Jensen interpreted his hunger as something else altogether.

“No, I’m not - Jensen, I’m not angry.” Jared sighs. Words are futile in their communication for now, he knows, but it doesn’t mean he stops being frustrated about it.

“Grry.” Jensen growls back, trying to repeat Jared’s last word. Although he isn’t scared - his feathers are soft - he shoots Jared a wary look and chews on the back of his hand. He’s standing and fully awake now, and - yep, stark naked. Great.

“No need to be nervous.” Jared clears his throat and does his best not to check if Jensen has humanoid organs below the waist too or not.

Forcing his gaze to stay fixed, he reaches out to pull that poor, abused wrist away, but to his surprise, Jensen mirrors the gesture and extends his own arm to press their palms together. Except for the colour and the size, their hands are astonishingly similar. Five digits, opposable thumbs, knuckles, nails. Jared doesn’t know why, can’t narrow down the reason, but his eyes burn as he watches Jensen’s pale, dotted fingers lace through his own.

“You don’t have fingerprints.” He mumbles, then flinches when Jensen makes a curious sound, tilts his head and presses the pads of his fingertips hard into the back of Jared’s hand. “Ow, what?”

Jared’s reaction is out of surprise, rather than pain, but for a split second he’s convinced this is the bloodsucking body part he failed to find sooner. Pinpricks of sensation scrape over his skin, dig in and tug, give him goose bumps that run up his entire arm. It takes him a second glance to realise that Jensen isn’t feeding on his blood, but sunk four tiny sets of hooks into the back of his hand to keep it in place while he examines the dark hair on Jared’s wrist his species doesn’t have.

“Should have known…” Jared mutters to himself and tries to unhook the bizarre structures that must have been claws once, before evolution decided to convert them into retractable climbing aids. They don’t hurt more than kitten scratches, but removing them is a pain in the ass. No wonder Jensen always had a good grip on the branches when Jared saw him climb.

By the time he manages to twist his hand free, his bladder is threatening to burst from the pressure of all the water he drank, and he is about to die from misery. He knew this was going to happen eventually - as much as he would want to, he can’t control the speed of his bodily functions, the technology for that isn’t available yet for commoners like him. And he’s not exactly the outdoorsy type. He’s used to modern comforts, vacuum technology, heated toilet seats, waste recycling and
whatnot, and peeing on a potentially electric bush scares his jewels enough that he feels them shrinking back into his body as his thoughts swirl. And lets not consider the impending trouble of a number two, because, well. If he has to stay here for another few days, that’s going to be another issue.

“Shit.” He curses and stumbles off the bed, scanning the room for a place where he could do his business. This is the first time he truly sympathizes with house-trained dogs that have been locked away from their potty area.

There’s nothing that seems even remotely appropriate. Jared can see several egg-shaped things lying around on the floor, an oval obsidian mirror, an indoor swing - egg-shaped, of course - a gigantic egg with one side open that has various clothing items bunched up inside, and a big rack filled with copper plates. A bookcase, perhaps? But no bathroom whatsoever. Does Jensen have to go outside to take a leak?

Jensen watches him tramp around, jiggling his legs and clenching his fists, then comes over and offers him the jellyfish comb again. Then a water pearl.

“No.” Jared almost sobs. He’s going to be a pee dancing champion by the end of the day and just that notion alone calls for desperate measures.

“Toilet, Jensen, where’s the toilet?” He whimpers, giving up and outright gesturing at Jensen’s - distinctly human-looking - crotch.

Jensen frowns and makes a slow move to cover himself up. Confused, he looks down at the pearl in his free hand, glances back at Jared’s face, then at his groin, and realisation dawns on him like a veil of light.

He laughs into Jared’s face.

“For that, I will piss on your pelts.” Jared grits out through his teeth, ignoring the buzz of attraction that happy sound sparks in him.

Fortunately, he doesn’t have to resort to that petty revenge, because Jensen goes over to the empty area opposite his wardrobe-egg, jumps up, and down comes a construction that looks like an attic ladder. Leading up to a space that could be nothing but heaven as far as Jared is concerned.

Why the fuck did these people put the bathroom in the loft? And why do they make everything oviform?

The good news is, Jared doesn’t have to go back to paleolithic methods to relieve himself, because the engraved brass cones Jensen leads him to are pretty much analogous to what New Earth restaurants install. Even if these are fancy as hell, using them shouldn’t be all that complicated. The bad news is, however, that Jensen is dead set on watching how he tackles the task.

He comes close as Jared pushes his dirty spacesuit down to his waist, and peers over his shoulder, _trilling_. “Hmrr?”

“Nope.” Jared tells him for the third time and manhandles him away. “You just turn back around, buddy.”
For all his fascination with different cultures, he has never been naked in front of an alien before and he is not about to tick that first time off his bucket list by letting his new friend watch him piss. That would be sort of a Chad move, bro-bonding over urination. Even more so because Jared is old-fashioned, *ancient*, as his little sister used to tell him before he ran away to New Earth, and he believes in the sanctuary of the body. He daydreams about love and intimacy, about sharing touches and looks only with a special someone, living the late twenty-first century romance that the first wave of genetical engineering brought on. He only ever shows his naked body to people he is in love with - which, admittedly, happens a little too often and ends with him feeling used and ridiculed when he reveals his secret. Nevertheless, he maintains his values, and a nosy alien isn’t going to deter him in that. When Jensen tries to turn back again, he is prepared with his answer - he hisses and snaps his fingers beside his right ear.

Jensen stops dead in his tracks, blinking.

“There.” Jared concludes and runs back to the urinal, *finally* getting to the part where the agony stops and streams down the drain. Satisfaction trickles through his limbs and brings a smile to his lips at long last. He might not know a single word in Jensen’s language, but he has already begun to put things together and utilize whatever small details he managed to observe. He *succeeded* in conveying something, and the fact that there *are* things he is actually talented at will never stop being amazing.

When he finishes an eternity later, Jensen still has his back to him, but he is tinkering with an ellipse arrangement of buttons on the wall. It takes only a second to understand why. Some kind of shower head system sprinkles warm liquid over them and half of the room in an imitation of rainfall, complete with that earthy smell that must have clung to Jensen’s skin last night. Jared panics for a second, but the food tester he will never let go of again in this life beeps once and identifies it as water, thank Fate. He has been dirty enough that he can comb dried mud out of the hair at his nape - rinsing it away feels heavenly, even if the wet spacesuit sticks to his lower body like an irritating second skin.

Now that all pressing matters have been taken care of, Jared can relax a little at last. He discards his boots to let his feet breathe after two days of confinement and takes a more thorough look around the bathroom. It has sage green walls and a row of round windows along one wall. The slightly lowered area where the water pours down on them is surrounded by actual living vegetation for unidentified purposes. Jared can see that Jensen uses one of the plants to squeeze a gooey substance into his hand, so it’s safe to assume that’s there to provide soap, but the others… Is this what they call decoration?

There’s a thick artificial branch running along the floor and under the urinals that Jared recognizes as the drainpipe. He has a suspicion that the tip of this egg-building collects rainwater and that’s what they use and empty back into nature through the fake tree.

As he glances out the closest window, he can see other people of Jensen’s species milling around in the morning light. From this height, he spots a creek where several people are bathing and collecting water pearls that must be the products of some sort of aquatic animal. At the edge of the clearing, he spots a semi-circle of stalls that people head in and out of. One guy with dirty red feathers doesn’t bother closing the door after himself and - yep, those are toilets. Which instantly raises the question, why does Jensen have a fancy bathroom all to himself when some people are resorted to using those? Or did they build the stalls only for emergencies?

However it is, Jared will never stop being thankful to the deity who’s responsible for dumping him on Jensen instead of that gross guy out there.

While they take their much-needed shower, Jensen stays unashamedly naked and gawks at Jared’s
uncovered torso like the creepy teen he is. Well, Jared can only presume that he is a teenager, but his family’s behaviour last night didn’t indicate otherwise. In fact, it was... strange. Unexplainable. Maybe Jensen is sick or something? He’s pale enough. And the dots could just as well be signs of a rash.

Jared decides not to address why that makes him feel relieved, rather than scared of a viral infection. There’s no acceptable basis for his sudden need to know if Jensen is of age or not.

“Jay.” Jensen sighs in awe, if his prosody is anything to go by, and flattens a palm on Jared’s left peck, then proceeds to grope Jared’s upper body from shoulders to waist.

“Oh, Jesus, no.” Jared extricates himself, his fingers securing Jensen’s wrists a good ten inches away from his skin.

Jensen gives him a forlorn glare, wrenches a hand free, and rubs it all over his other forearm as furiously as he can. By the looks of it, he is trying to brush the dots off and over onto Jared’s spotless, tan skin, and Jared’s heart clenches in painful realisation. He has seen behaviour like this before.

“Oh. Oh. You don’t -” He swallows, remembering his high school friend whose only flaw was, in the eyes of her race’s society, the shade of her limbs. How often she searched for shapeshifter creatures and xeno-medication...

“You aren’t quite the beauty standard around here, huh? You don’t fit the norm.” Jared muses softly when Jensen deflates and gives him one last envious look. “Something we have in common then.”

As soon as the water starts going cold, losing the warmth yesterday’s sunshine has given it, Jensen jumps out of it and shudders as though it was liquid ice. Jared can’t help a snort. His alien friend seems to detest cold as if it was his personal enemy.

Sulking, Jensen pushes the buttons to shut the shower off, picks up Jared’s boots, then snaps his fingers beside his ear.

“You just flipped me off, didn’t you?” Jared grins and shakes the wet strands out of his face. It’s a shame he doesn’t understand what Jensen mutters in response to that, but he bets he could have learnt a useful array of swear words he could hurl at ‘Fleet cadets. Jeff always hates it when he doesn’t know the insults Jared hides behind his dimpled smiles, after all.

By the time Jared is back in Jensen’s bedroom, Jensen has a pair of honest-to-God pants on, eyes flickering neon for a second as he poses in front of his obsidian mirror. In Jared’s boots. What was the deal with the loincloth-skirt yesterday? Was that a uniform or what? And why would he put on boots three sizes too big? Especially because he doesn’t look like he has ever had closed footwear in his life. There are various headbands in his hand and a new cape around his shoulders. All of them seem to have been chosen for one specific reason - to match the neon line on Jared’s boots.

Ludicrous as it is, Jared’s ugly-ass footwear might be the height of fashion for this race. And Jensen looks like he fucking loves it. So much, as a matter of fact, that Jared doesn’t have the heart to wrestle it back for himself. Jensen can have his fun with those boots as long as they are inside. What could go wrong with staying barefoot for a few minutes, right?
What he fails to count on is a non-sentient, scaly animal pouncing on him when he struggles to make his way down to the ground floor from Jensen’s room. The fat reptilian chipmunk, whatever it is, bites into his big toe, then recoils from the taste and scurries away, the metal band around its tail twinkling. Jared is about as nimble climbing off the central tree as he was tumbling down from the yellow one yesterday, but with the additional scare - there’s no two ways about it - he plops down like a lead weight, quite possibly denting the wooden floor under his feet, while Jensen just swings down with nothing more than the sound of soft panther paws brushing dirt.

Sitting on furry ottomans at the round kitchen table, Jensen’s entire family stares at him as if he was a grossly oversized toddler.

“Hi.” Jared rubs the back of his neck in embarrassment. To his horror, Jensen’s Mom gasps and covers little Mack’s eyes. “Er… Was that inappropriate?”

Jensen makes an amused face at him and raises his own slender hand to waive it into his fluff of feathers.

Josh lets out an outraged - or horrified? - noise and stands up, shouldering his way between his brother and Jared, a rant spilling from his lips, while Jensen just clicks his tongue in disinterest. Just as annoyed, Jensen’s mom abandons her breakfast in favour of joining her sons’ argument and pushing Josh back into his seat. The scaly creature comes back, scampering down to the ground and running circles around their legs, an excited alien-puppy. It gives Jared’s boots a distrustful sniff, then whickers like a goddamn horse until Jensen steps out of them and lets it nibble on his toes. Jared grabs the opportunity to take them back and swears he will never ever let Jensen borrow them again.

When he tunes back into the commotion around him, Jared realises that sometime during her fretting, Donna pulled out a weird, ivory coloured ball and began to roll it all over Jensen’s arms. He squints at it in confusion, then his eyes widen again when he sees the sea-green freckles disappear under a layer of fine powder. So those dots truly are caused by an illness and that ball contains the medication? Or is it an alien make-up device? If it is the latter, all that fuss seems pretty odd, especially because Mack is wearing an obviously self-made contraption out of some shards of Jared’s pod and no one is bothering her to make her prettier.

The obvious double standard throws Jared for a loop. Why is it so important to cover Jensen's natural looks up? It’s hard to believe his freckles make him that ugly in his race’s eyes.

Even though Jared knows Jensen isn’t quite happy with his own appearance either, he seems to be determined to make a point, because after they settle around the table - Jared on the smallest, shaggiest chair - he dusts the concealer off himself and lets his dots glow. His father scowls, says something gruff, then grabs his gear and stomps out of the house. Jensen’s siblings look down at their plates, heads bowed.

Jared has a feeling he has become the oblivious witness of a full-blown family drama. He doesn’t understand much about this culture yet, but he knows that there is something amiss with the way these people treat Jensen. He just has to find out why.

Breakfast more or less resumes after a few minutes of tense silence, but Jared keeps an eye out for inconsistencies. Sure enough, he finds plenty that revolves around his friend, but he can’t pinpoint a common pattern in them. It’s a mystery. What he has no doubt about is that if he had been found by anyone else than this guy, he would be pushing up electric daisies by now. Simple as that.

Mack has given him two palm-sized coins, one big and warped, the other flat and sharp on one edge.
There's some kind of rabbit-sized cerulean bug on the table that looks roasted, the smaller versions of a familiar striped slug piled up around it. Jared's device cheerfully informs him that the dish is edible. He would rather eat from Chad's pie again, but not everyone agrees with his opinion. Donna handpicks some slugs to munch on them, while Mack is trying to sweet talk Josh into giving him half of its wing. Jensen, however, gets "specialty food" - an assortment of indescribable… stuff on a plate. Jared thinks he sees a few eyeball-fruits in there, but he might be hallucinating from sheer nausea.

"Jay." Jensen whispers and raises his hands, his own coins between his fingers, then makes a show of cutting a crunchy rod in half. Jared flushes, sheepish. Utensils, of course.

He knows he has to eat eventually. Some gullible people live on grass and leaves for months when they buy into the so-called herbivore diet hype that has been spreading on New Earth in recent years - he won't die from a handful of weird flavoured fruit. He's starving as it is, so he steels himself and fishes a pink berry out of the selection Jensen piles in front of him. It smells overripe, repellingly fragrant, but the food tester says it's consumable and Jared's choices are limited.

Well. It can't be worse than metal poisoning, right?

He pinches his nose shut and pops it into his mouth.

It's delicious. Juicy and sweet, leaving a minty-fresh aftertaste on his tongue. He imagines baking a pie out of it and he almost chokes on the new mouthful he shovels into himself, so hungry he can barely stand it. He eats like a barbarian, with bare hands and juice-sticky fingers, but he has no time to figure out how to use those utensils today. He will be civilized when his stomach isn't trying to digest itself. Jensen smiles at him, taking a sip of a drink that Jared's device labels as poisonous, then turns to his Mom and launches into a story that Jared would be dying to understand.

Deciphering speech just by observation is one the hardest things Jared has ever had to do in his life, but he concentrates and listens to the lilting conversation flow around him. Whatever it takes, he will be the first foreigner in history to speak the Saxet language.

The first word Jared learns in Jensen's language is water. It's the first one because Jensen talks about it all the time. He thinks Jared needs it like air, brings him bucketloads of it, and keeps saying "Water, water… Jay."

Of course, he could be saying "drink" instead of water, or any other word, really, but inscrutability of reference or not, Jared will have to start somewhere, and he decides establishing the essentials will do. He learns the name of the eyeball fruit too, because "food" would be a bit trickier, then he picks up on the compound word rain, which has a first morpheme and water as a second. Jensen kept pointing up at the storm that broke out three hours ago when he said it, so Jared suspects it's "skywater" and stores the first half away in his mental lexicon as sky.

The first word Jensen learns in Jared's is no.

"No," Jared tells him for the umpteenth time when Jensen brings the apparently docile reptilian to him so that they can become friends. "I love dogs, but that isn't one. No."

They are holed up downstairs in the holo-room, which seems to function as playroom and appointed baby-sitting area at once. Josh is their put-out supervisor while the parents are out doing whatever.
He has a piece of the hull of Jared’s capsule and he has been tinkering with it since breakfast. The concern is ridiculous, but, of course, Jensen’s parents have no way to know that the only danger around Jared is getting in the way of his flailing limbs when he stumbles or forgets not to speak with his entire body. Although he may look threatening because of his size, there isn’t a violent bone in his body.

Jared looks at the clock in his suit. It has been eight hours since they woke up and the sun is already setting to the soundtrack of pouring rain. Or is it just the storm worsening? Jared doubts it. He realised early on that Saxet-d rotates much faster around its axis than Jared’s homeworld and New Earth. It’s possible that a day on this planet takes as long as fifteen to twenty hours at Jared’s place would. He can’t say yet if Saxet-d’s obliquity is high or low, but that’s the range of time difference he estimates. He hopes he won’t have to figure out what’s the deal with longer periods - the very idea of months and years make his pulse skyrocket. A rescue ship will find him before the need for that comes, he assures himself.

He will take another day for recuperation, then he will stock up on water pearls and go search for his ship. He can’t be here for more than a week, because that would mean an intergalactic missing persons notice, and then his Mom would know, and Jared can’t bear the thought of how crushed she would be. She would think he died.

As far as he was able to discern, Jensen’s people don’t have clocks in the traditional sense. They keep specimens of a certain plant around the house to tell the time. It looks like a bleached mammillaria cactus, but it’s covered by flowers all around its surface that are attuned to the daily rhythm of the planet, which, basically, makes it a living sundial. The flowers open and close according to the plant’s circadian clock, so one look at the flower configuration is enough to know how much time is left until sunset. Jared doesn’t know how to read it yet, but he sat by one for about an hour, checking his human clock, and indeed, the plant was shifting at a measurable pace.

If he wasn’t on the verge of dying every other hour, he would be utterly captivated by Saxet-d’s flora.

From his seat in a comfy nest on the floor, he can see a plant just outside the oval window showcasing awesome hydronastic movements. It has large cup-shaped flowers that turned upside down gradually since the downpour started and began fanning out into vivid umbrellas to protect the finger-sized insects working on the ground under them. A symbiotic interaction, in all probability.

Jared is yet to see truly big or dangerous animals, but he knows they are out there. Josh’s scars look like claw marks.

Mack is showing him her own modified go board when they hear scratching from the locked front door. Josh jumps up, grabs his ever-present spear and shoves Jensen towards an egg - cupboard? - that’s just big enough to hide behind. Jared adds the over-the-top vigilance to his running tally of all the things that are awry at this place. God, he hopes they aren’t in the thick of a tribal conflict, ‘cause that would mean he is screwed.

The door creaks open, but he can’t see more than Mack’s curious expression and Jensen, doing his habitual nervous tick in the nook behind the cupboard. Heavy steps come closer and closer until Josh comes into view again, and behind him, three monstrous, menacing guys with a fourth one in the middle. He’s built like a brick wall and has strong eyebrows to compliment his dark hair and feathers. His beautiful breastplates and clothes are decorated with dark green emeralds and embroidered patterns, just as intricate as Jensen’s tattoos, and he’s wearing a feather headdress with an animal’s skull in its center.

Jared has absolutely no doubt that this guy is the chieftain. Or whatever Jensen’s people call the big
He is also dead certain that this group has come for him.

The natural reaction should be a frantic flight response, shouldn’t it? Trashing, running for his life, screaming to get out through the window. Instead, Jared feels nothing but cold. Freezing cold fear in his veins, inside his brain as he stands up and steps into the guy’s line of sight, waiting for a blow, a stab, a cut, something. For the Chief to instruct his muscle men to tear him apart or drag him away to prison or a torture cave. He is an unknown element, an intruder, after all. A danger to the tribe.

Chief, whatever his name is, stalks closer, unblinking eyes roaming over Jared’s figure. Then he stops, goes eerily still, and looks up to hold Jared’s gaze. Jared has always been good at stare-downs - sometimes all he had against Jeff was his plethora of death glares and his brother, more often than it was wise, attempted to break him out of it by initiating staring matches. He knows he probably shouldn’t demonstrate this practiced ability right now. It’s foolish not to cast his eyes down while this guy is assessing him, but there’s something compelling in that dark, serious gaze. A challenge, maybe?

He doesn’t get to find out, because before Chief could make a decision and bark an order, Jensen comes to the rescue and wedges himself between Jared and the guy, his back pressed flush to Jared’s chest.

Jared is just tall enough to see over his head and observe, to his utter amazement, as the tribe leader’s eyes shift down and soften. He says Jensen’s name and smiles, showing just the barest curve of lips. He and Jensen exchange a few words, too soft for everyone else to hear, but no one dares to move. They seem overly familiar for a clan leader and a random teenage boy and a possible explanation pops into Jared’s mind with a force that leaves him floored.

What if Jensen is the Chief’s son?

That could answer so many questions and gaps in the picture Jared built in his head. The special treatment, the security, the attempts at hiding and concealing his appearance - what if it’s true? What if this tribe really is going through a war and decided to hide their leader’s weak spot? It’s a heady thought, one that Jared isn’t quite ready to believe.

“...Jay.” Jared hears Jensen say his name and he focuses back on the Chief just as he glances up and inclines his head, stepping away.

Apparently, it’s enough for the entire room to relax. Josh even goes as far as smiling, which Jared has never seen him do. The Chief raises his right hand and presses his palm to Jensen’s forehead, the heel of it brushing the bridge of his nose. It must be an affectionate gesture, the first one that definitely requires intimacy. Josh makes a strangled sound, but the bodyguards stay calm until the Chief pulls away, gives Jared a stern parting look and briskly walks out of the house.

The visit leaves everyone out of sorts. Mack runs up to her room, furiously rearranging the pebbles on her go board, while Josh gives Jensen a lecture, presumably about not leaving a hiding place until someone says the coast is clear. Jared just collapses into the nest and even lets the scaly pet press up to his hip, he’s so shaken. It sucks not to know what happened, what kind of agreement they struck up. What did they say about him? Can Jensen keep him around or are they going to come back for him once his friend gets bored with him? Is he the new toy for the Chief’s son? What about human sacrifices? What… What if they are going to kill him as part of a ritual?

When is he going to die?
He doesn’t stop freaking out until Jensen drags him back up to his bedroom and leads him to the nook again.

“Thank you.” He mumbles and curls up, pressing his fingers to the window. It feels like glass, maybe it is made of that material. If he closes his eyes, he can pretend he is back home, tracing droplets as they chase each other down in their tracks, making up stories of them competing. Sometimes he imagined if he wished for it hard enough, the dirty raindrops made it down faster than the perfect ones.

He only realises he shed yet another tear when Jensen wipes at his face and whispers. “Water?”

And despite himself, despite everything, Jared smiles. “No.”
Jared is a college kid, all right, but six hours of sleep after the day he had doesn’t cut it. Dawn comes too soon, digs shards of light into the corners of his eyes until the orange-pink behind his eyelids stings too much to bear. He groans and turns in his little window nook, one arm hanging off. He’s disgustingly sweaty - he has no idea how Jensen survives bundled up in his pelts, but he’s used to his dorm’s temperature regulating mattresses and intelligent shading system, and the small curve he’s nestled in feels like a boiling cauldron. Jared’s brain isn’t quite online yet, holding onto oblivion with all its might, but the discomfort caused by wearing the same spacesuit for days cuts through all his defences. He doesn’t know what to do. He could take some of Jensen’s clothes, sure, but that would leave him vulnerable to environmental forces he is currently protected from. Toxic materials, bacteria, anything would be able to get through to him at once. It’s bad enough that the suit is damaged - he might not know it yet, but he could be dying from a microscopic monster already. And he can’t be caught off guard lounging naked or in his underwear if the Chief decides to execute him after all.

He doesn’t have time to work out a solution. Something scritch-scratches on the floor, then tiny teeth close around Jared’s limply hanging thumb.

“Ah!” He yelps and jerks up, plasters himself to the glass behind him until the panic in his mind settles. There’s a ball on the ground in front of him, a ball of scales. It’s seamless, except for a shiny wet snout that sticks out on one side, sniffing tentatively. Jared sighs and rubs a hand over his face.

“Jensen, your pet is hungry.” He calls out and hears a weak grunt from the bed. It’s almost like a conversation with Chad before either of them synthetizes coffee, even though Jensen doesn’t understand anything but his name. Jared takes the comfort of it with an exhale of relief. He may be lost on an uncharted planet, but he has someone he can count on.

Trying to shake off his splitting headache, he staggers to his feet and goes over to the bathroom entrance. He should take advantage of the fact that Jensen seems to be a slow riser - if he can do his business fast enough, Jensen won’t attempt to peep on him again. He pulls down the ladder and starts climbing when his scaly alarm fights down its initial fright and runs after him, yipping and running circles around the leg he has on the ground.

“Damnit.” Jared swears. He is going to trip over this thing if he doesn’t get it out of the way.

Reluctant as he is to touch something that’s evolutionarily coded to scare him, he reaches down and
grasps the - dog, or whatever it is - around its fat middle to pick it up. It keeps wiggling in his hands, and he holds it as far from his body as he can. When he deposits it on the edge of Jensen’s bed, Jensen blinks up at him with an absent look in his eyes. Once again, there is a feather stuck to his face.

“Feed it.” Jared points at the overexcited pet as it bounces up to Jensen’s chest.

“Idit.” Jensen repeats - well, tries to repeat, then closes his eyes again and wraps his arms around his lizard, cuddling it under his chin. The pet makes a series of happy gurgling noises and lets him tickle its belly.

“Ugh.” Jared groans and turns his focus back on making his way to the bathroom. He just - he can’t deal with watching that shit this early in the morning. He is already homesick as it is. Reminiscing about the childhood memories of his dogs would just screw a rusty nail into his heart. Who knows, he might never see a regular dog again.

For all his planning, though, he doesn’t get to finish freshening up before Jensen takes a complete U-turn and gets all perky and awake. He is waiting for him at the foot of the ladder and takes Jared’s hand as soon as he reaches it to pull him back down into the bedroom.

“Jay. Jay.” He says, gesturing at his own loose clothes with wide swings of his arms. He is wearing navy and royal blue today, colours that completely fail to bring out his eyes and clash horribly with his feathers. It takes Jared by surprise. Even though he doesn’t have a grasp on the local fashion yet, he gauged Jensen’s taste as somewhat more… harmonious.

“Huh? What?” Jared frowns, then stops in his tracks when Jensen presents him an assortment of outfits spread out on the round bed. They are different shades of grey and they all come with detailed blue embellishments, the exact same hue Jensen’s shirt is. The precise choice reminds Jared of Tamarian warfare practices and his heart does a backflip in fear. If there truly is some tribal conflict going on, Jared doesn’t want to be the exotic peace offering, thank you very much.

Jensen grabs a poncho and holds it up to Jared’s shoulders, expectant.

“You want me to wear your clothes?” Jared says, not sure if he’s asking or commenting on it just for the hell of it. Should he take the risk? Getting rid of the itchy discomfort his suit has become would be a blessing, and it seems to be important to his new friend. Are they going somewhere? God, Jared hopes it’s not because he has to partake in a ritual. “No.”

“Jay.” Jensen insists and points at the rip in Jared’s spacesuit, throwing the poncho back on the bed and replacing it with one of those loincloth-skirt things. He measures it to Jared’s hips, mumbling to himself when the fabric refuses to stretch wide enough. It’s apparent that he isn’t going to take no for an answer this time.

“Okay, okay, I get it.” Jared bites his lip and takes the poncho. He has a hunch that this isn’t going to end well, especially if he has to put on that godforsaken loincloth. “But you cannot take my boots.”
Ever since the industrial boom advanced copolymer technology set off around 2100, all human stores have been selling *fin de nouveau siècle* clothes, made of an elastane variant and intelligent fiber to shrink and expand according to the wishes of their owners. Jared has never worn clothes that didn’t fit him. But Jensen’s pants are tight at the waist and baggy around his thighs, and there’s a bit of a problem with… well, with the crotch situation. Going commando is frowned upon on New Earth and Jared feels uneasy strutting around without underwear, but he can’t keep wearing his bio-feedback briefs and a quick investigation in Jensen’s egg-wardrobe revealed that he doesn’t own any undergarment at all, so Jared has to suck it up. At least he is perfectly clean now.

Jensen has only gotten happier since Jared agreed to dress up to his liking. His green feathers look beautiful today, shiny and obviously in prime health, and he is glowing all over. He circles around Jared and grins in delight, then picks up a football-sized egg and shoves it into Jared’s hands.

“What’s that?” Jared asks and decides that the answering word means present. “Uh… thanks. It’s pretty, I guess.”

Jensen grimaces at his cluelessness and presses on the shell. It cracks and opens like a container, filled with feathers. *Feather chokers* - metallic blue and red that gleam sharply in the morning light.

Jensen makes sure to hold his attention before he reaches into the box and picks out a red one. He offers it to Jared.

“Is that mine?” Jared smiles and bends his head to let his friend clasp it on. He has no idea why Jensen plays dress-up doll with him, but he can’t help getting excited to see the reason. Once again, he wishes he came here as a delegation member, because he would absolutely love this experience if it wasn’t for the niggling dread of an untimely death hanging over him like the sword of Damocles. As Jensen secures the choker around his neck, his fingers brush Jared’s pulse point. He goes rigid as a marble statue and snatches his hands back as if the contact burnt him.

“What?” Jared raises his eyebrows at him, then blinks when Jensen’s face turns distinctly blue. “Oh my God. Are you blushing?” He laughs.

He knows the customs are different here, but his bewildered amusement breaks out of him nonetheless. How come that Jensen, who has no trouble munching on his compound fracture for a night, who licks his cheek without a second of hesitation and tries to watch him pee gets all flustered from a brush of skin? It’s fascinating.

Jensen takes back the egg-container in retaliation, scowling in spite of the steady blue hue of his cheeks. He turns and picks out a blue choker made of long contour feathers, then ties it around his own neck.

“I see.” Jared mumbles. Today’s colour code makes more sense now.

Jensen gives Jared a sad smile and pulls out a make-up ball to cover his dots with that fine powder, then loops a light blue scarf over his head and the rest of his own green feathers until all of them are covered up. Not counting his pale complexion, he looks like someone from one of those extinct Old Earth desert tribes Jared has been interested in as a kid. There weren’t many sources he had access to about the dead planet, but its history always had him entranced. The roots of our race, his great-grandfather kept telling him, we shouldn’t forget the roots. And Jared, ever the good kid, took it to heart in spite of how often his Dad would say Old Gran lost it during the Martian War. He spent countless hours in museums looking at restored photographs and films instead of training to become a hoverball champion like Jeff. He loved those pictures, those peeks into the past. They weren’t moving or anything - digital photography wasn’t on the same level as light field recorders are nowadays - but Jared has never been big on tech and he didn’t need sound or kinesics to enjoy
stories. He could make up thousands of his own just by looking at those still, lifeless printings in the stuffy booth of the museum.

Watching Jensen as he adjusts his scarf in front of his obsidian mirror gives him the same sense of wistfulness for the easy naturality his own society seems to have forgotten. Jensen would have liked Old Earth, he thinks. Before the Martian War, that is.

“Why do you want to disguise yourself?” Jared asks him. It’s in stark contrast with the way he behaved yesterday, and Jared wonders what changed.

Jensen sits into his egg-swing and starts talking to him, well, at him, and Jared knows all the answers are there, must be there, because Jensen’s tone holds the same bitterness Jared knows from his own teenage years. It’s so frustrating that he can’t reach the words. They hover at the edge of his understanding - he is reasonably sure he can determine the intonational phrase boundaries, but he can’t put the structure together yet. It’s impossible to guess the meaning of complete sentences until he figures that out. The language barrier is like a block, an opaque sheet on his mind. He can hear patterns in the prosody and he tries memorizing them, but they slip away. If only he had a universal translator at hand… That would pick up on the semantics much faster than he could ever hope for.

Jared remains lost in thought until Jensen leads him out of the house and shows him the weirdest, scariest animal Jared has ever seen out in the open. Animals, to be precise, because there are four of them around, two are pulling a wagon packed with dark brown eggs and the other pair seems to be equipped with some sort of saddle. They are six-legged and look like a neo-abstract artwork gone wrong, colours splashed over them without any symmetry. Jared can see how that could work as a mimicry in this environment, but the initial aversion it evokes in him isn’t something he can rationally fight off. He didn’t think he would see a hexapoda that big, but he should have considered the possibility in retrospect. He knew his stamina was a little worse than back home from the get-go, but it only just occurs to him that Saxet-d might have moderately stronger gravity than New Earth or Jared’s homeworld. If bigger creatures need extra limbs to support their weight, it’s a sensible conclusion.

“Come. Jay, come.” Jensen waves for him a few steps ahead. His Dad and brother are carrying the last bunch of eggs to the wagon - they must be heading to a market. And Jensen wants him to come along, apparently. But...

Fuck, Jared hates insects.

“I’d rather just chill in your room.” He tells Jensen and digs in his heels when Jensen tries to pull him along. He doesn’t expect the high-pitched, pleading chirps that follow, nor the murderous look Josh sends his way. Which he is, but the point is, not getting on that monster-ant isn’t an option if he doesn’t want to ruin Jensen’s day. “Fuck. Okay.”

As he approaches the one Jensen leads him to, it makes a hacking noise and spits out cud that looks like the cabbage soup Jared sometimes serves at the uni cafeteria for spare credit. Smells like it too. Needless to say, it’s not the best way for that alien-horse to endear itself to him. Trembling, he lets Jensen guide his hand to the saddle. It must have been made of the same material as Tom’s stretcher was. The horse-ant jerks its head in his direction and examines him with creepy black compound eyes.

Jared freaks so fast he stumbles and steps on Jensen’s toes.
I don’t - Jensen, I would rather just -” He panics, but before he could escape and run back inside, Josh is there with a big knife and an alarmed expression. Jensen glares at his brother, but the message is obvious anyway - Jared either gets up on that thing on his own or Josh will make him. “Okay. Okay, guys.” Deep breath. He can do this. No big deal, right?

The saddle turns out to be very comfortable, much more so than the one Jared tried out during one of those Historical Reenactment Days, but there are no reins or even a goddamn saddle horn he could hold onto, and the horse-ant doesn’t have a mane either. Jared is going to fall off as soon as this thing lurches into motion. He sends a desperate glance in Jensen’s direction.

Jensen pats a groove behind the horse-ant’s neck that must be the juncture where its front legs start.

“What?”

Josh snorts and exchanges a series of gestures with Jensen until Jensen huffs, blushes again, and jumps up right behind Jared.

“No, Jay.” Jensen grumbles into his ear. It doesn’t require further explanation to understand how exasperated he is.

“Well, Jen, easy for you to be like that when you see these every fucking day. Wish I could take you to New Earth, see how you’d do there, fucker.” Jared snaps, then buries his face in his hands for a moment to cool down. That was unfair. He knows Jensen hasn’t seen an extraterrestrial before, and given how similar their appearance is, he has no way to anticipate how well Jared could be expected to cope with a task.

Abruptly, their ride staggers into step and almost shakes him off his perch.

“Shit!” He curses and flails until Jensen curls an arm around his waist and secures him against his chest, which officially puts this into the top ten of the most embarrassing things Jared had to endure in his life.

Josh laughs at them and trots ahead on his own horse-ant to catch up with his Dad and the wagon as they take off on a narrow path into the woods. It’s kind of funny that the first time Jared rides any kind of animal he is also the first human in the entire fucking universe to do it on one of these.

All he ever wanted was a normal life and some kernel of recognition. Was it too much to ask for? Why did it have to be him who landed himself into this clusterfuck?

Unaware of Jared’s fuming thoughts, Jensen shifts even closer, grabs Jared’s hand and slides it into the groove he pointed out a few minutes ago. He bends Jared’s fingers, forces them to curl even when Jared goes stiff and tries to pull away, even when it feels like they are reaching into the joint of this otherworldly animal to push at its meaty flesh. Then Jared feels it - a row of knobs under its skin.

“Oh. What - what do I do with them?”

Jensen makes a purring noise and presses down in the gaps between Jared’s fingers. The hold of his other arm tightens and a second later they are galloping, flying past Josh, past the wagon, past Alan, and into the undergrowth while Jensen laughs and says all sorts of happy things that Jared regrets to lose to the language barrier. He feels around with the hand trapped under Jensen’s - and realises the hooks in Jensen’s fingertips have sunk into the horse-ant’s epidermis right where the knobs are.

“I couldn’t have done that even if I knew.” He mutters in their usual one-way conversation as they slow to a walk and wait for Josh to stop chastising them from afar. Jesus, that guy is overbearing. What the hell is wrong with him? No wonder Jensen is so freaking curious. If he’s watched over
24/7, any kind of distraction could be a godsend. But how did he end up in the forest alone with Jared for an entire day if this is Josh’s regular behaviour? Did he run away?

His questions just keep growing without any answer forthcoming. Ironic, considering how many times his profs offered to field inquiries after lectures and no one ever went up to them, thinking they knew all the details of the universe that mattered. If only he knew how little he actually understood… Thinking along the rules of one frame of reference and locked in another can screw with the mind. What he perceives as friendly might mean the exact opposite in the long run. There aren’t any handles for him to grasp and tether himself to, he is utterly lost and dependent.

Very few things appear to be constant and stable for Jared at the moment, but one of them is that Jensen isn’t normal. As their little convoy passes through the narrow path in the jungle, Josh and Allen bark at him until he stops trying to teach Jared how to control the horse-ant and falls into step between the wagon and Josh, the safest position in the line. Whether he is a teenager or not, he doesn’t have much freedom in his life. Even Mack has more than him. Maybe that’s why he is so particular about his clothes - it could be an outlet for rebellion, however small or insignificant. The other guys sure as hell don’t put as much thought into it. They are wearing the same boring outfits they did yesterday, didn’t disguise themselves at all. And neither of them wears earrings.

“What’s your secret, Jen?” Jared whispers and slouches a bit more to let Jensen look over his shoulder more comfortably. Sitting the way they are is awkward and he understands why Josh’s upper lip twitches in a silent snarl whenever Jared glances back at him, but thank Fate Jensen isn’t bothered. Jared would hate to travel with all the baskets of dead slugs or whatever it is that they are transporting.

Even though he has come from a technologically more advanced civilisation, Jared never felt more inferior in his life.

It feels as though he is Jensen’s new puppy, a compensation for the way they treat him, and Jensen is just so happy to take him out for the first time and watch his reactions to the world around them. On the other hand, they all seem to understand how much Jared looks like one of them, so they don’t quite dare handle him like an animal. A horrible idea runs through Jared’s head - what if these people practice slavery? What if he is a slave, a sentient pet, and he only just realises?

He doesn’t get to put together a tally of pros and cons for that, because Jensen’s arm squeezes his middle as they walk through thinning shrubbery and suddenly tip down into a canyon.

Jared isn’t ashamed to admit he almost faints. They walk down an almost vertical wall into a chasm with a blood-red river snaking at its bottom. Alan takes the wagon to a less steep slope, and Jared wants to scream at Jensen, ask why the fuck they don’t follow him, but his voice is locked behind his vocal cords by the adrenaline pumping into his veins.

So that’s the reason why these ant-horses have six legs. Not to battle gravity, but to climb.

By the time they get down to the river, Jared has broken out in a cold sweat and has to slump back into Jensen’s body to close his eyes for a second. He should have run away last night. He would much rather die trying to find his ship than from a heart attack while going to the fucking marketplace. Or wherever they are actually going.

“What? Water?” Jensen asks later, rummaging around in the bulging sides of their saddle. Jared opens his eyes to accept the pearl only to let out a whistle of awe at the sight that greets him.
Ahead of them, the canyon widens and the river flows into a coppery lake - the one Jared saw as his escape pod plummeted to the ground, probably. And stacked along the shore, there are several enormous buildings crowded around a harbor as far as the eye can see.

They are going to a city.

“That’s more like it.” Jared whispers. This city might have had the technology to shoot him down - and if he starts here, he has a chance to find the wreck, he is dead certain about it. The more he thinks about it - the layout, the lake, the direction he has seen this place from - the bigger the morsel of hope grows in his heart. He can do this. He sucked at SURV101, but he can do this. He knows what to do now. He’s going to pay careful attention, map out the area as much as he can, and next time Jensen takes him here, he’s going to run away. He just has to stay alive to see that day.

They stop and unpack at the market. Jensen’s family has a stall where they can pile the contents of those brown eggs into round, shell-shaped containers and supply the throngs of people on the street with fresh eyeball-fruit and striped slug. Their stand is one of the more popular ones. Alan and Josh are serving customers non-stop, haggling, by the looks of it, while Jensen is left to make sure every container is full and the goods are prepared for packaging. He isn’t allowed to interact with strangers - when a guy approaches him, Josh cuts into his way with his feathers sharpened to razors. Aside from shooting amused, cheerful glances Jared’s way, Jensen keeps his eyes on the ground and goes about his business without complaint. Frankly, it’s starting to worry Jared.

Jared himself, for the most part, is left to sit on a stool in the corner, blending into the brick wall of the building behind them. He sees now why Jensen dressed him up for this. There’s no way he would have survived this without being noticed and taken to a lab for possibly torturous experiments if he came in his spacesuit. He’s sweating buckets in spite of the cool breeze that drifts through the street and holds a salty aftertaste in his mouth. The feather choker itches around his neck. It’s going to chafe, but it’s worth it if observing the hustle and bustle of this marketplace is the reward for his endurance.

He always enjoyed casual people watching, but it has been so long since he was trying to learn more about a culture just by listening that his cogs feel rusty, unused. Nevertheless, some norms stick out to him instantly. Everytime a customer agrees to a price, they cluck their tongues, as if to say yes. Women seem to have equal opportunities to shop and bargain in the market, but none of them carry any children that looks younger than a five-year-old, which strikes Jared as odd. He doesn’t see pregnant people either. Most of the adults have tattoos, but they are asymmetrical and plain, while Jensen’s are perfectly placed and elaborate. He spots a bunch of young guys with big, ornamental earrings, piercings and white painted feathers. They are shooting disinterested glares at the people in the vicinity and look like they have no other purpose than to be an eyesore. Those are the only males wearing any jewels, and Jared is flooded by some irrational warmth thinking Jensen is a bit of a rebel at heart, taking a page from that group’s book.

Once the first rush passes, Jensen wipes the sweat from his own brow and turns to him, smiling wide and gesturing around. Jared mirrors his expression and takes another look around, scratching at the irritated ring of skin on his neck. When he turns back, Jensen is just as blue as his fake feathers and he’s biting his lip. His eyes flicker neon, but switch off just as fast because Josh is on him like a hound on the scent and hisses words into his ear.
Jared’s theory about Jensen being the Chief’s son is rapidly gaining evidence.

Unfazed, Jensen sidles up to Jared and pulls out his round go-board from a container. “Food, food.” He says and puts it into Jared’s hands.

He doesn’t mean it’s food, Jared knows. Jensen learnt to pronounce a small array of words yesterday by simple imitation, but he doesn’t know their denotations. He is like one of those cat ladies who learn how to convincingly meow but have no idea what kind of nonsense they tell their cats whenever they try to “talk”. It’s equal parts amusing and sad - mainly because it puts Jared in the position of the pet once again and he really wants to get out of this incompetent role.

But he has no clue what to do with the game pieces.

“I don’t know how to play.” He tells Jensen with a tired sigh and gives it back.

“No.” Jensen refuses and nags him until he grudgingly moves some of the pebbles at random.

It earns him the cutest laugh he has ever heard from a humanoid guy.

Jensen ducks his head down and laughs with his whole body, shoulders slumping and torso shaking with the waves of glee that rolls over him. It’s as though he is defeated by it and all he can do is going lax and letting his amusement run its course. He closes his eyes, but Jared catches a glimpse of light under his eyelids that fills him with satisfaction. At least he is funny enough to make Jensen lose control over his phosphorescence.

A little while later they are both exhausted and bored. There’s only so much talking they can do without grasping any layer of the semantics. Jensen goes over to Josh and makes those pleading chirps again until Alan gives the boys a curt jerk of his head that must have been a sign of permission. It isn’t long before Jared finds himself in the middle of the buzzing road, hand literally hooked to Jensen’s as they cut through the crowd to follow Josh.

“Where are we going?” He asks and Jensen answers with a word that he used for the striped slugs a handful of times. So they are getting some street food, most likely.

Some people give them interested looks as they skirt around them. Jared figures it’s because no one believes for a second out here in the sunlight that his feather choker belongs to his body, but he doesn’t understand the significance of that until they reach some kind of open public space where a group of guys are cowering on a round stage. A man with long, silver feathers and a green robe holds up a pincer and the audience roars. Jensen puts the back of his free hand in his mouth again, and Jared’s stomach clenches with unease. He saw a public execution only once, on holovideo, but it was enough for a lifetime. It’s still a common practice around the less liberal members of the Federation, but New Earth and Mars banned it around the Second Enlightenment in 2080. He has no wish to witness one in person.

Fortunately, the silver man doesn’t start pulling out teeth or cutting off hands - he just plucks all the feathers off the first guy his fellows hold down for him. Okay, so criminals are punished by losing their feathers. It doesn’t seem like that big of a deal, Jared knows they can grow back, and it can’t hurt that much if they can be used as projectile weapons anyway. Sure enough, Josh gasps and cheers along with the crowd, finding it more amusing than horrible, but Jensen looks really, really sick.

“Hey.” Jared nudges him.
Jensen snaps out of it then and takes off, pulls Jared along to a side street that keeps endlessly bending. They lose sight of Josh, leave him behind in their haste to get the stage as far behind them as possible. It’s going to get them in trouble, but Jared trusts Jensen to keep them safe, even as he starts getting dizzy from all the curves around them. Living on his home planet and New Earth, he never noticed how reliant he is of straight lines. They provide perspective and a basis for his mind map, using them is instinctual. But Jensen’s people don’t use linearity at all, everything is curved, bent, round, arranged in concentric circles or contained in artificial eggs - and Jared has begun to lose his grip on his ability of localisation. Everything feels like a loop, he can’t see where things begin and where they end. God, who knew he would miss the unnatural regularity of modern architecture this much?

When they eventually stop, it’s to check Jensen’s disguise at a stand selling decorative obsidian mirrors. Off to the side, a retriever-sized furry animal is chewing a long copper rod - a metallophage. It could be the same species that gobbled up Jared’s knife. Next to the vendor with the mirrors, there’s a small cage, and as Jared crouches down to look at its occupants, five pairs of eyes zone in on him. Five lizards, similar to Jensen’s dog, and they must have just hatched - one of them has eggshell stuck to its back. They are so adorable that Jared can’t resist. He sticks a hand inside. The uh… puppies are so trusting they snuggle up to it immediately and a brave one goes as far as climbing up into his palm and curling up to nap there. Its back starts vibrating and the scales shift, almost like a massage ball that has the most awesome, relaxing setting there is.

Jensen smiles down at him and mimes sleeping, repeating a word twice, and just like that, Jared learns how to say sleep. He misses real puppies so bad it hurts.

As they wander along at a slower pace, Jared can finally get a closer look at the large tubes he saw some people selling. They contain a liquid substance, but he can’t determine what they are based on the smell, so he directs his food tester at one and finds out -

- that it contains a high dosage of the main components found in human blood plasma.

“What the hell?” He murmurs and glances around the stand. Collapsed at the foot of the closest building, a pair of unkempt, blue-faced guys are trying to stagger to their feet without spilling the last gulps of their drink onto the ground. One of them has a bleeding nose, the other has several feathers with damaged, gap-filled vanes.

“Some things never change.” Jared mutters, turning away. Too much drinking fucks people up.

They must have been the local drunkards, which means blood plasma is the booze. Jared squints at Jensen, contemplating. He remembers their first meeting in vivid detail, not like there’s much of a chance for him to forget, and he’s sure of one thing now. Jensen and his buddies were either drunk to begin with or got drunk on Jared’s blood. Which is a terribly disturbing thought, but kind of an explanation as well. Drinking his blood couldn’t have been much of a chore if they basically guzzle the same stuff as liquor in the market.

Also, Jared realises with a snort, he could be considered a walking distillery around here.

Unaware of his thoughts, Jensen pulls him to a stand on the opposite side of the street that sells numerous smelly mushes on plates, each with a big coin stuck in them. It figures that the cheap fast food is right next to the drinking stalls.

Jensen rattles off some sort of menu for him, but all he recognizes is the eyeball-fruit’s name, so it’s not much of a choice. While they wait for their turn to order, Jensen points at a large stewpot of reddish mass a plump woman stirs with a stick held in both hands. Jared can spot a striped slug and some yellow bark in there.
“Not quite my favourite snack, Jen.” Jared wrinkles his nose in disgust and makes Jensen laugh again. He’s a little surprised that the nickname seems to stick, but he likes it, even if it’s nothing close to Jensen’s actual native name.

When they do finally get their food, Jensen hands out two shiny opal beads from a bag he carries on what constitutes his waistband. Jared hopes the handful of fruit he’s munching on didn’t cost too much of Jensen’s pocket money. The cook sends them on their way with a two-handed salute that Jared rushes to mimic before someone catches on that he doesn’t quite understand the gesture system.

He is glad the disguise works well enough. Sure, they don’t go too close to most of the stands, because Jensen seems reluctant to interact with others and keeps his gaze on the goods or Jared at all times, but it’s still a big relief that if Jared doesn’t open his mouth, he can make it reasonably far without drawing the wrong kind of attention to himself.

They pass stalls filled with copper plates - books? - clothes and weapons until Jensen staggers to a sudden stop and leads them to a small alcove in the wall. A hunchbacked old woman who could have been the double of the wicked witch in Chad’s favourite holovision soap is selling trinkets there. She greets them with three fingers raised to her forehead that Jared hastily reciprocates, but Jensen doesn’t react to it. His gaze is fixed on the products and he sinks his hooks into Jared’s hand once again.

Jared winces. “What’s up?” He whispers and tries to figure out just what the hell the woman is selling.

In a woven basket, he can see various types of eggs, real eggs this time, painted with symbols and traditional patterns. There are medals hanging from the top of the stall and the table is covered by tiny figures made of blue, red, silver and lilac gemstones. Some of them resemble Jensen’s earrings. In the far corner of the stall, there’s a half-open egg-container, but Jared can’t see what’s in it. However, it’s apparent that the woman sells amulets, jewelry and religious paraphernalia. All that’s missing is a mysterious cloud to make her creepier.

Jensen strokes a tentative finger over a red earring, then pulls it back and worries at his lip. The woman says something, but Jensen just steps closer to Jared and reaches for the jewelry again. Damnit. If only Jared understood what’s going on… Is it too expensive or what?

Jensen huffs and grabs for his bag of beads, coming to a decision. The old woman flashes a gummy smile and pulls out a small sack for the purchase. Then Jensen’s eyes flick up to offer the money and she goes stock still, smile freezing off her face.

“…quetzalitzli.” She murmurs and Jensen grimaces, but straightens up. No use for keeping up the act, probably - if she knows his name, she must have recognised him. Perhaps she lives in the same village?

She spurs into motion abruptly after that, picks up the earrings and uses a metal tool to polish them off until there aren’t any sharp edges left. Jensen’s cheeks burn blue again, so Jared figures he is bothered by the special treatment he gets, being who he is and all. What’s puzzling though is how valiantly the woman refuses to accept the money. She even snaps her fingers at him, which gets an eyebrow raise from Jared, but makes Jensen shut up about paying. They are just about to flee when she grabs Jensen’s elbow and shows him something else she pulls out from the egg-container in the back.

A belligerent creature carved out of a deep green stone that Jared’s food tester recognizes as jade.

Jensen drops it on the table and turns tail to run.
They end up in an orchard, up at the highest point of the city. Away from the noise, they enter a spiral of trees in beautiful peach-fuzzy bloom, dark green leaves and black trunks that come close to how Old Earth’s concept of the afterlife was depicted in those few books Jared got to read about it. The sun is high up in the sky and pours heat over Jared’s hair, makes the shade in the garden a little personal paradise. Beyond the treeline, a pebble-shaped building lies abandoned in the pale white grass that whooshes as the saltwater wind brushes over it.

Jensen wastes no time looking around. He disentangles himself from Jared and climbs up on a tree that has an old egg-swing tied on its thickest branch. Jared only makes it up to the first bough, but he doesn’t mind it, the view is still excellent. As he leans back against the trunk, he can see the harbor and the glittering water, ships scattered on its surface like pink seashells in the sand. Jared’s family has never scraped together enough credit to visit a vacation moon, but if he lets go of his apprehension long enough, he can imagine he is here with them, posing for one of Megan’s holovids or hiding from Jeff and his overpowering perfection.

“I like this place. Do you come here often?” He calls out for Jensen, but all he hears in reply is the whistle of leaves dancing in the breeze. “I used to do this a lot after I got the news about Jeff and… you know, everything. I always hid in trees. Thought if I wished hard enough, the test results would change by the time I got back into the house.” He sighs. “People say I talk too much. They lose interest after a while. Would you still listen to me if you understood?”

There’s a rustle above and first one, then two slim legs appear in Jared’s field of vision. He tilts his head back and stares up into Jensen’s attentive eyes, one level above. He snickers and pulls on a bare ankle. “Come back down already.”

Jensen doesn’t, but it’s fine, Jared is an expert at filling silences, whether it’s the one in his head or the quiescence of the real world. He babbles on about his perception of the city and shares his speculations about the abandoned house behind the orchard until the tree shudders under him as Jensen jumps one branch lower. He is holding an oval sheet, something akin to paper, which he must have bought at the mirror stand when Jared wasn’t paying attention. His fingertips are smeared with the pulp of a fruit he has in his other hand and his hooks are protracted again - he has been drawing with them.

“The sketch isn’t much, just a few lines and shades, and a carefully placed dot with some writing Jared can’t read. He turns it around in his grip, trying to make some sense of it that doesn’t point to Old Earth-style avantgarde until he finds the right angle and it clicks in his mind.

“Is that… my nose?” He squints and shakes his head, but no other way to see it, it’s his upper lip, nose and the dark circles under his eyes, a bit too much realism. “Dude. Why?” He laughs in embarrassment and rubs the pointy tip of it reflexively.

Jensen’s gaze drops and he turns blue again.

“You are weird.” Jared grins, even though if he looks at it, technically he is the weird one. He’s the
intruder in Jensen’s world. “Stop drawing me. No nose, Jen.”

“No nozgen.”

Jared points at the center of his face. “Nose.”

“Noz.”

“Close enough.” He sighs. “I forgot how exhausting this can get.”

Uncomprehending, Jensen snatches back the sheet, drapes it over his thigh and starts scratching three fingertips over it at once. How the hell could anyone draw like that, Jared has no idea, but it seems to be an effective technique, because a minute later he is staring at the recognisable depiction of the very orchard they are sitting in.

“Jensen.” Jensen says and points at the figure he drew into the egg-swing. He takes back the paper and sketches on a row of footsteps leading to the house. “Jensen.” He repeats.

“Yeah?” Jared raises his eyebrows. Where is this going? “You used to live here?”

Jensen launches into a story, but Jared has nothing but a helpless look and a small smile to offer once he’s done with it. All that got through is that Jensen is sad about it. Perhaps he didn’t want to move, wanted to stay in the city, in this serene garden and stunning house. Didn’t want to be sequestered away into a room with no more than a faraway glimpse at the water.

“I knew you didn’t look like a farm boy.” Jared elbows him, hopes his company is enough to help.

Jensen closes his eyes in discontent and throws away the fruit, slumping forward until the crown of his head is pressed to Jared’s shoulder.

“I know.” Jared lets out a long, calming exhale. “We are going to learn it, okay?” He clucks his tongue, imitates the vendors.

“Ay.” Jensen repeats listlessly. This way it almost sounds like they’re having an actual conversation.

Jared takes a deep breath of the harbor’s salt mixed in with Jensen’s fragrance and tilts his face into the sunshine. “Okay.”

“O-kay.”
A dance around the fire

Chapter Summary

Jared has a dilemma, Jensen talks and they go to a "party".

Chapter Notes

I can't seem to keep up with my usual schedule... I blame my thesis supervisor. :)

In this chapter, the boys start talking, but it's not yet perfect and Jared gets even more confused.

As far as Jared’s standards are concerned, Jensen is a goddamn genius when it comes to painting. Don’t get him wrong, Jared has seen plenty of people do much better, depicting the world in perfect detail, but none of them did it with their bare hands. What Jensen does with his fingers is almost prehistoric in technology, but contemporary in artistic value. Human artists don’t use paint, coal or graphite anymore, they work on screens with holo-tools, nothing corporeal. Art has long since evolved beyond canvas and paper, left the physical world. Something like this is a marvel. Not even children draw this way, they get age-appropriate sketch pads instead. Paper isn’t a common product anymore, at least for first class Federation races. It’s antique and expensive. Hell, the only reason why Jared recognises the material is because he is a museum-geek and aspiring exolinguists need to learn traditional handwriting in their first year. Although his field has nothing to do with modern art, he knows one thing for sure - if he were to sell Jensen’s “doodles” on New Earth as his own work, he would earn himself a fortune for reinventing classical art.

Of course, his admiration doesn’t necessarily mean Jensen has artistic talent. It’s a byproduct of their cultural differences. Jensen would likely be just as much in awe over a simple human hobby he hasn’t seen before. Still, watching Jensen produce masterpieces as if they were nothing is the best entertainment he had in weeks.

“Sun.” Jared repeats after his friend, staring at the perfect concentric circles Jensen’s ink-covered hooks left on his oval paper.

They are lying side by side on the floor of Jensen’s room, drawing with a syrupy substance that smells like the orchard. It’s raining outside in fat, reddish drops - whatever causes the colour of the lake and the river, the clouds must have picked it up too. Jared isn’t convinced it’s not toxic for his skin, so he doesn’t mind at all that they spend their third day in a row inside. Since the stunt they pulled at the market, running away, Josh hasn’t let them leave the house. They are grounded like misbehaving human kids in the early 22nd century. It’s annoying, on one hand, because Jared doesn’t think either of them is a child. Okay, he doesn’t know Jensen’s age, but whatever counts as the cusp of maturity for these people, Jensen must be close to it. He doesn’t look all that younger than his brother, and Josh seems to have complete independence.
On the other hand, being grounded isn’t such a terrible punishment when the company is the best he had since - well, since forever.

“Ink.” Jared grins at Jensen and snatches the paper away. They have been playing this guess the picture game for hours now and Jared’s mind is floating in a pleasant buzz of new words. Spending days glued to each other’s hips has its advantages. Armed with a decent enough vocabulary, they can carry a primitive conversation now. This is where it starts getting fun. “Give ink.”

“No.” Jensen flashes a cheeky smile, guarding the ink pot, then squeals when Jared’s clean fingers dive under his cloak and flutter over the ticklish spot between his shoulder blades.

This is weird, Jared is well aware of that. He shouldn’t be touching someone he has only known for a week at such a place. It’s intimate for humans. But Jensen has a completely different concept of touch and intimacy, and Jared’s reserves are dropping at the speed of light. They are already past non-erotic blood drinking, sleeping in the same bed, face-licking, showering together and handholding - what’s next, platonic naked cuddling? The worrying thing is that he would no doubt go along with it. Maybe, it’s how his mind tries to adapt to his new environment, taking up these people’s customs.

Or, a tiny, guilt-inducing whisper suggests in his brain, it’s Jensen himself. It’s hard to imagine doing something like this with Josh or Mack. Even with Chad, there’s a certain limit they would rather not cross, where it starts to get flirtly and awkward. Jared has no idea if he and Jensen are flirting or not. If they are, it’s insane - after staying an “exo-virgin”, as Chad so eloquently called it, for twenty-three years, this is the worst fucking time to start playing with the idea.

And not the best person to do it with either. While not a kid anymore, Jensen is more likely than not underage, and Jared feels like a creep for the fleeting warmth that runs through his body whenever they touch. This is the first time he feels attracted to an alien and he can’t help wishing it wasn’t happening. This is like… hostage syndrome, right? What was it’s eponym on Old Earth… Stockholm, yes. This must be a sign of Stockholm syndrome, he reasons with himself. Not real attraction, only the manifestation of his gratefulness.

“O-kay, o-kay!” Jensen gives up when he laughed himself sick and goes limp with the biggest grin on his bright blue face. The warmth of his blush spreads all the way down to the point Jared’s hand is pressing on. He yanks his arm back as though that heat hurt.

“See, Jen.” He diverts the attention quickly, before Jensen realises how flustered he is. Not that they are attuned to each other’s clues - Jared still finds himself baffled whenever Jensen shrinks away for some unfathomable reason.

Dipping his index finger into the ink, he tries drawing a chicken and some eggs. There’s no guarantee Jensen will recognise them as anything. For all Jared knows, there might not be any birds living in this jungle, let alone something similar to a chicken, and he has his doubts about his artistic abilities too. But after a week of living on fruit, his stomach craves protein with a vengeance and his best chance - not counting the insects Jensen’s family eats - is finding an actual nest of eggs.

When he points at the chicken, Jensen’s face shows a tell-tale frown of confusion. No recognition there, only curiosity. The eggs, however, pull an enthusiastic reaction Jared certainly isn’t fluent enough to understand.

“Hey, slow down, buddy.” He chuckles and bumps their shoulders together playfully. In the pinkish hue of the storm clouds, Jensen’s full lips look like an enticing candy. *They must taste sweet,* Jared muses a split second before he wrenches his gaze away. Goddamnit, he is a teenager with a crush. This is the last thing he needs right now, attachment. He’s going to leave soon, run away and find his
ship or die, he doesn’t want regrets and longing to sour his departure. He’s habitually bad at keeping a tight grip on his feelings, but he resolves himself to doing it this time. Falling for Genevieve was a mistake - falling for Jensen would be a disaster.

With those foreboding thoughts in mind, Jared points at the eggs under his unrecognisable chicken, watching Jensen’s mouth as it moves just to learn the shape of the word better. It’s a rational reason, he assures himself.

“Eggs.” He repeats and nods. He picked up on the affix that makes nouns plural, but he has a hunch it can also change the tense of a verb. It’s still confusing as all hell, but Jensen is smart, he might recognise it even if Jared butchers his agrammatic sentence. Here goes nothing.

“Give Jay eggs.” He says and mimes taking a huge bite of something and chewing.

Jensen gives him a scandalised look. Yep, he definitely understood. “No! No...eggs, ...slugs and fruit, Jay, no eggs.”

Even though he missed a few words here and there, the meaning is clear enough. They don’t consider eggs food around here, which is a damn pity. “I guess that’s a no to omelettes then.” Jared snorts, amused despite himself.

He should have expected this, in retrospect, given how obsessed these people are with the shape, almost religiously so, but it still comes with a pang of disappointment that he either goes back home thin as an ascetic or mans up and eats what they put in front of him. Munching on arthropod exoskeleton it is going to be then.

“God, I miss red meat.” He sighs and daydreams of the steaks their cook-bot used to make back home. Thick and spicy with just the right amount of smoky smell… He always imagined they tasted like the ones people ate in the dusty diners of the American South when the continent was still habitable, before the Martian War.

“Josh.” Jensen says when he is done with his newest sketch - it’s once again the orchard and the pebble-house with the swing Jensen seems to love. Josh’s figure is standing a few feet away from a tree. Behind its trunk, a smaller boy, a child, is crouching in the grass. Above them, three sets of concentric circles show the moons.

“Jensen.” Jared hears the obvious, then what he assumes is a personal pronoun. “Me.”

“Okay.” He nods. Jensen’s expression is serious, devoid of the cloak of levity their past hours draped over them. Jared purses his lips in concentration. He knows he is going to hear a story and he bets it’s the same one Jensen told in the orchard, but he might not be ready to understand it yet. “Josh and Jensen in orchard. Night.”

Jensen clucks his tongue yes. “Hide.” He says and bites the back of his hand, for show this time.

Jared blinks. “You always hide like that?” It makes sense that it became a nervous habit then. Did he have to do this a lot as a kid? Muffling his noises by biting his own hand? It’s both sad and scary at the same time, because it means there was something to hide from.

Jensen turns back to his work and draws an animal in front of Josh’s figure. It’s some freakish mutant lion, long claws, sharp teeth and a mane of spikes. It doesn’t have a tail. There’s a band around its middle and tied to that, a leash. Which is held by a guy in a long coat and a mask. At least, Jared hopes it’s a mask. To think there are people or creatures out there looking that disturbing makes him shudder.
Jensen coats his hooks in ink again and sketches flames on the house. “Fire.” He says.

“Christ.” Jared mumbles to himself.

What kind of political conflict did he drop into? Attacking a family, setting their house on fire... And why the hell does it seem to be centered around Jensen? The thought gives him a wave of anxiety. He is no good in a fight. Bar brawls, wrestling, a few punches once in a while he can do, but risking life and limb scares the shit out of him. He has a complex about it. Easy to guess why - but just because he shaped his identity around the fact that he will never be allowed to become a member of the Fleet, he shouldn’t have turned into the polar opposite of a brash cadet. Yet here he is, trembling at the mere possibility of being caught up in a tribal war.

Jensen says the animal’s name, then runs his fingertips down along his own arm. “Josh.”

“So that’s how he got his scars.” Jared grimaces in sympathy. The mutant lion’s claws must have transferred some kind of venom into his skin the remedial saliva couldn’t work against, he assumes.

“I’m sorry, Jen.” He shakes his head. Where were Jensen’s parents? His father with that bigass knife? Was there more than one attacker? “How did you even get out of there?”

Jensen doesn’t understand, but he draws another figure, a man with a long spear and a broad, bare chest. He’s drawn with bulging muscles that bring the hint of a smile to Jared’s lips. The picture reminds him of the Old Earth Comic Book Days the museum back home used to host for children. “Chief.”

“Oh.” Jared gasps in dumb realisation. Why wasn’t that evident immediately? Of course, who else would Jensen have a hero complex for?

“Mutant lion...claw...Chief.” Is what he comprehends from the sentence that follows and from the scratching gesture Jensen makes on his chest, he guesses the Chief’s breastplates have more than a decorative function. Then he watches as Jensen acts out an over-the-top death scene. It would make him laugh, all the gurgling and rolling around, if it didn’t actually happen in real life. “Kill.” Jensen adds at the end. Or was it “dead”? It isn’t easy to distinguish between verbs and adjectives yet.

“Chief kill mutant lion and man.” Jared attempts to string together.

“No.” Jensen wriggles his nose. Jared has seen him do it before - is that the local equivalent of shaking one’s head? “Chief kill...mutant lion. Man...run.”

“Oh.” Jared says once again, like a broken record. So the freak criminal ran away. Did he want to kill Jensen? Feed him to his leashed monster? Jared never understood how someone could harm a child. Even if that child is connected to a political figure. That’s his only explanation, a political cause - it’s apparent that something is amiss between Jensen and the Chief, and his blood relation theory still fits. How come it wasn’t Alan who saved the boys? Was it really the Chief who was closest?

“Chief...Jensen.” Jensen says, and Jared’s mind supplies a guess for the verb in the middle - save. The Chief saved Jensen.

Something ugly and not quite right stirs in Jared’s ribcage that he frantically tries to trample back down. He should be grateful, not jealous, for Christ’s sake. That guy saved his friend’s life. Without him, they wouldn’t have even met. But the feeling lingers and sets off an unpleasant ripple in his belly, seething. It’s a mix of hate and admiration similar to what he feels for his brother, and it gives him an idea. He is going to call the guy Jeff in his head and be done with this Chief nonsense. He’s
Satisfied with the semi-conversation, Jensen gathers his ink and papers to put them away, a dreamy expression on his face. He glances out the window and smiles to himself, a faint blue tinting his cheeks against the pinkish, stormy backdrop of the sky outside, and Jared has to force himself to close his eyes and rest his forehead on his hands before the emotions clamoring inside his heart get the best of him.

A new hypothesis is knocking on his mind’s door, but he refuses to think about it. Even if New Earth didn’t ban sexual relations between people with an age gap bigger than twenty years, he would find that idea utterly repelling. It just sounds horrible to him. He isn’t going to consider it. Different social norms or not, it can’t be happening while he is around to witness it.

“Hear?” Jensen calls for him from his swing, knees pulled up to his chest. A cowlick of his blondish hair sticks straight up from behind his ear, and Jared wants to hit himself to quash his desire to smooth it down. Jensen is smiling as he rocks back and forth, waiting for him to check out the device he’s holding in his hand. It is, unsurprisingly, round and shaped like a platter, and it beeps when Jensen taps it with a finger. Then the room erupts into a cacophony of sounds - drums, pipes, roaring and noises too otherworldly to place.

Jared startles, hand flying to his heart to keep it inside his body. “Shit.”

Jensen’s answering smile suggests he wants to laugh but refrains from it for Jared’s sake.

“Don’t laugh at me, you ass.” Jared groans, even as his own lips start curving up. He can’t help it, Jensen’s moods are contagious to him. He caught himself mirroring him down to a tee multiple times today. It’s embarrassing, and whenever it happened before it usually led straight to clinginess and being called overbearing. He needs to get a grip on himself before he leaves.

“Is that what you call music? It’s awful!” He yells over the noise as he marches over and grabs the device, pushing buttons on it at random until the song or anthem, whatever it is, stops and gentles into a different melody, soft tunes and the strumming sounds of a chordophone instrument. “Much better.” Jared exhales in relief.

“While this isn’t synesthetic music, -” He starts, knowing all too well he’s talking to himself, but he wants to say it anyway. “- I don’t miss hearing its smell and, uh… I can see you better without chromesthesia.” He admits quietly.

Call him old-school, but he does like classical-style music, where all sensations are simple and free, unconnected to each other. He always felt like modern synesthesia-inducers lock up his imagination, force him to choose a specific route of associations and interfere with his perception of the real world. And he hates how he can’t dream his own way if he falls asleep in a headset.

Jensen wraps his arms around his pulled-up legs and stares up at him as though he understands, head resting on his knees.

“Not this again.” Jared rolls his eyes, but to no avail, of course. He gets it, he must be the most interesting thing Jensen has ever seen, but he doesn’t do well under that silent scrutiny. His limbs seem to twitch and fidget on their own accord from restless energy and his mouth blabbers on without permission. “I like this one, it reminds me of 20th century classical music, you know? Without the vocals of course. Hey, can you sing? I sound like a caterwauling cat when I try, but I bet you have a nice voice.”

He rubs the back of his neck and Jensen’s gaze drops, slides away to look at the slowly brightening
sky. A stab of guilt aggravates Jared’s already struggling mind. Jensen looks so content and happy, having a friend around all day long, and the certainty that he’s going to ruin that feels wrong. He has to go home, he knows - but to what is he going back? His life isn’t exactly compelling when he’s not lost in a misclassified planet’s jungle. Researching Tamarians with Chad, then moving back to Mars just to field questions about how awesome Jeff is aren’t too stellar outlooks. But I don’t belong here, Jared thinks ruefully as the music device changes tracks again and blares a new song, something lively and fast.

Jensen glances back at him and he is overcome by the sudden need to make the most of these last few days, to enjoy them, before they go to the market and he runs away.

“You know what?” He grins, pulling Jensen to his feet. His worries can wait, he decides, choosing the sweet lull of denial for now. “We should dance.” He declares and performs his ridiculous, patented time-traveller dance moves he learnt from the hours of Old Earth 2D movie footage he gobbled up as a moody teen. They always get him in the ladies’ good graces, goofy as they are - which only occurs to him when Jensen throws his head back and laughs, body shaking. The triumphant joy crowing in Jared’s heart has nothing to with that, he tells himself. It’s just a happy day, that’s all. One of the best.

To Jared’s disappointment, Alan doesn’t let them come to the market the next time he goes, and he isn’t afraid to use harsh words to get it across either. Jensen gets sullen and silent after that rebuff and spends the morning playing with his go-board, ignoring the entire world. Then he comes over to Jared’s nook and passes half an hour stroking Jared’s hair and whispering secrets in that alien tongue of his. He is so lonely and sad, no wonder he jumped at the opportunity to take care of a clumsy pet he can talk to and share even the most mundane of things with. Too bad Jared will ruin even this for him, for them.

Since Josh is gone, they could probably bribe Jensen’s appointed babysitter to go out and get some fresh air, but only Jared seems to have any interest in that, so he gives up on it pretty fast. This morning clocked in his tenth day on the planet and he has already begun losing his grip on the date. How long has he been here in standard time? A week? His Mom must be still hoping then, right? How long does it take until they close a missing person’s case? He doesn’t know, can’t remember if they taught him that at school or not.

His growing despondency combined with Jensen’s sour mood does none of them any good. Not even the permanently excited lizard dog breaks them out of their blues. With nothing better to do, Jared descends the tree and stretches out on the floor of what counts as the living room, feeling even more like a useless pet than before. Maybe he should wander out by himself, see if anyone comes to collect him. He could explore the village and make some mental notes on their agriculture - he saw a group of women earlier coming out of the forest with a wagon full of harvested crops, but he didn’t have the opportunity to watch what they did with it. He should go investigate.

He has just made up his mind about it when Jensen comes bounding down from his room in a hurry. Since the last time Jared saw him, a couple of minutes ago, he acquired a new pair of earrings and lost the headband he put on when they got up. He exchanges a few words with their guard that Jared doesn’t catch, then turns to Jared and pulls him up, leading him to the door.
So they \textit{are} going out after all. Thank Fate.

Two hours later, Jared almost wishes they stayed inside instead. They trekked into the jungle on a narrow path between electric bushes and hissing, blistering rocks, then up on a cliff so steep Jared wants to lie down and die at the top of it. Yeah, stronger gravity, he tells himself as an excuse for his laughable stamina and collapses on a patch of off-white grass that, for a change, doesn’t seem swarmed by invertebrates. From the corner of his eye, he can see their guard as he picks a slug off a tree to snack on it. Ew.

Jensen ignores both of them in favour of climbing even further up, on a structure that looks like a sanctuary. Jared pushes himself into a sitting position to follow him, but freezes when he spots Jeff himself posturing up there, next to a massive statue made of green stone. It depicts a man on one knee, feathers around his neck, wrists and ankles, and a crown of skulls on his head. He looks down on them all, holding up twelve fingers, six on each hand. There’s a spear at his feet.

If Jared had any doubt left that this culture is quite violent after all, it’s cleared now. That is unquestionably a war god who decorates himself with the bones of his victims. Charming.

When Jensen gets to the statue, he makes the two-handed salute of a goodbye, then bows his head and lets Jeff touch his forehead like he did last time. They talk for a while, alternately desperate or worried, and Jared wonders if it’s an argument he’s witnessing. If his first theory turns out to be true, then the tribal war isn’t going too well and they need to gain the favour of their war god somehow. The fleeting notion that he is the human sacrifice and this is his big day runs through his mind, but no one actually pays attention to him, so he discards it with a huge breath of relief.

If it’s his second theory that applies... Poor Jensen. He doesn’t seem to be a willing participant at the moment.

After half an hour of fighting, Jensen’s shoulders slump and he hops up on the pedestal, legs dangling like a kid’s. Jeff grabs one of his ankles and snaps something shiny in place around it. Jared’s blood boils. If that’s a manacle, if that guy is putting Jared’s friend in chains -

But it isn’t. It’s an anklet - golden and elegant, adorned with tiny green stones.

“Please tell me that’s not a wedding present.” Jared growls to himself when Jensen says his goodbye and comes back down to walk back to the village. He’s jiggling his leg every other step, irritated by the unfamiliar weight, but doesn’t say a word. Jared knows he has no right or place to be angry - really, who is he to these people? No one, just a trespasser from outer space - but he feels something for Jensen, gratitude, friendship or sympathy, whatever, and it makes him hate everything that causes him such obvious discomfort.

If only for the sake of his own peace, he has to get to the bottom of this. “Jensen... Alan’s family?” He mangles a sentence, cringing.

Jensen’s reply is as patient and cryptic as ever. “Body, yes. Feathers, no.”

“Your feathers aren’t part of the family?” Jared huffs. That’s nonsense. He must have mixed up the meaning of the words again. Disappointed, he kicks a stone into the undergrowth and sways further away from the trees when something furry scurries away from its path. “I’m messing this up, aren’t I?”

“I do not understand.”

Jared snorts, racks his mind for a second. He hopes he’ll get the hang of interrogative words soon,
because communicating like this is a pain in the ass. “Feathers?”

“My feathers are the Chief’s.” Jensen answers without a blink of hesitation.

“What?”

“The Chief has my feathers...the Lights come, Chief gives my feathers to...City. Twelve anklets.” Jensen bends his leg to indicate the accessory.

It’s one thing that Jared only understood half of that sentence, but he can’t even make sense of what he did comprehend. Twelve anklets? Lights? “I lost you, man.”

“Chief says I can dance alone.” Jensen adds, oddly apprehensive about it. “Man...not child.”

Well... That answers the maturity question at least. Maybe the anklet thing is part of a coming-of-age ceremony? Let’s hope for that.

Jared’s heart clenches, trying to warn him of an impending break. His crush is growing to epic proportions and it’s going to hurt like a bitch to rip it out the next time they go to the city, he knows now. But what else is there to do? What else? He can’t stay and Jensen can’t keep him. They have separate lives, going opposite ways. Jared has to go.

Less than ten hours after the walk in the sanctuary, Jared is dreaming of eating candy floss clouds and flying to the rhythm of a waltz when Jensen shakes him awake in the middle of the night.

“Hm?” He snuffles. He can still see the glorious sugar fluff ahead, he doesn’t want to leave it.

“Come. People. Fire.” Jensen grunts as he hoists him up with a grip around his torso. Jared, like a zombie that feeds on affection, snuggles into his feathers, for which he’s unceremoniously dropped back on the furs.

“Dance. Drink.”

“A party?” He moans in pain at the thought of alcohol, then his mind informs him all the liquor he could get here is basically his own blood. Half-asleep as he is, it doesn’t sound distressing as long as he can keep his eyes closed. “Am I the keg? Do I really need to be awake for that?”

Unaware of the moronic questions spilling from Jared’s mouth, Jensen makes his usual chirping pleas that no one ever seems to resist.

“Ugh. Jesus. Not cool, man.” Jared groans and - literally - lets himself fall out of his little nook and crawls across the room to find the outfit Jensen no doubt prepared for him on the bed. He is so tired it feels like he is going to die of sleep deprivation.

“You invite people to a party before it starts. Not when.” He grumbles as he pulls a poncho over his bare torso without more than a cursory look at it. He’s getting used to sleeping in his single pair of boxers, then changing into Jensen’s clothes so that he can wash his underwear in the morning. It’s not like they are going anywhere where people would consider him indecent - and he already stashed his spacesuit into a sack he stole from Jensen’s closet. He’ll put it back on when he finally leaves the
Jensen is gracious enough to help him arrange a feather choker around his neck, then climb down the “stairs”. He seems gleeful and thrumming with energy - he must have been going stir crazy since the mishap at the market. Jared has to admit he senses it too, the hum of a celebration seeping into his bones.

Only when they get close to the bonfire at the very centre of the settlement does he realise that it’s an actual humming sound that creeps into his body, not only a figurative impression. Around the fire, a dozen cloaked men are murmuring in a tight circle, stepping closer then backing away from the fire like a gaping, hungry dragon-mouth. They are wearing masks, each one with a unique design, and with a fearful jolt, Jared recognises one of them - it’s the same type of mask Jensen’s attacker wore that ominous night. Under the mask, though, it’s obviously not the same person, because Jeff is right over there, chilling on a comfy-looking raised platform thirty feet away, watching the - priests? druids? - with calm indifference.

Jensen stands on his tiptoes to whisper into Jared’s ear. “Kill.” He says and gestures at the masked men. Jared shudders, confused but thoroughly unnerved, until he spots something through a gap in the ring of cloaks and almost slaps his forehead. It’s a goddamn homonym, of course. Jensen didn’t mean they are about to kill someone. There is a skeleton submerged in the flames, and he just wanted to point out that this isn’t a party, but a funeral.

A weirdly cheerful funeral, but still.

When Jeff spies Jensen in the crowd, he stands up and the masked men take notice, start a different dance. The villagers quiet down and Jared blushes, tries to sink behind Josh, because this essentially shows that everyone has been waiting for them, that is, for Jared to get his ass out of bed and down to the clearing. He is so caught up in his mortification that he doesn’t see it when Jensen disappears, but his spine goes rigid from tension within a minute of his absence.

The shamans in the center stop chanting and take several steps back. Around the Chief’s stage, a group of drummers start up a quickening, rhythmic beat that builds and builds and builds until Jared thinks his pulse is going to explode with it, then Jensen jumps into the middle of the circle and the crowd cheers. He is wearing a mask too, and the very same clothes he wore when they met that fateful night in the jungle, when he saved Jared’s life. Jared has been wondering how he got away that time, but it’s not hard to compose an explanation now. The majority of the people gathered around the fire are already drunk - if Jared’s pod hit the ground during their preparations for a similar event almost a fortnight ago, their attention must have been divided between the unknown threat and getting ready for the ritual, then they got too plastered to see Jensen slinking away.

Beside Jared, a familiar blue-eyed figure murmurs Jensen’s name. Jared turns to him and realises it’s Tom, Jensen’s friend who helped him get to the village. This would be a great opportunity to thank him, especially because now he knows how, but Jared has a suspicion that his blundering words wouldn’t be welcome. Tom doesn’t look outright hostile this time, but chances are he still isn’t fond of Jared.

Around the fire, Jensen starts some acrobatic choreography, jumping over the flames and pulling some flat-out dangerous stunts. Jared gives both Tom and Josh an incredulous look. They don’t let him talk to people, but they have no problem watching him doing somersaults inches away from bright-hot embers. What’s wrong with these people? Is this what Jensen meant by dancing alone?

As the cloaked guys resume their own dance moves Jensen stops, kneels in front of the pit and plucks a feather from his neck. He holds it up, eyes glowing neon behind the slits of his mask, then drops it into the flames. As expected, part of the fire turns green until the copper burns away. When
the orange swallows it all up, the people gathered around raise three fingers each and hold them up to their foreheads. It’s what Jared chalked off as a greeting gesture, back at the market, but he falters now, unsure how to take this behaviour. What or whom are they greeting?

The formalities seem to be over after that. While the drummers pick up a new rhythm, less foreboding, Jeff leaves his podium and disappears into the darkness with Jensen. The crowd stirs into motion and join in on the dance while everyone who looks older than a ten-year-old human drops a single feather into the fire. Even Jared gets roped into the celebration when Mack grabs his arm and hangs off of it monkey-style until he gives in and makes a fool of himself with his human dance moves.

The shamans start a series of bravery competitions, including stabbing each other in the thigh without a twitch of emotion on their faces. It isn’t that big of a deal, of course, with healing saliva at the ready, but Jared can’t help but cringe when the sand closest to the fire turns into dirty-blue mud from all the blood shed there.

Swinging a giggling Mack back and forth, he doesn’t notice it when Jensen comes back until he literally bumps into him at the edge of the crowd. The light of the fire makes the shadows flicker on Jensen’s face, reflected by the sheen of sweat that covers his entire body. He’s panting and flushed, and his hair is all mussed up and tousled, but he also has a wide grin on his face as he cocks his head to the side. “Jay... like my dance?”

“Yes.” Jared chuckles, shaking his head. He doesn’t quite know how to express “it was fucking crazy, man, are you serious?” in a way that Jensen would understand.

“I can’t believe you’re cold.” He says instead, eyeing the goose bumps on Jensen’s sweaty skin. Even though it’s hell’s oven hot around here, Jensen’s body is shaking, which might be a sign of too much adrenaline - well, too much of the equivalent of the hormone. Without thinking, Jared reaches for his borrowed poncho and takes it off. He was sweating in it anyway and the fresh air feels pleasantly cool on his naked abdomen.

“I’m giving this back before you get sick.” He says and pulls it over Jensen’s head, brushing his neck just under his ear in the process. Jensen gasps and slaps him away, feathers bristling. Jared walks a few steps back before he gets bitten or clawed at. “Okay...” He gulps. “No messing with your clothes, got it.”

He doesn’t get an explanation, but he writes the sudden aggression off as an emotional after-effect of the ritual. Though Jared hasn’t seen him interact with his friends within normal circumstances before, Jensen’s strangely standoffish when a bunch of people around his age approach him to praise his performance. He doesn’t appreciate them in the slightest. In fact, he turns stoic as a stone wall and keeps backing into Jared’s body, seeking shelter in him. From what, Jared has no idea, because these guys seem genuinely nice, much nicer than frightened, alien Jared was on the day they met. Why would Jensen trust the complete unknown instead of his peers? There gotta be some serious issues with that.

One of the girls, the feisty redhead from the night after Jared’s crash, stays around to keep them company even after the others give up on getting more than a strangled grimace out of Jensen that night. She smiles at Jensen, flashes her red eyes three times in a row, then reaches up and combs through her feathers, puffing them up. Jensen’s eyes grow wide with something akin to dread. A deer caught in the headlights.

Jared would rather stay and either intervene or watch whatever is transgressing in front of his eyes, but the next tug on his arm doesn’t come from Mack. It’s Tom, urging him to step away and leave Jensen alone. Reluctant as he is, he doesn’t want to get on anyone’s bad side, so he follows Tom to
an abandoned log closer to the fire.

They plop down on it in companionable silence.

“Danneel wants...two.” Tom says out of the blue, tearing into the ghost-white grass around his feet.

“Two?” Comes Jared’s bewildered question. Two of what? Damnit, sometimes it feels like he hasn’t learned anything at all. The language is so difficult - to truly understand parts of it, the context is crucial, but Jared knows about as much as a toddler in this culture.

“Two, when...man and woman...family.” Tom tries again. Getting one set of his hooks caught in the ones on his other hand, he shows his fingers to Jared. Bonding, his gesture seems to say.

“Ugh… Mating? She wants to mate?” Jared winces. That doesn’t sound like a good idea if either of his theories are true. “But Jeff?”

It’s Tom’s turn to frown in puzzlement. “Jensen can do...girls, boys, more.”

“Polygamy?” Jared rubs the bridge of his nose. “If that’s cool with you guys…”

The thing is, he feels even worse now when he thinks about his crush. He doesn’t like polyamorous relationships - as much as he hates to use it as an excuse for anything, it is genetically coded into him, in the components of his temperament - he is possessive and doesn’t want to share. God knows Chad tried to get him laid by inviting him to orgies enough times that he knows the idea of exposing both himself and his partner like that is a turn-off. To… to think that Jensen, that curvy redhead and the freaking Chief…

Jared might as well dig his own grave if he lets himself fall any deeper.

“Hey, Ja-red.” Jensen jostles him on the log as he squeezes between him and Tom, his previous aloofness replaced by a smile. Jared sniffs, can’t help it, but he doesn’t smell sex, just the usual flowery scent of the soap-plant in Jensen’s bathroom. This dubious reassurance is enough to calm his churning insides a notch.

“Hey. Cold?” He smiles back, flashing teeth and dimples when Jensen leans into him.

Jensen takes his time figuring out what the word meant, but his eventual answer is confident. “No. Warm.”

Tom throws a handful of grass on them, perhaps annoyed that he doesn’t understand anything, and gets up to spend his time dancing with the ladies instead. Jared feels drastically better at once. When they are alone, he can just pretend nothing exists outside their bubble, that Jensen doesn’t have all sorts of problems out there and he doesn’t have to go home. He can believe, for a few minutes, that he belongs here.

“So, uh… Danneel and Jensen?”

“Danneel wants…no little me. Mate, but no child. Danneel wants the tribe to see.” Jensen drops his head to Jared’s shoulder with a hum. The empty space inside Jared’s chest aches.

Does it make him a pervert that he wants to know the word for sex? Because that is the expression Jensen is skirting around, for sure. Casual sex. An affair for popularity, if he heard right. Does this tribe value commitment? Or do they change their bed partners every month? He wonders if Jensen has any choice in the matter at all.
“I’m sure you must be quite a prize.” Jared says listlessly. Pretty, athletic and kind? That must be a winning combo for finding a suitable partner. Well, partners.

“Jensen is -” Beautiful. That’s the word he wants to find, but his mind comes up with a blank. He barely knows any adjectives, let alone something so abstract. The only word he knows that can express the sentiment is Sun, but he thinks it will suffice. “- the Sun. Jensen is the Sun.”

Instead of a bashful smile, Jensen outright laughs at him, head shaking on Jared’s shoulder. It’s an intimate laugh that shocks Jared’s system like electricity. He wants… more. Much, much more. Hearing something like that has been one of his deepest desires ever since he learnt about companionships in school. It’s ironic that the first time he has it happens in an impossible situation. Story of his life, huh?

“No. I am the forest and the rain, the wind and the river. Strong.” Jensen answers as though he took it literally. What if these people don’t use similes and metaphors at all? “Ja-red is the Sun. Ja-red came from the sky and Ja-red is…”

Something. Jared is something, but he doesn’t understand what. He managed to catch the affix for the past tense and some of the words, but that’s as far as he got in this endlessly frustrating language barrier. “Huh?”

“No dots. Big body. Long neck. Laugh.” Jensen says, slowly so that Jared can decipher the words. He goes on, probably with more conceptual terms, but this is the current limit of Jared’s vocabulary and he has to admit his defeat for today. His head hurts. Jensen carries on, gesturing with his hands, and Jared wants to stop him, but he seems happy and serene and it would be a shame to break that, however futile his words are.

“…sky?” Jared picks up on the end of the monologue, but has to shake his head, uncomprehending. Jensen hums in thought and tries again. “Jay likes living in the sky?”

“Jay no live in sky.” Comes Jared’s barely comprehensible answer.

“Speak… sky. Please. I want to hear Ja-red’s speak.”

“You want to hear me speak my language?” Jensen’s tattoos shift as his muscles flex in the moonlight. He clucks his tongue yes, as if he understood.

Jared shakes the hair out of his eyes and smiles up at the stars, thinking of rainy, gloomy little New Earth rotating around somewhere out there. “Okay.”
Chapter Summary

While Jensen keeps collecting anklets, Jared struggles not to change his mind about running away the next time they go to the market.

Chapter Notes

Super late, but super long chapter. So long, that I ended up postponing a few scenes to later chapters. I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts about this part. Enjoy! :) Oh, and there's some vague sexual content in this.

As time trickles into Jared’s third week on the planet, Jensen quiets down. His radiant smiles soften, his touches withdraw, and a new sharpness lights up in his gaze whenever he looks at Jared. He acts less like a giddy kid and more like an adult. Seems to put an effort into it, to re-establish Jared’s agency. Before their first coherent conversations, all he did was dragging Jared along into whatever activity he wanted to share with him - now, he asks. And, lo and behold, he appears to have some modesty too. Quite a bit, in fact, if his squeak when Jared walked in on him in the shower was anything to go by. It worries Jared at first, keeps him awake at night, tossing and turning in his little nook with restless self-doubt and worry. Did he mess something up? Is their friendship, their unbelievable connection, wearing off?

But by the twentieth day of his stay, he realises it’s not a bad thing - Jensen is just settling back into his normal self, into the guy he is with people he considers equals, now that the over-the-top excitement of Jared’s arrival has begun to wear off and it sunk in that Jared isn’t a potential pet or slave. That he is just as intelligent as these people are. Now that they can talk and actually get things across, their relationship changes and evens out, and, as far as Jared can tell, Jensen isn’t sad or upset about it, he’s just… different because of it. Fair enough, Jared tells himself. If his dogs back on Mars started speaking to him with evident sentience, he, too, would stop lounging around in the nude at home.

There are other consequences of this revelation though: Jared learns that Jensen can be one sassy, grumpy motherfucker if the mood strikes. Particularly in the morning.

“I don’t understand why your third arm cannot wait.” Jensen grouches, glaring at his wardrobe irritably. “Jeff called us to meet him. I need to give you nice clothes before we go.”

Jared cringes every single time he hears third arm. Unbelievable - these people have at least two words for saliva and several for different subtypes of licking and slobbering and whatnot, but they don’t have a word for penises. Well, they have the one, only it equates the male genitals to a special arm that reminds Jared of hectocotyli. He hears third arm, he thinks “octopus penis”, and that’s just not right. Jared hates slimy things. Ugh. He needs to teach Jensen some proper human lingo if they
want to keep referring to what he’s packing.

“It’s a dick. A dick, Jensen.”

“Deek.” Jensen says it like he isn't quite sure if that’s a noun or an adjective. He tends to mix those up. Yesterday, he called Jared’s hair “the brown soft”. “It can wait.”

“No.” Jared grinds his teeth together. It’s painful to keep holding it in. He can’t help it, it’s only human to wake up with the need to pee, right? He has to go, but Jensen locked the bathroom because they need to hurry, apparently, and an impressive outfit is much more important than Jared’s nonsensical human needs. “Your metabolism is different, okay? You have to pee only twice a day, cool. But I really, really have to go right now.”

With his oh-so-pretty, infuriating eyes complementing his confused pout, Jensen frowns. “I do not understand.”

“Just let me piss.” Jared yells back, but he is already laughing, dumbstruck that they are having an argument, their first one, and of all things, his full bladder is the subject matter.

He’s lucky he ended up in Jensen’s gilded cage - not many of the locals seem to have their own bathrooms. They usually take care of their business either in the communal stalls he can see from the window or in the forest. Jared has seen numerous dicks and bare butts so far and he doubts the latest one was the last. It makes him wonder what counts as obscene or sexual for Jensen’s people. And he still hasn’t got a clue how sex works for them, because Jensen never, ever touches himself that way. He’s either celibate or has kinky polyamorous orgies with Danneel and Jeff those times he goes “dancing”. Jared has a suspicion that the word is a euphemism for something. He should have better things to focus on than the reproductive customs of this species, but the thought hardly ever leaves the forefront of his mind.

Jensen scowls at him, but his lips purse and dig dimples into the corners of his mouth the way they do when he tries not to smile. “Deek.” He says and grudgingly opens the bathroom latch.

There’s little to no chance that he meant it as a playful insult like a human would have, but the mere thought pushes Jared into a giggling fit that ratchets up the torture in his lower belly. He all but stumbles up the ladder and his breathless laughter ricochets off the walls long after he finally got his boxers around his ankles.

“You have to wear what I give you!” Jensen calls after him, but immersed in his relief and amusement, Jared just keeps smiling to himself.

Everything turns drastically less funny when they are walking through the forest to another clearing nearby and Jared’s fingers are twitching in discomfort. “I not want this.” He complains and gives in to the urge to tug on the hem of his loincloth-skirt.

He doesn’t care if Jensen finds him handsome in it, neither does he give a fuck if it gets him into Jeff’s good graces. He feels indecent and exposed, his slim thighs seeing daylight for the first time since Chad took him to the newly renovated waterpark on Phobos half a year ago. His quadriceps muscles tense up and show off involuntarily each step he takes, which makes him feel like a bulking bodybuilder compared to the much shorter villagers he and Jensen walk by. As if that wasn’t embarrassing enough, he isn’t wearing much on top either, only a choker composed of overly long red feathers.
All the people they pass stare at him. Some of them even light their eyes up, they pay so damn much attention to his appearance.

“They look.” Jared wanders closer to Jensen and tries to get it across that he isn’t comfortable with this arrangement at all.

“Good.” Jensen gives him an appreciative smirk and touches his green feathers. Jared subconsciously nudges the ones tied around his entirely human neck. “You...time for...mate.”

“I not want mate.” That earns him a concerned flash of neon he can see from the corner of his eye. He plasters on a faint smile and slides an arm around Jensen’s shoulders for a fleeting, reassuring touch. The tips of Jensen’s contour feathers brush his forearm. “I not good mate.”

Jensen just wriggles his nose in disagreement and takes off into the undergrowth, searching for something. He picks up, then discards half a dozen of tiny pebbles until he finds what he is looking for - a colourful one with a natural hole in it, a hag stone, as they would call it on Mars. It glitters in the light as he brings it closer, iron-red quartz crystals embedded into a softer stone. Jared saw these before, scattered around houses and hanging from people’s attire like rosaries, but he didn’t spare them half a thought. They obviously mean something though, because Jensen avoids his gaze as he twirls it between his fingers and his cheeks are darkening.

“The Sun...you safe.” Is all that Jared understands from Jensen’s mumble, but he gets the gist of it anyway. They probably attribute magical properties to the stone. It’s unclear what that has to do with the sun, but it might just be an idiom, he reasons, and decides to take it as it is, as a gift.

“An amulet, huh?” He grins and shifts so that Jensen can reach the string of material on his skirt. He wondered what the purpose of that thing was. “You wanna protect me, Jen?”

The meaning flies over Jensen’s head, but he has spent enough time around Jared to hear the teasing in his tone. He swats at Jared’s side and ties the hag stone on the string.

“Now they know you are not bad for a mate.” He explains with careful articulation.

The smile melts off Jared’s face. What? Is that... is that a testament of how many mating offers one received? How many people wished for one’s protection? How come then that Jensen doesn’t have any? Or... Is it a sign that he is available? Damnit, it’s confusing. As much as he loves languages, he finds the cultural barriers hard to crack. His human frame of reference and his Martian viewpoint in particular limit the flexibility of his imagination.

He opens his mouth to ask for clarification, but the sound of footsteps drifting over from the path ahead interrupts him. It’s a group of morose guards, coming to get them. They must be really fucking late.

The leader of the trio stops in front of them and gives Jensen a long, indecisive stare before turning on his heel with a gesture for them to follow. Jared scratches at his sparse, but quickly growing facial hair and daydreams of the comfort of his dorm issued personal bot. Even though it was a crappy model made a good fifteen years ago, standard time, it took efficient care of his hygiene. And... well, he doesn’t know how to get rid of his beard by himself. He heard of new wave hippies practicing old-school shaving with, uh, blades and stuff to get a more authentic five o’clock shadow, but he has never seen anyone do it. Unfortunately, it’s not something they teach you in Survival Training either. They need to revise that godforsaken curriculum, because this itch and the warmth of all that hair in a jungle are a nightmare.

Maybe Jensen could help? At the very least, he could lend a firm feather.
As they reach the Chief’s clearing, Jared spots a house similar to the one Jensen used to live in back in the City. Do the shapes have any significance? Sleek roundness and curves seem to be the trend in this society, but just like Martians prefer straight lines to preserve the memory of Old Earth’s Golden Age, these pebble houses could hold a meaning too. Not to mention the borderline obsessive tribute these people pay to eggs.

It’s quickly apparent when they enter the building that Jeff isn’t too impressed they have arrived together. He furrows his brows and rises from his seat at a round table to clasp his hands around Jensen’s shoulders.

“I asked for him, not you.” Jared hears him say and his insides shrink in fear before he realises a split second later that Jeff is addressing Jensen, not him. “Go home.”

Jensen frowns, upset. “But -”

“Go home. You can get him back in the evening.” Jeff cuts him off and raises a gentle hand to Jensen’s forehead.

“Evening?” Jared panics, but everyone ignores him in favour of watching Jensen stomp out of the room.

Jeff goes after him, and it isn’t long before the snappish lilt of an argument filters in through the door. The guards stay motionless until the voices fade and Jeff comes back in, looking worn-out and exasperated. “Walk him back, please.” He tells one of his hunks, who slaps his pecs and takes off after Jensen.

Jared glares. He’s not foolish enough to outright attack these guys, but he sure as hell won’t cooperate. He has numerous ideas about what Jeff wants to do with him alone and none of them are good. What he doesn’t expect, however, is the almost contrite smile Jeff sends his way.

“Do you understand me?” He asks as he motions for Jared to sit at the table. His gruff, deep voice is harder to decipher than Jensen’s, but it should be fine if he keeps putting effort into articulation.

Jared can’t exactly explain ‘if you speak slowly in simple sentences’, so he just clucks his tongue yes. He won’t say anything that’s not necessary. He wouldn’t trust this man as far as he can throw him.

Jeff hums, pleased. “You are… I see why…” Jared didn’t catch that at all, but a silent agreement is much more likely to be beneficial than giving away how clueless he still is. He stays mute. “You came from the sky.”

It’s not a question, so Jared doesn’t answer. He figures the chief of a tribe probably knows a bit more about the measures that City had to take to shoot Jared’s ship down than Jensen and the other villagers, so he might be fishing for technological information. Who knows, he might want Jared to help him develop a new weapon. Which would be the joke of the century, since Jared is about as adept at weaponry as Chad is at cooking.

Jeff leans forward, brows drawn together. “Did you see the Sun and the moons in the sky?”

_I did circle around the planet three times after I passed Saxet_, Jared thinks darkly. He’s such a klutz. Why did he even think it was a good idea to travel alone? “Yes.”

Jeff sucks in a breath as if that was a big revelation, a miracle of sorts. Did Jared misunderstand something? He can’t fathom a reason why it’s so great that he saw the star of this system and Saxet-d’s moons. They can be observed from the planet too. Do they think he came from one of them?
Jeff doesn’t offer any explanation whatsoever. He leans back and squares his shoulders, schooling his features back into a stern, emotionless mask. Gotta keep up the firm leader image, huh? Jared grits his teeth.

“You...train with my…” Guards, Jared’s mind translates the new word. What the hell? Why? Christ, training with those muscleheads is going to kill him. “And teach me your speak.”

That throws Jared for a loop. “What? You want to learn my language?”

Jeff tilts his head to the side. “That. Teach me that.”

Jared almost laughs. Fate does have a quirky sense of humour, huh? He grows up wanting to be a soldier of the Federation, a member of the Fleet, only to have his dreams crushed by the results of a test. Then he builds his teenage years and future life around the fact that he can’t fight, only to be forced to join the warrior group of an unknown, moderately militant alien race. Splendid.

He sleeps in Jensen’s bed again that night. They don’t touch, not more than the accidental bump of knees, but the tension flutters between them like a restless butterfly, pulls a sigh from Jensen’s lips and makes Jared’s fist curl. He imagines batting it away in his mind and wills himself to sleep, fingers clenched in soft pelt. His dreams are blissfully empty.

Next morning, he wakes up and thinks, fuck, this could have waited a little longer.

The heaviness he felt in his heart before drifting off has spread through his entire body over the course of the night. He doesn’t want to move, to open his eyes, doesn’t want to take a breath regardless of the automatic push and pull the muscles around his lungs make. He doesn’t want to see the light coming in through the window, doesn’t turn to his other side when Jensen nudges his shoulder. He doesn’t want to go home and neither does he feel like staying anymore. Every option seems hopeless and unreachable, nothing but threads of a cloth clinging to a thorn in the bushes. He’s heavy and weak, weighed down by lead manacles that dig in so painfully he feels it in his bones.

He would have thought being stranded on an alien planet provided enough adrenaline for a lifetime to snuff out his depression.

Jensen’s talking to him, petting his hair again, but he can’t muster the energy to make sense of the words and just straight-up guess their connotations. He’s sick. In his mind, not his body. Depressed. He got his diagnosis ten years ago, his first doses of stabilizers ten months later. Some people swear on natural remedies, traditional therapy and lifestyle changes, but usually it’s taken care of by three injections nowadays, administered two months apart. His parents went with the easier solution and he doesn’t blame them. That way, at least, he could live a normal life without making too much of an effort. Losing his eligibility to become a member of the Fleet seemed preferable to facing the mess of family problems that caused it in the first place. Trusting modern medicine was better for everyone’s sake.

However, booster shots are strongly recommended every eight years, and, obviously, Jared’s time is up. It’s not like he didn’t know he could be hit by a wave of this again. Just… He thought he was handling it. Yeah, his last two years of college progressively sucked, but he kept telling himself it
was just the workload and the pressure to be better, to have a real purpose instead of just going along
with whatever was tossed his way.

Looks like it wasn’t, huh?

A loud yelp and the sound of a crash scares him out of his mood enough that he flinches, and his
eyes fly open in fright. His heart beats double-time until he drags himself to the edge of the bed and
glances down.

“Ow.” Jensen moans from the floor, the anklets on his left leg caught in a device that must be a
cleaning tool. He struggles to free them, but there’s some kind of suction going on that keeps his
jewellery wedged in that whirring ball of a thing. He can’t reach the off switch on his own. “Help?”
He blinks up at Jared with a sheepish smile.

Jared doesn’t have a ghost of a chance of refusing.

“Okay.” His joints scream at him leaving the bed, but he has priorities and Jensen seems to have
climbed pretty high up on the list of them. He takes a moment to figure out how to switch off the
cleaner thingy, then, running on impulsivity, he grabs Jensen’s ankle to rub the irritated skin under all
that gold.

There’s only one problem with that: Jared loves shiny things.

He prefers to say he doesn’t have kinks, that he’s all boring and vanilla when it comes to sex. Dull,
even. Chad would readily agree, since Jared isn’t even hooking up with Orion girls, which is just
madness in his books. But, if Jared had to choose one thing as a kink, he would say it’s jewellery. He
loves gemstones and rich materials, pretty things. Loves how they shift and jingle under his hands
when he puts them on someone, how amazing they look when he watches them dangle during sex.
There’s such a wonder to them, to their colours and gleam. He always thought it was nothing but a
harmless fascination, something to go with his fondness for Old Earth artifacts, but it was his love for
these that got him into trouble in the first place, so he can’t say that anymore, can he?

It has been distracting from the get-go that Jensen always wears all sorts of shiny jewels and he is not
only beautiful, but has an altogether attractive personality too. And anytime he disappears with Jeff,
he receives a new anklet that compliments the determined expression on his flushed face.

It’s driving Jared crazy.

Jensen too, if Jared considers spitting fire and growling as that. The anklets jingle each time Jensen
moves his legs a fraction of an inch. It has become a built-in alert system or a measure for
surveillance, if it’s the worse of Jared’s theories that applies. You can hear Jensen coming from sixty
feet away because he is a walking set of bells. An angry, breathing chime.

“Loud…” Jensen whines as Jared rubs the bruise under his newest anklet - the seventh - and the rest
of them clink together. They tried breaking or tearing them off earlier, but to no avail.

“But beautiful.” Jared offers as consolation. He can feel the want tugging on his willpower to let his
eyes roam across Jensen’s body, to check out his earrings and tattoos, but he forces himself to keep
his focus on his task. He can’t get distracted now, because he can’t allow himself to act on it in any
way. He can’t even go jerk off, he doesn’t have his own space for that.

“No.” Jensen sighs and flops back on the floor. “My spots are ugly. Mom wants them covered. But
your skin is beautiful. Brown.” He indicates Jared’s tan torso.

Jared feels so helpless and mad. How could anyone tell this breathtaking creature that he is ugly?
Okay, he is seeing through tinted glass, filtering the picture through his human norms, but honestly. How could Jensen’s unique appearance make him ugly? Do these people prefer to be dull and plain? It’s such a shame that Jared can’t really express how he feels about that.

“Don’t be sad.” Is all he can say for now.

Jensen sits up and bites his wrist self-consciously. “...not talk about it.”

“Yes.”

A small smile spreads over Jensen’s lips. “I want to draw. I’m good at drawing.”

Jared grins back. “That’s the spirit, buddy.”

The rest of the morning doesn’t go as bad as the first few minutes of it indicated. There’s something calming in creating art, as much as anyone could call Jared’s doodles that. He expected the heavy, crushing wave of depression to linger, but the worst of it fades away fast. He still feels like crap, but he can at least function on the sentient level now.

In the past few days, he has been stitching pieces of paper together to make a calendar. Since he seems to be settling down for a longer haul than he would have wished for, it’s a logical measure. He can hardly keep track of New Earth’s time in his head, he needs some aid. Making a big enough sheet is a painful struggle though. Jared’s only saving grace is the experience he gained at college - while Survival Training doesn’t prepare you for unaided first contact, it does provide classes on how to sew in case of an emergency. They even provide a tiny kit of needles and intelligent elastane in modern spacesuits. Gearing up for his impending departure, Jared has already taken care of the damage in his own suit. It won’t hold for long, but should be enough to last until he makes it to his ship. If he makes it.

But until then, he tries to make use of the equipment this way.

He is done with most of his calendar by now, the months and days scribbled on the patchwork-paper by his pinky finger. He has been here for sixteen days, New Earth time, at the minimum. He hates that it’s only an estimated number, that he has been forced to stay here so long that he lost count. His family and friends must think he is dead now. That he finally snapped and drove into a neutron star. Why would anyone suspect he ended up in this forgotten star system in the middle of nowhere? No one would assume he strayed this far off the beaten track.

Interrupting his musing, Jensen leans over his shoulder with a curious chirp. “What are you drawing?”

“Not drawing. Writing.”

“Looks like a drawing.” Jensen insists, tracing the dried curve of a ‘g’. “I like it.” He mumbles, then jumps up and rushes over to the egg his painting tools are stored in to pull a ridiculous amount of ink out of it. “Draw on me!”


Jensen doesn’t understand the question, only his hesitation. “I like it. I want it. Draw on me.”

Jared shakes his head in disbelief. His writing is barely legible. Why would anyone like it? “Write on you?”

“Write, draw.” Jensen waves a hand impatiently, as though he thinks those two are the same thing
for humans.

“Write what?”

He ponders over that for a second, then settles down on his knees in front of Jared, eyes sparkling, literally. “Your home.”

Well, Jared is nothing if not acquiescent when it comes to his friends’ wishes. “Alright, you demanding little shit.”

“Shit.”

Jared stills and closes his eyes for a moment. “Of course.” He lets out a long exhale, trying not to laugh. He didn’t think he would experience this until he became a parent. “I’ll just let that go. Maybe you’ll forget it by tomorrow.”

Body-painting is a bit surreal, yet surprisingly therapeutic experience. Confident in the knowledge that Jensen can’t read a word of what he writes and can only see it as a decorative pattern, Jared pours his wishes and fears onto the pale canvas of his skin. In a rush of artistic whim, he writes ‘home’ on Jensen’s left palm and ‘here’ on his right, then goes up his arms with things he connects to those places. He stops only when Jensen leans away from his touch and points at a different part of his body instead.

In the end, Jared realises something peculiar - it looks like he found the boundaries set by Jensen’s concept of intimacy.

Everything above his knees and below his apparently nonexistent belly button is off limits. It isn’t a shocker given how he has the center of that area covered most of the time. It’s much more informative, however, that Jensen didn’t let him touch anything above the knobs of his shoulders. Whirring from excitement, Jared’s mind recalls all the times Jensen flinched away and turned angry after touches to that part. From Jared’s very first morning in the village to the night of that ritualistic funeral, they all point to the fact that the neck is a forbidden zone for this species. It might even be erogenous, come to think of it. Jared has a distinct memory of rubbing his own nape in front of people and receiving scandalised looks for it.

To test his theory, he reaches out with his recently cleaned hand to brush Jensen’s neck. He gets cut in the pads of his fingers for the attempt.

He hisses and yanks his arm back, wiping at the blood welling up in the wound. Jensen turns stricken eyes at him. “Ja-red, okay you? So-ry.” He stumbles over the foreign phonemes, messing up the word order as he is prone to do.

Jared resists the urge to ask for a lick. He kinda deserved that cut for being nosy, he should bear the consequences. “Yeah, don’t worry.”

Jensen purses his lips, but lets it go. He does heal Jared’s skin by rubbing saliva into it, which, Jared finds, is less disgusting than it should be after days of being exposed to the custom. Once the superficial wound is gone, Jensen skips over to his mirror and admires the looping lines of decoration filling the spaces between his tattoos.

“I’m sad I cannot have...these...during the Dance.”

Jared would have guessed they have strict rules for that obviously gigantic ritual that’s coming up. He bets his “body-writing” wouldn’t fit those.
“What, uh… what you do… on the Dance?” Jared strings together a shitty question to get some answers at last. Everyone mentions the Dance in passing, yet nobody says anything he can grasp.

“I cannot talk about it.” Jensen replies, running his fingers along ‘friendship’ on his right forearm. He seems to find his answer natural, like one would regard a social taboo if they grew up thinking along its lines.

Jared swallows back his disappointed groan and tries attacking a different point. “They asked me about the Sun. Why?”

“I do not understand.”

“What is… about the Sun?”

Jensen yawns and stretches, plopping down into Jared’s window nook to enjoy the sunny spot there. “She left.”

“She?”

Jensen gives him a patient, patronising stare. Jared imagines he would react similarly if someone freaked out about the existence of atoms. “Yes. The Sun left her mate...here and took their three daughters to the Sky. Her mate created us...in his sadness, but we can’t shine as...the Sun can. He is angry. He fights the Sky every day to see his daughters and kills the Sun...for taking them from him. In the dark, the Sun’s daughters look down at us and...call. Every morning, their voice wakes the Sun and the Sky again. When the Lights come, the Sun gives...and comes down into someone to dance. The Lights are her robes. Her mate only kills the Sky that day.”

Jared has a hard time processing that speech. This is the longest he heard Jensen speak to him and he has to admit, it’s exhilarating how much he understood of it. Some gaps still remain, but he seems to get quite a few things now, thank Fate.

“I’m a complete idiot. Of course they think celestial bodies are deities.” He refrains from slapping his forehead and ventures a guess instead. “You dance with the Sun?” He still can't identify the future tense at all, but Jensen should get the meaning nonetheless.

“Yes. With the one she chooses.” Jensen jiggles the jewellery on his legs. “Jeff...tell me. After the eighth anklet.”

For no rational reason, that leaves Jared with a sense of foreboding deep in his gut.

As much as Jared would have liked it if Jeff’s order about the “training” was some kind of bluff, it really wasn’t. Every midday, like clockwork, a burly guy appears at Jensen’s doorstep and escorts Jared to wherever they decide to torture him with barely possible physical tasks and bravery challenges. One of the things Jared has come to detest in this society is the high regard they attribute to recklessness. Jensen calls it being strong and fearless, Jared would simply say it’s lunacy.

They force Jared to run until he throws up, make him climb cliffs and swim across wild streams until he’s dripping wet and gasping. To top that off, he has to spend about an hour each day bumbling
through his language lessons with Jeff. No common ground and no equality don’t produce impressive results. Jared hates it all. What’s even the purpose? He bets it has something to do with his height. And the way he reacted the first time he met Jeff. He fucking knows it. Jeff must have liked his attitude and the potential lying in his body.

The joke is on him, because Jared’s mind makes sure to stop him from utilizing all that’s in him. He feels like a failure all over again. Every single time they present a new task for him, especially if it’s any way related to using weapons, he feels his parents’ eyes on him, a mix of disappointment, pity and guilt directed at him. He has a complex, he knows, one that generates an excessive amount of performance anxiety. Knowing that he will never be able to live up to the family tradition and to what he has been genetically chosen for kinda does that to a man.

Since Jared’s great-grandpa served in the “Great War”, the Martian War as they call it on New Earth, Padalecki men aimed to work in the Fleet to hold onto the honourable family tradition. His Mom specifically chose the embryos with the most suitable genes for him and his brother when they presented her opportunities at the PregLab. No one counted on the glitch that Jared’s mind could fuck up what his body was capable of. Well, they could have asked for a re-evaluation when he turned eighteen, but he didn’t want it by then and they couldn’t pressure him into it. His family made their peace in the five years that passed since, but he never stopped thinking he wasn’t good enough.

Jensen puts valiant effort into convincing him otherwise.

“I cannot.” Jared told him a few minutes ago when Jeff’s scariest guard grunted at them to climb the rock they were facing.

Jensen, always a little colder with other people around, just tilted his head in confusion. “Why? You always say you cannot.”

“Because -” Jared felt like crying, “You know me not. I am not -” He didn’t know how to say it, how to start explaining something like his problem. “I am not whole. I cannot fight or -” He gestured at the rock wall helplessly.

“You look whole.”

“I am - not whole in me.”

Jensen pointed at a guard with only one hand halfway up above them. “He isn’t whole, but look...” He said, then mumbled a few words Jared didn’t catch. “I know you can, Jay.”

Standing on top of the cliff with no more than a few scrapes and a bruised knee, Jared thinks he could kiss Jensen for encouraging him to do this. A rush of relief floods through him and something he isn’t too familiar with - pride. Step by step, he will fight and defeat his demons, he feels so sure of it now.

And Jensen, the most awesome friend ever, is so happy for him that the sparks of attraction in Jared’s belly flare into a blazing fire.

It’s such a shame that he can neither kiss, nor hug Jensen for it.

As the alarmed haze of imminent danger clears from his mind, it occurs to him that this is only the second time Jensen came to join their training instead of doing all those obscure things of his he is socially forbidden to talk about. So, instead of flattening himself to the ground for a well-deserved rest before his next challenge, he blows out a breath and nudges Jensen’s elbow. “Why are you here?”
“I came to tell you something.” Jensen replies and turns, showing his other side for the first time since he caught up to their small group before the climb.

As expected, Jared is much better at making sense of what he hears than he is at expressing himself, but he has a good enough command of the language now that when he sees the blue dribble of blood on Jensen’s ribs, he exclaims. “Jen, you are hurt!”

“I’m okay.” Jensen smiles and wipes at his side to indicate his healing flesh and the slowly fading wound. “I got a new one.” He points at his ankle, sporting a brand-new anklet.

Jared frowns so hard he might need wrinkle treatment back home. Gaining new anklets requires shedding his blood? What if Jensen is going to be one of those shamans and this is his initiation process? It’s a plausible theory, one that worries Jared, now that he thought of it. What if they make Jensen hurt himself?

Pretending to be oblivious to Jared’s discomfort, Jensen goes on. “Jeff chose you to dance with me.”

“Shit. Why?” Jared winces. There’s no way he will participate in any kind of ritual in front of the entire City. He would rather jump off this cliff. “Why?” He repeats for Jensen’s sake.

“Because you came from the Sky. We all knew she would fly into you.”

“Awesome. Just what I needed, to be possessed by an imaginary female entity.” He mutters to himself. “When the Lights come?” He needs to figure out when that is and escape before the date.

“Yes. Four more anklets.”

Does that mean one week, maybe two? He has to act fast then. If they don’t take him to the market in three days, he will have to run away no matter what. No way in hell will he stay for whatever crazy, violent ritual they are trying to rope him into. No way.

That evening, the tension rises so high in Jared’s body that he gives in to his desire and tries jerking off in Jensen’s bathroom. When Jensen left the bedroom to join his brother downstairs, Jared opened the latch and climbed up, queasy about sneaking around, but so, so full of pent-up want. He messed around with the control panel until water came flooding down on him, warmed by a day of sunshine. He squeezed out a dollop of that sweet flower’s nectar and imagined Jensen as he looked on their first morning here, naked and unabashed, in awe of Jared’s body.

“Fuck.” Jared tells himself in a hiss when his hand wraps around his erection under the hot rainfall of Jensen’s shower. You shouldn’t, his mind insists as he moves his fist up and down, panting from the pleasure of it. Jensen, his heart throbs, and he bites a sob into his lower lip to keep himself from moaning it out loud into the humid air. He hasn’t done this in four weeks. Touching himself again after so long wipes his mind clear of any higher function. There’s nothing but his fantasies now, ideas he never let himself wonder about before, how pliant Jensen would be, how goddamn perfect his lips are. He doesn’t know how Jensen would like sex, if they could even do it without killing each other, but he imagines him on his knees, looking up, shining neon in joy and anticipation.
“Ja-red, look what Josh found in the forest!” Jensen - the real one, the one Jared cannot touch - calls out from the bedroom, and Jared comes grunting, biting deep into his lip to keep from whimpering. There’s nothing to lean against or collapse on as his bliss makes him reel and stagger to his knees before he breaks something trying to stay upright. Jensen yells for him again, and he shouts back, “Coming!” before he realises how bad that would have sounded if he used his own language. He laughs at the stupid tracks his thoughts take.

When he emerges from his shower, dressed in Jensen’s pants again, Jensen drags him downstairs to the living room where Mack and a bunch of kids around her age are staring at a flickering hologram of “Giant Machine” Kelly, B-action star extraordinary.

Josh and his fellow hunters find miscellaneous objects from Jared’s pod time and again. Jared can’t quite crush the twinge of hope he feels whenever they bring him something - is it a comm? a navigator? a miracle packed in technology he didn’t know about? - but he knows he’ll never get anything that useful. His ship was filled with junk, not with weapons and emergency packs like his brother’s probably is. The only device he was genuinely happy to see again is the compact sonic teeth cleaner.

This, however, though not useful for his escape, is still great to have survived the crash with only surface damage.


Jensen’s eyes light up and he wades through the children to poke at the device, trying to get the projection to move. “Mate?” He asks Jared, inclining his head at Kelly’s unnatural musculature and fake Andorian antennae. What a crappy movie that is, Christ…

“No. No.” Jared shakes his head and uses the voice command function to switch materials.

Grave mistake - as the still projection fades out and a dynamic one unravels into motion, Jared’s eyes widen at the sight. It’s a human-Vendorian adult movie, aka tentacle porn, that comes alive in front of their eyes. The shapeshifting Vendorian currently has a human head to tongue-fuck its “victim”, while its red, glistening tentacles snake around and capture her limbs.

Jared is going to kill Chad if he ever gets out of this jungle. He is going to strangle him. When do pranks this childish go out of fashion?

Frantic as can be, Jared yells “Switch, switch!” and the holovision dutifully turns the projection into one of those nostalgic period dramas that depict Old Earth in the 1980s. The kids don’t seem to understand what they have witnessed in the past five seconds, but Jensen looks horrified and flabbergasted at once. Jared raises a hand to rub his neck, an involuntary reflex, then snatches it back a moment later when Jensen’s cheeks flush. Shit.

“You - You have…” Jensen stammers, waving at Jared’s arms, then stops, blinks, and touches his mouth. “Eating each other?”

If Jared cringed any harder, his teeth would fall out. “No. No, no, no. Two arms only.” He rushes to clarify. “And it’s kissing. Not eating.”

“Hissin.”

“Kissing. Kiss.”
“Khiss.” Jensen looks like he might faint. “What is a khiss?”

Not exactly concerned about his piece of shit cheap holovision, Jared takes Jensen by the hand and leads him to the trunk of the central tree-structure, hidden from sight. He doesn’t think Mack and her friends should hear this conversation. “Mates in my world, uh… touch lips.”

“Lips?” Jensen paces around, trying to wrap his mind around it. Damnit, Jared knew this species used oral contact only for healing. He refuses to acknowledge why he feels disappointed by that. “And then eat?”

“No, no eating.”

“Khiss. Do you like a kh-kiss?”


Jensen lets out a long exhale and slumps back against the trunk, freak-out session over. He’s nibbling on his wrist again, staring at Jared’s legs. It’s obvious he can’t quite understand how that Vendorian had a human head and tentacles. Hell, he might have never seen tentacles at all. This jungle is full of insects, not terrestrial cephalopods. He must be wandering if that was an accurate picture of human sex or not. God, he must be completely weirded out. As much multiplanetary knowledge Jared has, he still finds himself floored by the customs of some sentient races. He heard of a colloid species whose reproduction starts with throwing everyone’s reproductive materials into one bowl and mixing it all together to eliminate any kind of pain-in-the-ass mating process. Practical, but disgusting. He can imagine Jensen feels a bit like that right now.

“Do you like children?” Jensen breaks the silence at long last, rubbing the tattoo around his left wrist to soothe himself. Jared can’t help it, he feels guilty for confusing his friend this bad, so he reaches out and takes over the task.

“Yes. I want family one day.”

Jensen bows his head with a heartbroken expression.

“Hey…” Jared says softly. He itches to hug that unhappiness away, but now of all times he wouldn’t want to step over any boundaries. “Why sad?”

Jensen bites the back of his hand again before he answers. “I can’t have children.”

“What? Why?”

“I have to dance. Children take you away from…” He says something else Jared doesn’t catch. “They sewed my neck.” He finishes, miming how Jared stitched together his calendar.

“What the fuck?” Jared whispers. He can’t see any… There’s no scar on Jensen’s neck. What is he talking about? “Sew?”

“With -” Something. Some kind of horrible device whose name Jared doesn’t recognise. “That day I got scared and run out of the house…the house in the City…the bad man saw me. Then he came back with the lion and killed the others.”

“Others?”

“Other dancers.”
Others. What others? Is dancing a lifelong profession around here? “Jen, they, uh, they hurt your neck?”

Jensen clicks his tongue yes. “Sewed it closed.”

Sewed what closed? “Can I see?”

“No.” Jensen blushes blue and raises a self-conscious hand halfway to his feathers. “Only a mate can see.”

“Right. Okay.” Jared makes a face. Sometimes he wants to take care of his friend so bad he forgets he isn’t one of Jensen’s mates. Just a friend. At least that’s one step above pet, huh? “In my world, they can, they can, uh… open it.” Whatever it is. Jared is 90% sure physicians on New Earth could reverse whatever surgery those barbarians forced on Jensen.

Jensen seems sceptical, but grateful for the change of topic. He gestures in the direction of the living room. “Is that the world in the sky? Your world?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to go back?”

“Yes.” Soon. Too soon. Sometimes never. “I go back one day.” He still can’t get the future tense right, but he hopes Jensen understands.

“Take me with you.” Jensen whispers, a longing so deep in his voice Jared shivers.

“Jen…”

“Please. I don’t want to dance with you when the Lights come. It will be so bad. I don’t want Chief to give me to the City. I want to see the world in the sky. I know the Sky can kill me for going there. But I want to try.”

He can’t do that. That would be illegal, breaking dozens of Federation laws, not to mention the sheer risk of exposing Jensen to a human world. If he doesn’t die of a disease humans don’t even suffer from, he might spread one, or just drive himself insane with the overload of new information a planet such as New Earth would bombard him with. No, Jared can’t and won’t take him anywhere.

He can comfort him though, the best he can. He slides his hands to Jensen’s back to pull him closer, but Jensen fights the force to keep eye contact and plead. “Promise? Promise, please?”

God. Jensen will be inconsolable once this adventure is over. “Promise.” Jared murmurs and the lie hurts like thousands of sharp teeth embedded into his heart.

Jensen doesn’t feel that, of course. He just beams, then lights up until Jared rolls his eyes and pokes at his shoulder.

“Jared.” Jensen licks his lips then and steps fully into Jared’s personal space.

His irises won’t stop glowing neon as he very, very slowly leans in, trembling, and rubs the tip of his nose along Jared’s cheek. Just above Jared’s mouth, he takes a deep breath that sends a cool blow of air to trace Jared’s lips. There is no more than an inch between them, between the warm, plush curve Jared wants to lick open for his tongue, but he doesn’t dare close the distance. Jensen waits a beat or two, then tips his forehead until it rests against Jared’s brows. He stands on his tiptoes and presses his nose right there next to Jared’s, moves it in a tentative up and down caress. Jared closes his eyes and
waits, a starving man one bite away from his manna.

He has never wanted a kiss more in his entire life.

Jensen rubs their noses a little harder, then makes a trilling noise and pulls back, dazed.

“Oh.” Is all Jared can say when the rest of the ticklish feeling disappears. He is too busy mourning the chance of his kiss slipping away to take much notice of the fact that this is the first time Jensen managed to pronounce his name.

He doesn’t miss it, however, when Jensen’s hands end up on his left forearm. Smiling, Jensen turns around and curls into Jared’s front to lean into him while nosing at the underside of his jaw. His fingers curl and uncurl on Jared’s arm, hooks scritch-scratching over his skin in an instinctive rhythm. Even though Jared has never held a real kitten before, he felt the sensation of their kneading claws through his holo-vision set and this is almost like that. Pinpricks of love, something inherently gentle and affectionate.

Unsure of what this progression means, Jared loosens the reins on himself and embraces Jensen as tight as he can without touching his neck. He knows he missed a hell of a lot right now, judged by the blissed-out expression on Jensen’s face, and he wishes, not for the first time, that they have born of the same species into the same system of norms. He wishes he could gauge whether this behaviour still counts as friendly or something more. Oh, how he wishes.

“We are going to the market tomorrow.” Jensen says into his collarbone, and Jared’s heart cracks from the pain of it. He spent four weeks wanting to go, to leave, and now that he has a reason to stay, Fate gives him the chance. Taking it is the right thing, and he will. He will do it. But for one more night, he’s going to forget about all that and let himself feel. For one more night.
Jared goes through crazy adventures, in mind and body alike.

An extra eventful chapter! Thank you all for the lovely feedback this story got so far. I hope you'll have fun reading this part too. :)

[Warning for brief violence.]

One question has been bugging Jared ever since he touched down on this godforsaken planet and made it out alive. How did they shoot him down?

It has been clear from the beginning that these people have successfully mastered the basic uses of electricity - they got as far as video recording and developing entertainment devices. As much as he was able to determine in the weeks he spent here, Jensen’s race has just reached the threshold between personal computers and handheld devices. What Jared has mistaken for a game-board is actually an early version of a communicator, which Jensen uses to exchange texts with his wealthier friends in the tribe. No wonder it was funny when Jared pushed pieces on it at random.

Given how abundant electrical conductors are in Saxet-d’s natural environment, the surprise is how much they don’t know about the possible utilization of their resources.

The village is poor, that much is obvious, but through the glimpses he caught of what urban life is like, Jared assumes they have figured out how to create internal combustion engines and use them for transportation. Those few precious times he got to watch the news, he saw government personnel greeting the crowds out of gaudy six-wheeled vehicles. By the most likely order of development, this race should be stepping into the age of interstellar exploration soon.

But they don’t even know how to fly.

It took Jared a while to figure out the reason for that. There’s a massive block of oppression halting the imminent information revolution and further technological advancement - the religious dictatorship devoted to the Sun. Science is restricted to subjects that fit the dogmatic ideology of the government. The only news available are laden with propaganda - stock full of how generous their leaders are, how happy and faithful people claim to be, how much they all await the upcoming sacral events. How “modern” technology makes everyday life better. As an outsider, Jared finds it easy to spot the bullshit - it doesn’t take more than one look at the amenities in the village to know it’s a big fucking lie. No plumbing, no roads, no vehicles with ICE. Nothing advanced for anyone but the most privileged. And, if the broadcasts aren’t showing propaganda, they air tapes about phenomena they attribute to their deities. Most importantly, the twelve-fingered war god whose sanctuaries are bursting with people anytime they show them on video.
The Jade God. The one whose statue they visited three weeks ago, the infamous entity Jensen hates with every fibre of his being.

He doesn’t talk about it if he can help it, pretends to live in a world devoid of him. Never says his name. If someone mentions a natural catastrophe, he backs away. If Jeff forces him to climb up to the pedestal, he sulks all day. He refuses to watch the holovision-like computer’s streams in the living room and gets moody whenever Jared decides to do it without him anyway.

The constant secrecy and turbulent scheming drives Jared up the wall.

Despite all this, he managed to garner enough information that he can safely say, on this technological level, they shouldn’t have been able to even detect him circling around the planet, let alone shoot him down. Even if the government keeps warfare development reports from commoners, it doesn’t add up. Especially with a belief system that bans all attempts at aerospace engineering because disturbing the Sun is the greatest sin a man can do.

It leads to the conclusion that there’s either a more evolved nation on the planet with considerable weaponry they don’t hesitate to use, or another sentient race that doesn’t wish to be found. Neither option bodes well for Jensen’s people.

Or Jared, for that matter.

He tries not to pull this responsibility on himself. This isn’t his business. One way or another, he’s getting out of this situation tomorrow. He’s a nobody, just a student who’s too clumsy to travel a few hundred parsecs alone. He’s the last person who should butt into another race’s problems. A low-tech race’s problems. No, no. He did enough damage as it is, he won’t interfere anymore. And that includes leaving Jensen here.

Leaving him where he belongs.

“It’s the right thing to do.” He mutters to himself once again, because saying it out loud seems to firm his resolution. The guilt in his chest will dissipate in time, he figures.

Currently, Jensen is lounging pressed to him in the living room, compliant enough that he agreed to watch whatever’s on when Donna asked him to. This is the appointed family bonding time they get through with various levels of success every third day. Mack and Donna are still cheerfully hanging around even though Alan and Josh left ages ago. Usually, it’s either them or Jensen who storms off. They haven’t yet warmed up to Jared, which isn’t quite surprising if they can detect even the slightest bit of the confused cloud of attraction wafting around him and Jensen. They must think he distracts Jensen from focusing on his “duties”, which... well, isn’t exactly the wrong assumption to make.

“...and then we can go to the waterfall, would you like that? It’s close to the orchard. I can get away again, Josh is…and stupid…”

Jensen babbles, whispers about the places he wishes to show and the elaborate plans he wants them to complete tomorrow in the City, and all through it, he touches and nuzzles Jared’s shoulder without rhyme or reason. It’s probably why he agreed to watch HV with his Mom in the first place - to stay by Jared’s side and keep on with... whatever this is. Making out? Does this count as that for this species?

Jensen’s nervous - and if that isn’t a sign of how new this is to him too, then Jared doesn’t know what is. Which clears the last vestiges of doubt in his mind that this isn’t just a casual initiation of polyamory. Jensen, who’s maybe-probably banging the tribe’s Chief, of all people, is jittery.
Perhaps the awkwardness stems from the fact that he isn’t used to being the one to *do* the courting.

“You smell good.” Jensen sighs in the middle of his own monologue and leans further into Jared’s side.

*I smell like you*, Jared would like to counter, but he doesn’t want to break the mood that fell over him, a veil of lazy comfort. There’s something about watching the limited variety of broadcasts like this, snuggling, that makes him nostalgic and terribly homesick. When he was still a kid going through kindergarten and pre-Fleet elementary, Jeff used to trick their faulty vintage projector and unlock the “scary big boy channels” by imitating Old Gran’s raspy-weak voice. They would watch spy movies huddled under the comfy fort their bot helped them build until the streaming switched to the “boring bald people” on the local midnight show. The similarities between those haze-tinted memories and the present are almost uncanny, except for one detail - what Jared feels right now isn’t brotherly at all.

“Or we can see his house...” Jensen jiggles his anklets, none the wiser to the annoyed look Mack shoots his way. The movie they are watching is about to reach its catharsis, where the devout Sun-fearing hero defeats the evil “wingbuilder”, but Jared would be surprised if Jensen could name a single character in it.

“Who’s he?” He asks, gaze involuntarily jumping back to the fighting warriors on HV when one of them cries out. The guy has a big blue feather sticking out of his ankle and he seems completely incapacitated by that, bleeding buckets. *Huh*, Jared notes distractedly and glances at Jensen’s feet. Those joints do seem a bit slimmer than one would expect, less mass for more agility.

“Tlamacazqui, of course. Giver of Things.”

Oh. The dude with the silver feathers they saw on that memorable day in the City.

“We could see his house?” After watching him pose and strut around on HV as many times as they switched the device on, Jared decided to call him High Priest in his head. Considering how often he’s mentioned in the HV programmes Jensen’s family watches, he must be the governor of the City and the surrounding villages, if not even more. He must have a complete castle to live in.

“Yes. He knows me.” Jensen beams, then averts his eyes for a second before turning them resolutely back. The shimmering green of them is full of determination. “But he...want me to pay...dance for him...we go there.”

The High Priest and his fancy house can go to hell then. No way that kind of personal dance could mean any good. And however tolerant he is, Jared just can’t find it in himself to trust a governor in a system based on such blatant dictatorship. Not even a tribe leader like Jeff.

“Waterfall.” Jared decides, despite how unlikely he is to be with Jensen long enough to see it. He doesn’t want to enter even the vicinity of Tlamacazqui’s place. “No dancing.”

“Okay.” Jensen smiles and tries to fake some interest in the movie just as the broadcast shifts into a religious insert again.

And there he is, that prick with his shiny silver feathers and green ceremonial robe. He’s sitting on a throne this time, apparently not deeming the criminals kneeling in a half-circle in front of him worthy of doling out their punishment with his own hands. Another guy in similar green clothing holds a pincer in one hand, a red feather in the other, and everyone, including the flock of lower ranking priests and guards, is looking up at the sky.
On the left, a group of timid women play on instruments that consist of two metal antennas each. Jared blinks, but the sight remains the same - they play eerie, vibrating music only by waving their hands between the metal rods. No chords in sight. They aren’t touching anything but **air**. How the hell does that work? With radio waves?

Lacking even the slightest bit of musical talent, Jared will forever be in awe of the virtuosity around the world.

“Miquitzli.” Jensen mutters when the news report cuts back to the criminals and the priest, who, probably guided by some “divine insight”, seems to have decided to deplume these guys as well.

“What?”

“The bad man with the lion is Miquitzli.” Jensen covers his eyes as though he can’t bear the sight, just like the last time they saw a public punishment. “His people paint their feathers white.”

Jared’s head whips around, and sure enough, the stage is dusted with soft white feathers. To the rapturous sound of brainwashed cheering, drops of blue blood dribble on the wood when the pincers tear into the metallic flesh, instead of breaking feather stems. Jared remembers the rebellious guys he spotted in the market and feels unwarranted sorrow rise in his throat. Neither of these leaders sound like good men to follow.

“They are against the Dance. Want the High Priest to… go away and... a new leader.” Jensen adds in a peculiar voice, and something clicks in Jared’s head that makes him gape.

“You like them.”

Jared can’t wrap his mind around that. This Miq-whatever was the one who killed all the other dancers in the pebble house, why would Jensen sympathize with his views? And what does it mean that he doesn’t get to decide? Does he have any choice in the course of his life at all? “But he is bad.”

“Bad. But better.”

These people really are in the middle of a political conflict, Jared notes with dread. The thought of leaving Jensen here, in a society on the brink of a civil war, pulls at his heartstrings. But how could he even smuggle him on board of a rescue ship? If he could steal him away from all those watchful eyes, that is.

“What they did?” He asks, trying to distract himself from his constant dilemma and self-doubt.

“They set fire to…” Something. Probably another institution, like that pebble house. “And they gave us pictures in the City, in the market…a Different World. Close, across the sea. Where people fly. We didn’t know people could fly. The High Priest is a coward. He kept it from…”

“Jensen!” Donna hisses and snaps her fingers at him. She’s fuming. “Don’t say what isn’t. One song for the Sun and Her Giver of Things before sleep.”

Penitence for the gods’ and the High Priest’s forgiveness for lying. **Right.** Like Jensen would ever sing those regretful prayers his Mom orders as punishment when he steps out of line. He doesn’t seem to give a fuck about the gods.
“Yes, mother.” If Jensen was a human, he’d be rolling his eyes right now. As it is, he just bristles in silence until his Mom turns back to explaining this not at all age-appropriate content to Mack.

Then, with a coy little tilt of his head, he puts Jared’s hand above his knee, on the soft expanse of his thigh.

Jared jumps, flushing beet red. “Bed. I, uh, I mean…” He swallows the liquid fire that seems to have flooded his body and reverts back from his instinctual outburst. He doesn’t want to be a tool used to piss Jensen’s Mom off. “I go sleep.”

From looking at Jensen’s ear-splitting smile, one would think he has just won a medal in the Federation Olympics. “I will come too!”

He stands up, and Jared’s left debating whether he has it in himself to have a one-night stand with an alien before breaking his heart. He’s terrified that the answer might be yes.

There’s none of Jensen’s gleeful confidence left when they have climbed up to the bedroom and the awkward shuffling around starts about the what now and where. Jared would tentatively add how to his own set of questions, but he doesn’t even know the words to ask them.

In the end, he gives himself a figurative slap and heads straight for his window nook. “Good night.” He says and settles on his side, facing away from Jensen. As anxious as he is about tomorrow, he won’t get much sleep, but it’s for the better if he channels his restless energy into tossing and turning and not… other activities.

He listens to Jensen’s nightly routine, the rustle of clothes as he shucks them, then the strange little snick the dome-shaped lamp makes when it switches off. Jensen’s glowing reflection in the window chews on its hand. Neon green orbs of confusion blink in and out of existence on the glass. Jared doesn’t turn but can’t look away either.

“Jay?” Jensen’s low voice barely carries through the dim room. He sounds unsure and young and - fuck.

Jared never claimed to have an iron will, okay?

“Sleeping.” He says as he rolls out of his borrowed bed, holding up a finger in warning.

Baffled by the unfamiliar gesture, Jensen raises three of his own to his forehead as if in greeting. “Okay.”

They curl up facing each other on Jensen’s round nest, curtains drawn to shut out the dark ring of the oversized bedroom around their cozy niche. Jensen offers some pelts, thick, silky bunches of fur, but Jared stays strictly on top of the covers. He feels warm enough anyway.

Squirming under his blanket, Jensen raises an arm to ruffle the drapes. His skin looks like dozens of miniature fireflies dancing in synchrony.

“When I...sleep...I think...after the Dance.” He says. The dots outlining his fingers shift to reach for the ceiling. “I star we go up and...the sky.”
More than anything, Jared wishes he could make sense of all the words. “Star?”

“When you want and uh… Wait for what wasn’t before… Want a thing to come to be?”

“Oh, hope? I see.”

Jensen’s luminescent eyes narrow. All lit up in neon, surrounded by complete darkness, he’s almost creepy, but still spellbinding. “What do you see?”

“Nothing.” Jared chuckles and presses his cheek deeper into the bedding. “Hope.”

“Ope.”

“Almost. You hope to go up?”

“Yes.” Jensen tucks his arm to his torso. “But I don’t know what…after the Dance.”

“You don’t?”

“No person does.”

Jared wonders how could anyone work for a single purpose that steadfastly without knowing what follows after. Just to think how it must feel for Jensen now… Being this close to the big day of your life must be terrifying. “I wish you’d tell me what you do know.”

Jensen snuggles into the covers and smiles, oblivious. His freckles and feathers stop glowing, only the drowsy rings of his eyes remain alight. He’s falling asleep.

“Why they are against the Dance? The - Miquitzli?” Jared asks, because he wants - he just wants to talk some more. Enjoy this snapshot of intimacy a little longer, for the last time.

“Because it’s…” Jensen mumbles something, then pauses, reconsiders. “I can’t say in words you understand… It’s old. Not good for us now. Many people don’t think it helps. They want us…the dancers…no more.” He drops his gaze from Jared’s face to his chest and jerks his head in what amounts to a shrug here. “I say that’s good.”

“What they do to Miquitzli now?”

“Not him, his men.” Jensen shifts, probably petting his own plumage. “Feathers are cut off. They work in the...where we get stones.” The mines. Criminals in the mines. Sounds logical, a normal solution for a race of this kind. “They wait for the Lights. Then…” Jensen gurgles. “Throat cut. Without their feathers, they can’t go on. They hurt until the last day of the world. Feathers are…” He makes a frustrated sound and presses a hand to the center of Jared’s chest. Even through one layer of clothing, the pads of his fingers seem to burn into Jared’s skin. “They are tied to what’s inside. What makes, uh… happy, sad and angry.”

What makes a soul. So the feathers are basically the tangible representations of spirits, the possessors of feelings, is that it? And by taking them away from criminals, then killing them in what must be a humiliating way, they essentially banish them into eternal pain, according to their beliefs. God. Now that is punishment.

The night of the funeral comes to Jared’s mind, the first time he saw Jensen dance like the star of a cosmic show. My feathers are the Chief’s, Jensen told him that evening, didn’t bother explaining it because it’s a basic fact of his life, being owned by someone else, having a chosen path and no decision. He was saying his soul wasn’t his to own and Jared had no idea. No idea.
“Are you a slave?” He whispers, but Jensen doesn’t understand, doesn’t hear the horror in the inflection, just curls closer and flattens his palm to Jared’s abs.

“After the Dance, the High Priest decides…my body was good or not.”

“What?”

“Jeff gives me to the City. The High Priest, uh -” Jensen furrows his brows, looks for a simple enough word for Jared to understand. “He is the City.”

Christ. Just to think that Jeff would hand Jensen over to that disgusting, self-righteous dictator...

“Your body good or not?”

“Not like… Not like making kids.” Jensen wriggles his nose and Jared feels just a tiny bit of relief loosen the vice around his chest. That means no sex, right? “My dance, okay? Good - I can go. Bad - I stay with him. To become… strong. Then I go.”

“Go where?”

“On the way.”

“What way?”

“The Way.” Jensen stares, confused about why Jared wouldn’t understand, how could he not know. “But don’t make your feathers fall out.” He soothes, then snickers at the irony of it. “Sorry, don’t uh… I don’t know your words for this. You will see. I will be good.”

His slim fingers trail down Jared’s stomach until they find his hand. One by one, Jared feels the hooks protract and start a slow press down-ease up pattern in the pad of his palm. This isn’t what Jared would consider a human sign of affection, but he knows, instinctively, what Jensen means by doing it. He drums his own fingers on Jensen’s palm and smiles.

“I know you will.” When Jensen blinks this time, his eyelids struggle not to stay closed over the light of his irises. Selfishly, Jared wants to keep him awake - to talk to him and listen to all the wonderful things he wishes to do after his dance, after the ceremony that might be what gives him freedom. He wants to be that kind of guy but won’t. “Sleep.”

“Okay.” Jensen mumbles and the glow of his gaze flickers out. “Udnight.”

Jared sighs, knows he will stay awake all night, memorizing the shape of every bony finger Jensen slid into his hand. His lips curve up anyway. “To you too.”

The morning of his departure Jared makes sure he’s downstairs before Jensen and hides the stolen satchel he packed with his spacesuit and the necessities among a bunch of egg-containers Alan already loaded into his wagon. He collected some food and as many water pearls as he was able to carry, along with a worn-out blue cape that Jensen only wears at home because “it’s ugly, but soft and good-smelling”. For some strange, sentimental reason Jared wanted to take it - it reminds him of Jensen’s favourite, the green festive cape, the one that doubled as camouflage the first day they spent together in the forest.
On his way back from his secret mission, he bumps into Tom, and without a viable excuse, he ends up helping him load timber into another wagon, which suggests they are going to the market with a much bigger party this time.

“What nose touch means? Nose to nose?” He asks when they stop to catch their breaths in the shade of an imperfect, egg-shaped barn. It figures that he has to get all sweaty and gross from exertion even on his last day here.

Tom blushes and fidgets as he mutters a few sentences Jared doesn’t understand. “...Only mates touch nose to nose.” He finishes and mimes kneading. “Comes after a person says yes to the first three mating steps.”

Jared chokes on his own spit. “Joke?”

“No,” Tom frowns at him. “First, you play with your feathers. When your mate does it too, you…” He flashes his eyes to demonstrate. “...then your mate touches your feathers and takes your stone…” He gestures at his own, hanging from the string on his pants. “...you can rub noses. Then your mate gives you their stone and you can, uh… make little ones.”

“Shit.” Jared scrubs a hand over his face. He didn’t realise he was giving signs that serious. They are at stage four and he didn’t even notice Jensen was following some sort of mating steps. They didn’t do anything but some mild flirting by human standards! God, Jared was leading him on, intentionally or not.

Tom twirls his stone between his fingers. “One stone is one mate, two is two, three is three. Best men have five.”

“Shit.” Jared repeats, thinks about the pretty red gem he slipped into the pocket of his spacesuit as a keepsake. He wants to ask why Jen doesn’t have any stones if this is the case, because Jeff is sure as hell more familiar with him than Jared is and they almost mated, but Tom decides that was quite enough of idle chatting, there’s work to do, and he doesn’t get another chance before they leave the village.

With more goods and bigger wagons come more people, which Jared thanks Fate for - it’s easier to slip away unnoticed into the bustling crowd when Danneel is shamelessly hitting on a suddenly contact-shy Jensen. It hurts so much to leave he has to ball his hands into fists not to turn back around, but he forces himself through it and soon enough he’s wandering around in the outskirts, where buildings get sparse again and the sounds of busy chatter fades away from the streets.

Behind an abandoned snail shell-shaped house, he gets out of Jensen’s beautiful clothes and changes back into his suit. It fits perfectly, of course - but after weeks spent in too-tight and too-loose outfits, he feels uncomfortable, like a second skin has attached itself to his own and the unnatural layer has made him itch.

He should leave Jensen’s shirt and pants here, he’s carrying enough useless stuff already, but he can’t drop them into the dust.

A wave of emotion hits him when he thinks about how carefully Jensen chose them for him, how many others he discarded until he settled on these, and he can’t. Can’t throw them away. He bites his lip to keep from sniffing the lingering smell of his friend in the fabric and stashes the clothes into his satchel until it’s ready to burst from its contents. His mind yells at him, throws crazy concocted ideas about finding his way back to the market or coming back with a better ship to take Jensen to New Earth, but he takes a deep breath and sends all those thoughts away.
The amulet in his pocket pulls like a lead weight on his right side.

Trekking in the jungle, along a paved road because he’s not yet ready to try crossing the undergrowth at random, his regrets keep gnawing at him. He feels weighed down with guilt, thinking how Jensen must have noticed his disappearance by now. How devastated he must be that he lost his friend, his prospective mate. But really, even though he is secluded away, he has a future and people who love him, at least it seems so, and Jared has to go home. Jared’s parents, his relatives and friends, his dogs, his professors, his jerk of a boss - they all must think he is dead by now. He doesn’t… he doesn’t want to be dead to them. He needs to blast out a message somehow or get at least one star system away from here - there, he would be able to catch the attention of wayward cargo ships, hitchhike his way back to New Earth, or maybe even Mars. God, it would be good to go back home, to be wrapped up in his Mom’s hugs.

This was the right thing to do. He did enough damage as it is.

He’s about to risk entering the treeline to follow the hypothetic trajectory he calculated for his ship, when he hears it. A high-pitched wail so distraught his steps falter, freeze, stumble over each other.

Jensen. JensenJensenJensen.

He knows it’s him, he heard this sound on his first day here, only this is wavery, straining. Jensen is calling for him and has already screamed his voice hoarse.

Jared doesn’t think, just runs.

“Jensen!” He shouts, cups his palms around his mouth. “Jen!”

“Jay!” He hears, and the sound is getting stronger, they are coming closer to each other, almost there, almost.

He runs a mile, maybe even two along the road, gets near the City border - Jensen’s calls are really freaking loud, and it’s so reckless of him to call attention to himself like that, so dangerous, that Jared’s pulse races for more than the thrill of running. Then he jumps into the forest and over bushes and thorny weed, rushes through the pain when something pricks his palm until he sees him, rubbing his own arms and looking up at the trees, so foolishly thinking Jared would act like him and would travel on the upper forest layers.

“Hey!” Jared waves and begins to grin, sees the mirror of his relief in Jensen’s face, but then the leaves crunch on the right and Jensen’s muscles seize up, clench until he drops to the ground and convulses.

“Jen!” Jared screams and picks up his pace again, heedless of the danger. He almost makes it - gets as far as seeing the glint of drool in the corner of Jensen’s mouth - when the bushes part and a pair of rugged men step out between the branches, flinching in surprise when they set eyes on Jared.

“Ours?” The bigger one asks and the other raises a metallic device that reminds Jared of a barrel.

“No.” The guy says and Jared’s world bursts into darkness and pain.

He wakes up in the bed of a vehicle that seems to be on its last leg just by its rattling sound alone.
His wrists are tied together, but they left his legs free and his body untouched. He can hear the low murmurs of talking as it drifts over from the driver’s cabin, but he can’t make out the words. Although the excruciating pain is gone, he feels sore all over, like he did during the first few days of his training with Jeff’s guards.

That barrel must have been a taser gun of some sort. Probably basic weaponry in a jungle brimming with copper.

Tightening his jaw, he braces himself and opens his eyes to slits. On the opposite side of the bed, he sees Jensen, tied up like a piece of Valerian ham. His limbs are secured to his torso with thick strings of rope and a wide collar placed above his feathers keeps them from stiffening into hard metal weapons. Jensen is still out of it - eyes closed and mouth slack, his saliva dribbles onto the rigid metal they are jostling atop as the vehicle moves.

“Jen.” Jared whispers and reaches out, curling his fingers into the limp bend of Jensen’s.

No response - for a body running on copper, the taser’s electric current must be more taxing and likely results in longer incapacitation. But Jensen is breathing, alive - they will be fine if Jared can figure out a way to get out of this mess. He suspects their kidnappers didn’t count on his iron-based body to recharge faster than the average local’s, so at the very least, the element of surprise could be on his side. He doesn’t know why he isn’t bound like a piece of meat, but he sure as hell will use that to his advantage.

Abruptly, the vehicle jolts to a stop.

For a moment, Jared thinks it actually broke down, gave in to its long-awaited death - but then he hears the guys get out and grunt at each other in amicable conversation. Perhaps a piss break then.

He doesn’t close his eyes fully, but through the narrow gap he leaves to look through, he can only see Jensen’s face and the play of light and shadow on it as the overhanging branches above them part to let streams of sunshine through. Jared breathes through his mouth and waits.

“...he Miquitzli’s man?” One guy says to the other, groaning as he relieves himself.

“Could be. No feathers.” So that’s why they didn’t bother to tie him up that much. They think he might be on their side, or at least on a side that isn’t a threat to them. A criminal on the run.

“Funny clothes.”

“You know they trade with the Lightwalkers. They have…” Things Jared doesn’t understand. The guys carry on for a few minutes without him catching a word, then they move back to the vehicle and lean against the bed. A hand with meaty, dirty fingers appears over the side of the truck bed and cards through Jensen’s hair. It takes a considerable amount of Jared’s willpower not to jump up and kick the guy in the face. He’d be dead in five second after a stunt like that.

“We caught it before its dance.” They laugh as the other guy flicks the anklets on Jensen’s legs. “Miquitzli will be happy.”

“Never thought I would see one.”

“Used to be more before the First Dance.”

The meaty hand withdraws, reappears with a ten-inch knife. “I wanna cut off its fingers. They would sell for...” Jared doesn’t understand, but probably for a hefty amount of the local currency.
He tightens his grip on Jensen’s hand as horrible images fill his mind, pictures of dark blue blood running down that palm, nothing but stumps sticking out of the soft pad of it. He squeezes hard enough that some of Jensen’s hooks protract and Jared’s hit by an overwhelming combination of panic and pain. They have been holding hands just like this last night. This is the twisted, cruel repeat of that lovely moment he thought he wouldn’t get to experience again.

The other guy curses and slaps his buddy’s forearm. “No. Miquiztli wants it whole.”

They argue a bit, then the one with the knife says “Its feathers?”

“No.”

“We can’t just give it away! Think…”

The level-headed one makes a thoughtful noise. “What about its hair?”

Jensen’s hair is, apparently, good enough for both of them. To have better access to his tawny locks, their kidnappers climb up between Jensen’s body and Jared, who snatches his hand back just in time for one of the guys to notice. A sandal-clad foot kicks his stomach, but Jared grits his teeth and fakes unconsciousness convincingly enough that the greedy man moves on to his task. They slice into Jensen’s hair and cut two fat locks out of it, laughing. But, single-minded as they are, they didn’t think of a way to store that hair and they break into a scuffle trying to settle on what to do.

The brash one decides to cut off the string from Jensen’s pants, the one where his hag stone would be, then drops his knife to tie the strands of hair his buddy holds up in his hands. The blade lands just in front of Jared’s belly - close enough to grab with his bound hands. Their last mistake, Jared thinks viciously, and curls his fingers around the cool metal handle.

He waits, heart pounding, for a good enough moment. Not the perfect one - there’s no such thing as perfect, just good enough.

Then the guy closer to him braces a foot on the side panel of the bed to rest his elbow on his knee, and all his weight shifts onto the other leg he leaves beside Jensen’s hands. Jared doesn’t think - he just leaps forward and stabs the knife so hard into their kidnapper’s ankle that it comes out through the other side with a sickening crunch of bones and snapping tendons.

The man screams and loses his balance, wounded in such a vulnerable spot, and collapses forward, knocks his buddy back while trapping his legs with his weight - and the other guy falls out of the vehicle, cracks his head on the pavement and doesn’t move again. Jared scrambles into an upright position, fists his hands and bashes them into the half-sitting, screaming man’s face until his noises stop and the blue of his blood coats his skin and Jared’s knuckles.

He doesn’t think about consequences, about anything at all, doesn’t care if the guy bleeds out - he yanks the knife out of his ankle, holds it between his knees and rubs his bonds along its sharp edge until the ropes are finally sliced off and he’s free.

He jumps up into a defensive stance, but there’s no immediate threat. Both of their kidnappers are unconscious and severely injured. Jared doesn’t care if they die. Blinded by his racing fear and the adrenaline of the fight, he can’t muster the slightest bit of empathy for them.

Crushed under the weight of the man Jared stabbed, Jensen wakes up. He’s throwing up into the wagon and trembling in his bonds, but he’s writhing in place, conscious enough to struggle for freedom. Jared tries to ignore his pounding heart and puts his hands on the kidnapper’s back, rolls him off and down to the dirty road. Jensen’s legs kick out as he cuts them free, get him in his right
hip and make him grunt.

“Fuck! Jen, it’s okay, it’s okay, it’s me.” He pulls Jensen upright and wipes his cheek. “It’s me.”

Jensen blinks at him, then crumples forward and buries his face in Jared’s shoulder, tied hands scratching at the front of his spacesuit for something to hold onto. Around them, the forest echoes the chitters of its bugs and birds, happy for a dry, sunny day. Jared doesn’t even realise he’s crying until he’s leaving the vehicle behind, taser gun and bloody knife in hand, satchel on his shoulder.

At least Jeff’s training was good for something, Jared thinks as he follows Jensen through yet another patch of sneaky, electric vegetation. They are walking on the forest floor for his sake, but he’s starting to think climbing thirty feet above ground would be preferable. His hands certainly can’t get dirtier than they are now, smears of blue blood dried black like a holey glove on his skin. It’s getting dark here, under the canopy of dense foliage, and it’s not likely that they will make it to the hill Jensen spied from atop a large tree a few hours ago. They have no idea where they are, how far their kidnappers took them from the City. They will have to reach a higher point so that Jensen could look around and maybe spot something they can orient themselves to. Going back to the road isn’t an option, because Jensen doesn’t have his disguise anymore and Jared is starting to suspect it truly was a necessary safety measure.

The sun is setting, and Jared knows they can’t keep this walk up for long. They have to find shelter for the night. He feels so tired and so sorry for Jensen, for himself and for this entire clusterfuck of a situation that he doesn’t notice the butterfly perching on the back of his hand until Jensen jumps at him, swipes it off to the ground and tramples it to death. Then he examines Jared’s hand and - huh, there is a tiny bitemark there and a drop of red blood, human blood, probably where the insect’s mouthpart pierced him. Jensen gives the wound a sad look and presses his nose against Jared’s knuckles for a second before he seems to catch himself and pulls back.

He doesn’t heal the mark with his saliva and Jared doesn’t ask for it. The residual pain is a reminder of how much he fucked up.

Within half an hour, it gets dark enough that the bioluminescent species around them light up. Jensen sighs, shakes himself, and switches on his own glowing mimicry. One day, Jared will have to ask him how it feels to do that.

Not today though. Not when Jensen refuses to speak more to him than what’s necessary, doesn’t even look at him if he can avoid it. He doesn’t look mad though - nor worried for that matter - so Jared isn’t quite sure how to deal with the silent treatment.

In spite of the glowing plants scattered around their path, he finds it challenging to follow Jensen in the dark. Fallen branches, rocks, simple, non-luminescent bushes all trip him as he staggers after the moving clump of dots and ring of neon feathers Jensen currently is to him. It’s only a matter of time before he hurts himself this way. Jensen, however, seems to move like a panther, without any of the crushing, bounding noises that accompany Jared’s every step. If it wasn’t for the jingle of his anklets, Jared wouldn’t be sure he was moving his legs at all. It hasn’t occurred to him with this clarity before, even though it should have, that Jensen never has any problem moving around in dim places.

“You see in the dark?” He asks to initiate some conversation about it. Does Jensen see in colour after nightfall? Does it only work when he switches on his luminescence?
“Of course I see.” Jensen grumbles. His voice is rough, raspy from all the shouting he did earlier.

Of course. Does he think Jared sees too? “I can’t see.”

Jensen stops and turns. His eyes look like levitating globes as he levels a glare at Jared. “I won’t lick your eyes.”

Jared splutters. “Yeah, that’s uh - good to know. Thanks.” He shakes his head in amusement. “You see hunters?”

“No.” Jensen sighs, then runs a hand through his hair. He doesn’t know he received an unwanted trim, Jared didn’t dare tell him. Even so, he seems to feel the difference, because his fingers keep straying to the coin-sized shorter patch above his temple. “Hungry?”

“No, thank you.”

Jared is just about to relax and declare the tension between them solved, when Jensen whirls completely around and shoves his shoulder. “You cracked egg!”

“Cracked egg?” Jared gasps, rubbing his brand-new bruise. Ow, that hurt.

“Yes.” Jensen mutters.

“Okay.”

“Stupid.”

“I guess cracked egg wasn’t a compliment then.” Jared’s lips twitch into a smile.

“Stupid, stupid cracked egg, Deek.” Jensen hisses and kicks something in the undergrowth that pulses white light as it rolls away. “Unshining moon.”

“You guys have creative insults.”

“Talk not!” He snaps at Jared and shoves him back again. “Talk you not.”

“Okay. Okay, Jen.” Jared whispers and raises his hands placatingly.


“Sorry.”

Jensen lets out a long exhale, skims his hand over his hair again. “I see an oztotl. We sleep there.” He says and marches off into the darkness. Jared fervently hopes an oztotl is something he can light a fire in, because being vulnerable in this environment freaks him out.

It’s a small cave. Dry and empty, without anything sinister lying in wait in its depth. Jensen checks it twice, goes as far as the short tunnel stretches, then comes back and flings a two-headed snake out the entrance. It was hunting for prey by pretending its heads were glowing fruits, he says.

Jared knows for a fact that he won’t be able to fall into more than a few minutes of dozing with creatures like that slithering around, but the relative safety is still a welcome relief after all the ways this day went wrong for both of them. His hands are still disgusting, but he isn’t going to sacrifice a water pearl just to wash the dirt off. He builds a fire - one of the few tasks he was genuinely good at during SURV101 - and munches on a handful of berries he takes out of his satchel.
Jensen refuses to eat with him, but he turns to pay attention when Jared grabs a stick from the pile of wood he collected for his fire. Jared draws a paleolithic comic in the sand, his ship falling and crashing into the forest. He points at the vague sketch and tells Jensen what it is the best he can. “I want to find this. Go back to my world in the sky.” He finishes lamely.

Jensen never replies, just stares at it for a second before sweeping it away and curling up with his back to Jared’s huddled body.

Jared wants to say he’s sorry he got them into this, that he regrets the promise he shouldn’t have made at all, but he knows he will have to wait for the forgiveness he’s so desperate for. He promised to take Jensen with him, then tried to leave him without a goodbye. Even though he had his reasons, he thinks Jensen’s anger is justifiable. Just what Jared deserves. As he watches the flames twirl, he feels almost wistful, thinking about the tech-puritan camping trip he and Chad went to in junior high school, because Jared promised Old Gran he would try it out and Chad swore infinite brotherhood with him that year. Too bad he isn’t here to experience this now.

He and Jensen would drive each other crazy.

In the morning, Jensen shows him a succulent epiphyte they can slice into and they wash themselves with its juices, a temporary measure until they find a stream. They hike up to the cliff where Jensen spends a few hours climbing trees and looking around, then they back down to their little cave for the night without exchanging more than fifty words with each other. Jensen knows which way the City is now and that is where they are going - everything else he dismisses before Jared can even try convincing him.

It starts raining half an hour before they get back into their shelter, and by the time they make it inside, they are soaked to the bones. The temperature has dropped too and it’s always somewhat colder inside cave systems anyway. It’s still pleasant for Jared, especially because his suit dries in a few minutes, but Jensen is shaking like a leaf while yet another attempt at a fire smokes away because of the wet wood.

“Can’t make fire.” Jared groans in frustration and crawls over to the cave wall, where Jensen’s resting his forehead on his drawn-up knees. “I have your clothes -”

“Feed them to Cipactli.” Jensen spits and raises his head to snarl.

“Whoa. Okay.” Jared soothes and rubs a hand down the curve of Jensen’s spine. “Jen, I’m so sorry. I have to find my ship. Why don’t you go back home without me? Your family is… sad. They must be worried.”

“You promised.”

“Sorry.” Jared tries again and slides his palm to Jensen’s elbow, intending to take hold of his hand, but Jensen jerks and snaps his fingers at him, hissing.

“You have to understand!” Jared exclaims in despair. “You can die in my world, you… you can get sick or overwhelmed or killed by something as a mundane as a fucking perfume. I can’t take you there! I want you safe and happy.”

“Do you see me happy?” Jensen counters, then deflates as suddenly as he lashed out, drawing his
limbs tighter to himself. “You wouldn’t let me die. I know. You are from the sky, chosen by the Sun, you are good.”

“I’m not.” He really, really isn’t. He’s a failure, a burden to everything he contacts. Just look at what he did here. One month on a planet and he hurt the most exquisite creature he has ever met in his life. He should be kept in permanent quarantine, lest he let even more people down.

“Yes, you are!” Jensen argues. How could he still… still love Jared despite everything when Jared hates himself? “You are different. I am different. You see *me* - not rain and stone or metal and *poison*. You don’t know what my people know. You see *me*...different. And you are different too. I saw that the first night. Wanted to know what you were, where you came from.”

Jared can’t swallow down the lump in his throat before his voice cracks. “Jen-”

“I don’t want to talk to you.” Jensen covers his eyes and turns away again. “I want to go home and train for the Dance and listen to your stupid, hookless speak.” He mumbles, then adds with a sniff. “And touch your nose. But I don’t want to talk to you now.”

Despite their fight, when Jared wakes up to find a pear-shaped berry on his satchel, he knows he has been mostly forgiven last night. He gets a tiny smile too while he’s moaning around the juicy flesh of it, and he feels it in his heart that this is going to be a good day.

Around midday, he’s tempted to reconsider. There’s a storm raging over the area, violent and damp, tearing into the forest and burning trees with lightning bolts that send electric currents through everything within twenty feet. The dirt under their feet turns into mud, into slippery-wet, disgusting mire as far as the eye can see. They can’t keep walking - get stuck halfway up another hill, huddling under the trunk of a fallen tree wedged between two rocks.

“I can smell it will stop soon.” Jensen says and takes Jared hand with a smile. He seems more concerned about Jared’s well-being than his own, now that they aren’t actively fighting anymore. He has been the epitome of calmness even through the most dire moments of their hike, but his eyes widen and feathers bristle when Jared reaches behind himself and pulls out a lump from the rock that has been digging into his back.

It’s an egg. A black, baseball-sized egg that hasn’t yet hatched.

And its momma is none too happy to see it in Jared’s hand.

“Ah! Jesus fucking Christ!” Jared exclaims when a shadow detaches itself from the farthest side of the rock, climbs out of a hole and snaps two rows of teeth at them that flash in the daylight. He throws the egg at it in panic - and screams all the louder when the four-legged creature’s tail jumps for it and catches it in an honest-to-god hand. A hand on the tip of the tail.

He and Jensen break out into a run.

The mud squelches and sticks to their feet as they rush through the pouring rain, running for their lives. The canine-reptile-ape-whatever chases them with ferocious growls and barks and they can’t seem to sprint fast enough, it’s still at their heels. Jared hears Jensen whine in distress and sees him look down at his ankles with a hopeless, anguished face. He must have sprained one or both, stumbling over this uneven surface, and now he can’t seem to keep up anymore.
“Go!” Jensen yelps and stops in place, waiting for the creature to catch up to him and take its rightful revenge for endangering its offspring.

“Like hell.” Jared mutters back and careens around to jump in front of Jensen and fire at the animal with his taser gun.

Two things happen in rapid succession - first, the taser fires and hits the dog in its snapping muzzle, sends it back to its nest whimpering, then Jared’s legs touch down at the end of his leap and the soil disappears from under his feet.

The wet dirt moves, and Jared’s rolling down the hill in a small mudslide with Jensen’s hooked fingers tearing at the sleeve of his suit.

For a second, Jared thinks he’s going to drown, die with his lungs filled with dirt and water and his mouth open around a scream. His body bumps into rocks and branches, into roots that stick out of the ground, and he can’t hear and can’t see anything but the flood of death that throws him around like a puppet until he’s one big bruise. He feels it when Jensen’s hand rips away from his, and that’s when he loses it, feels the approaching oblivion that would come with passing out.

Then the slide dumps him off the side of a flat cliff and into a stream of clear, icy water.

He submerges, just for a second, then he jumps up with a huge, heaving breath, coughing on shaky legs. He swipes his hair back from his eyes and looks around, ready to yell out his panic, but Jensen is there, only a few yards away from him, kneeling in the shallow creek with his head bowed.

“Oh my God.” Jared sighs and breaks out in laughter like a lunatic. Despite failing his mortal enemy SURV101 in college, he’s shaping up to be quite a badass survivor after all.

He staggers forward and slumps down in front of Jensen, reaching up to clean the mud from his friend’s face. It only occurs to him when he starts rubbing the length of a contour feather that he shouldn’t be able to touch Jensen there at all.

“Hey.” He smiles soothingly when Jensen blinks at him with wide, shocked eyes. “Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?” He wipes down another feather. “Hurt?”

Jensen’s face crumples. “Dirty.”

“It’s okay. I’ll help you clean up.” Jared promises and sets out to scrub the dirt off and the life back into Jensen before the stream fattens into a flooding river. When he finally gets Jensen back on his feet and out of the water, he spots a brown strip of leather hanging from a low branch further down the river bank - his satchel, a little worse for wear, but still closed shut, unopened. A surge of hope rises in him. Maybe, just maybe, some of the supplies survived, protected by the weird amphibian leather Jensen’s people use for tannery.

He sits Jensen down on a rock a safe distance away and wades back into the water, now almost high enough to reach his thighs. He makes it to his bag and back relatively fast, but by the time he gets back to the place they climbed up the first time, the rain has stopped, and the bigger waves of the river have started lapping at his groin. Soon enough, all the water from the hills will make it down here and further build up the deluge, he knows, so when he gets out and sees Jensen standing and fully conscious again, he doesn’t take a second look, just hustles them away from the bank.

When they finally collapse on a clearing miles away from the hill they tried to climb, the blinding sunshine that washes over them feels like a warm blessing and a big joke from the universe at the same time. He turns to share the humour of it with Jensen, who’s leaning against the same fallen tree
Jared’s arm is stretched out on. It takes him a moment to notice the teal-coloured drops rolling down Jensen’s cheeks among the water dripping from his short hair, but once he sees them, it’s unmistakable that they are cascading down from the corners of Jensen’s closed eyes.

“I thought you couldn’t cry.” Jared says and cups Jensen’s cheek again, wiping at the tears.

Jensen looks up and points at his wet face. “Weakness. Men don’t. I was good at not doing it.”

“That is stupid.” Jared smiles and drops his forehead to Jensen’s, rubs their noses together until Jensen lets out a strangled sound and wraps his arms around him in a loose hug. “I’m sorry.” He murmurs and repeats it in his own language, would say it in every single way he knows if he thought Jensen would listen to it. “So sorry.”

Jensen huffs a laugh, just a short puff of air against Jared’s lips and nuzzles back with such an enthusiasm that Jared has to pull back before he breaks his nose. The warmth tingling in his belly has nothing to do with the heat of the sunshine, but it feels a thousand times hotter than any kind of starlight he has felt on his skin.

“Jared so-ry no. I okay.” Jensen trips his way over the sentence and beams, tugging at Jared’s shoulder until he leans in and nuzzles Jensen again.

“One… kiss?” Jensen makes a frustrated noise and reverts back to his own language. “I want a kiss. First try.” He adds with a lopsided smile.

Jared, embarrassingly enough, blushes in excitement. “Anything you want.” He mumbles and finally, after long last, dives in to press their mouths together.

This is the moment he will remember Jensen by, if he ever leaves this place in this life - his plush lips pursed into a thin line that makes a confused curl up, his hands on Jared’s shoulders as they knead their love there, his hair under Jared’s fingers, warmed by an alien sun’s afternoon light. Jared will remember the smell of rainwater on his skin and the sound he made when he couldn’t keep from breathing any longer, and how stunning he looked when their lips parted and eyes met again.

He will remember how obvious it was that Jensen hasn’t even seen how to do this before, but still wanted to try and give his best to show how much Jared meant to him.

“Breathe.” Jared laughs softly and goes back for another peck, and another, and one more. The fifth time, he makes sure to rub his nose up and down and Jensen melts into him, lets his mouth drop open and a sigh escape. Jared can’t help it, he licks those lips further apart and dips in, comes back tasting sweetness.

Jensen jerks in his hold and leans back, panting. “Eat?”

“No, no eating.” Jared insists with an amused chuckle. “A kiss between mates.”

Jensen bites his own lip, probably chasing the phantom touch of Jared’s tongue. “Hu-maan mates?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Jensen takes a deep breath and smiles with newfound confidence. He tilts his head up in anticipation. “Okay.”

Jared smiles back and rubs his thumb up and down along Jensen’s temple. “Close your eyes.”
Chapter End Notes

*the musical instrument I mentioned in the beginning does exist, it's called the theremin
**I borrowed some creatures from Aztec mythology. The hand-tailed dog-ape was inspired by the ahuizotl, and Cipactli is a sea monster, part crocodilian, part fish and part toad, with mouths at each of its joints.
When they set off to find shelter for the night, it doesn’t take more than two steps for Jared to notice that Jensen did sprain his ankle while running from the ape-dog. It takes another three to realise Jensen has absolutely no intention to do anything about it. He won’t even open his pretty mouth to say that it hurts - oh no, he just smiles and limps past where Jared is rooted to the spot. He keeps marching ahead until Jared has to follow him and pretends not to understand the concerned questions and looks sent his way.

Jared knows, he just fucking knows this is how he tries to be more enticing as a mate. By being “strong and brave” or whatever. His culture admires bravery above all else, and the more risk-seeking you manage to be while still staying alive, the more prospective partners will flock to you. To be labelled as a coward or a weakling is the worst insult they can fathom, and resting because of some overstretched ligaments would probably warrant those titles in their eyes. Training with Jeff’s guards drove that home for Jared within a few days. The logic behind it isn’t hard to see, in an evolutionary perspective. If a potential mate can get through even the stupidest, most dangerous kind of shit, then they can definitely protect the family. Jared gets it, he does, but this pisses him off.

*They* did not build their connection on posturing and showing off.

“Stop, you are hurt!” Jared snaps at Jensen again, tries to grab his elbow, but to no avail.

It just spurs Jensen on. He jumps over a blistering rock, unnecessarily so, and almost topples into a thorny bush when his bad ankle buckles and doesn’t support his weight. How stupid. Stupidly endearing. Jared doesn’t consider himself a fan of macho pretension, but the fact that Jensen can’t really pull it off, yet still tries because he thinks Jared would like that… It sets a strange, tickling warmth off in his chest.

He’s not used to people working their ass off to court him. No, it’s usually him who runs after yet
another crush, making a fool of himself while trying to live up to unreachable expectations.

But, now that he thinks about it, he isn’t really one to stop either. Normally, what he needs to forget his reckless plans is something else to focus on. Three out of four times it’s a Chad-related disaster, but he always runs to help because he cares about that idiot. And if Jensen thinks about this even a tiny bit similarly...

Jared grunts and pretends to stumble onto his knees, clutching at his thigh as if it hurt.

Jensen is there in an instant, flailing with his hands. “Jay, Jay, are you okay? Did you let a bonebug bite you?”

Jared doesn’t know what a bonebug is, but he hopes he will never have the misfortune to see one. “Tired. I need to stop.”

Jensen sits back on his haunches, rubbing at his own ankle with a concerned frown. “Really?”

“More walk - I fall.” Jared’s solemn nod isn’t quite award-winning in sincerity, but Jensen buys it without hesitation. It almost makes Jared feel bad - Jensen knows just enough now that he recognizes simple human gestures, but the details of honesty escape him. He would be so vulnerable alone in the human world, so easy to manipulate.

“Okay. We need...” Jensen mumbles to himself, scanning the canopy layer high above them. The gears turning in his head might as well be visible as he works out the solution, but then a smile spreads over his face and he pats Jared’s forearm, comforting. “I found us good branches to sleep on.”

If he thought that prospect would be reassuring, he was mistaken by a mile. Jared’s guts are twisting in fear even before Jensen leads him to a tree whose lowest branch that could support them is twenty feet above ground.

“I can’t climb there.” Jared sighs, raising his normal, hookless human hands.

“You can.” Jensen dismisses him and fishes the knife out of their satchel. He swings it at the trunk above his head until a small chunk of wood falls out. *I’ll carve you slots*, his triumphant expression says, and Jared resolves himself to his doom, which is, apparently, falling out of a tall tree. But he doesn’t feel like complaining too much - Jensen will sit his ass down and rest soon enough, and that’s what he wanted after all. Mission accomplished.

In the end, he does make it up there, to the spot Jensen chose for them. Jared sort of wants to smack himself for not noticing it earlier because now that he’s sitting in the tree it’s obvious that the word Jensen said didn’t mean *branches*, but *nest*. A giant, dark blue nest. Granted, it’s hidden in dense sage-green foliage, but still, Jared can’t believe he didn’t see it. It’s big enough that curled up or with their feet dangling, they can fit into it lying down.

There are tufts of grey fur caught in the twigs inside, but Jensen just picks them out and throws them down into the abyss. Otherwise, the nest is clean, no pellets scattered around. And more importantly, no eggs, thank Fate. Jared is already creeped out by the thought that there might be a horde of critters ready to crawl over them at night. If there’s even a remote possibility that the nest’s original occupant is going to come back, he would rather skip tonight’s sleep.
Draping a poncho on their borrowed bed, Jensen hums a soft tune to himself. There are leaves sticking out of the pouch he would usually keep his money in - a plant he dug out of the undergrowth before they climbed up here, complete with plum-sized tubers on its roots. Their food supplies are low, and he probably wants to eat something fresh, Jared guesses. Not like his race is that big on cooking anyway. They are really fond of raw fruit and leaves, must be how they get a healthy dose of metal.

“Aren’t we too heavy for this?” Jared asks, clutching at the bough under him with a white-knuckled grip. He has absolutely no desire to test whether Jensen’s saliva could heal a skull fracture or not.

“I do not understand.” Jensen singsongs as he sits down square in the middle of the nest and picks up the knife again. He tugs the plant out of his pouch and begins peeling the tubers and the roots they are hanging on. Jared can see some pinkish sap leaking out between his fingers. One thing he’s sure of - Jensen can munch on raw mutant potatoes as much as he likes, but he’s going to stick to whatever’s left in his satchel.

“Will fall?” Jared shoots the nest a doubtful look. “We are too heavy?”

Jensen pops the first clean tuber into his mouth, laughing around the bite. “No, stupid. Grey branchers -” Nesters, Jared reminds himself. It means nest, not branch. “- have metal in their bones. They can only build nests out of this.” He gestures at the blue twigs. “Need five people to lift one after it’s shot.”

“Okay.” Jared mumbles, easing himself down next to Jensen with his heart in his throat. He has no choice but to trust Jensen’s judgement on this, against everything his own experiences with nests say. The idea doesn’t make him jump for joy.

Jensen gives him an amused smile and reaches down to take off his sandals. “They sleep during the day. This one isn’t here, means it left the nest, moved away. Don’t worry.”

“Easy for you to say.” Jared grumbles, but forces himself to breathe more slowly and his jaw to unclench. He feels Jensen’s thigh jump against his knee and he wrenches his gaze away from the nest’s rim to glance down at it. His eyes automatically skip down Jensen’s leg to the reason why Jensen hisses through his teeth - his purpling, swollen ankle.

It looks awful. So bad, in fact, that Jared wouldn’t be surprised if something tore. He can’t even imagine how much it must hurt that the swelling stretches the gold chains around the joint to their limits. They dig into the already tender flesh and further restrict its movement.

Jensen takes a deep breath, licks the side of a tuber cut in half and presses it to the bluest part of his skin, where the contusion looks the worst. He rubs the pinkish sap around the barely visible knob of bone, but he hits such a painful place that his hand shakes and drops away.

He bites into another tuber and flashes Jared a weak smile. “Try?” He asks, offering the roots.

Jared’s upper lips curls in disgust. “No, thanks.”

Jensen closes his eyes for a second and puts the tuber back on his leg. “I chew this. Tastes, uh… cold. Swallow half, tie the other half here. Less pain.” He taps his ankle, looking around for something that resembles a rope. “How to tie…”

“I can hold it there?” Jared volunteers. If squeezing analgesic sap on the wound helps, he will sure as hell do it. Even if the tuber is repelling for his human standards.

Jensen gives him an insecure look. “You would?”
“Of course.” Accepting help isn’t something Jensen’s people would consider attractive in a mate, so it’s a testament to how much it must hurt that he doesn’t protest when Jared confiscates the tuber. He just sits there, blushing in embarrassment, while Jared pulls the injured foot on his lap and spreads the fluid over it.

To cheer him up a little, Jared runs his free palm up Jensen’s calf to tickle the back of his knee. “Cracked egg.”

“That’s you!” Jensen chortles and swats at him.

“How?” Jared grins back. The leg of Jensen’s pants is snug around his wrist, but he doesn’t pull away. The warm skin underneath is too tempting, he just wants to stroke it all over, see if it feels this smooth everywhere. “Why cracked egg?”

“Because you are like a baby,” Jensen laughs, pokes at the fingers creeping up over his kneecap. “A baby who cracked his egg too soon.”

“Egg?” Jared stares. He can’t say it’s that much of a surprise, and neither is this the first time he talked with an egg-laying race, but the confirmation still makes him amazed. Are some kids born with tiny down feathers everywhere, like human babies with lanugo? Does this have something to do with the lack of toddlers in public spaces? “I wasn’t… Humans don’t come out of eggs. They grow in the, uh… in the belly, and come out as babies.”

Jensen blinks at him as though he grew a second head. “Strange.”

“For you, Jen.” Jared shakes his head in amusement. The tuber in his hand feels completely empty now, so he discards it and checks on the sprain. The swelling has gone down some, he notes with a pleased smile. “Hey, look.”

Jensen doesn’t. He just smiles and traces the gaps between Jared’s groping fingers through the material of his pants. “I know. It heals fast with saliva and dirplant.” He wriggles closer until he’s almost sitting in Jared’s lap. “Jeff’s daughter is a healer. She taught me.”

“Jeff has a daughter?” Jared asks and curses how his voice trembles. He’s anything but inexperienced with crushes, his body, however, doesn’t seem to remember that this isn’t his first time falling for someone. He hasn’t become this giddy just from touching someone’s bare knee since middle school.

Jensen clucks his tongue. “Only her. His two sons died when the Sickness came. His mates too. That’s why his daughter learnt healing.”

“The Sickness?”

“Pain everywhere, yellow skin, vomit until dead. We don’t know where it came from. People say the High Priest made too many dances for small things like better trades. The Jade God got angry because of all the wishes and didn’t take the gifts. Sent us the Sickness. Many died. My father’s other mate died too.”

“I’m sorry.” Jared says, tries to imagine how devastating it must have been to live through an epidemic like that, but his mind shies away from the emotion, too caught up in the excitement of having Jensen here, healthy and so close Jared can smell the rainwater scent of his skin. Deadly diseases seem removed from this serene reality right now.

Jensen gives him the equivalent of a shrug. “I didn’t… live home that time.”
That makes Jared’s eyebrows quirk. “Not home?”

“I was in the pebble house,” Jensen sighs. His exhale ruffles Jared’s bangs. “I miss it.”

As if that wasn’t obvious. He calls the village home and Allan his father, but he doesn’t love either the way he loves the City and Jeff. It’s endlessly complicated and sad. Although Jared’s home hasn’t been burnt down, sometimes he feels the same hopeless loss, the longing for something lost forever, never to come back. He refuses to wallow in it while he’s here, can’t afford that now, but the connection burns like a brand under his skin. Knowing a person who gets it is terrible and wonderful at the same time.

“It was a beautiful house.” Jared comments and swipes his thumb up and down on Jensen’s shin.

“Yes.” Jensen smiles back, shooing the nostalgia away, then clears his throat. “When the Sickness reached the City, Miquitzli stepped out and said it happened because of the High Priest. His group wanted him and the dancers gone. He looked for us. Saw me and set the house on fire.” He swallows at the memory. “When the Jade God gets angry, they hold a big dance to make him happy again, but after… I was the only dancer and I was too young.”

“Why Miquitzli want you gone?”

“The High Priest can...the gods by...us.” Jared frowns, missing half of the sentence, but Jensen goes on before he can interject and ask for clarification. “People think every bad thing will happen if they lose all of us. No dance, end of the world. Miquitzli wants to show it is not true.”

An apocalypse myth. Great. Just what Jensen needs to sit on his shoulders like a murky coat of responsibility.

“What happens on a dance?” Jared captures Jensen’s right hand in both of his, playing with his fingers.

Jensen looks him in the eye and stares until the steel in his gaze shimmers and softens into resignation. “Can we talk about other things?”

No, we can’t, Jared wants to say, if you are in danger, tell me right the fuck now, but he holds back the knee-jerk response of anger and worry and thinks it over. Whatever happens, it can’t be good, even though Jensen is hopeful and proud about it at times. It doesn’t matter how bad it is, what’s important is that Jensen ran away for him, with him, and Jared can’t let him go back, now that he’s free. There’s not much of a chance that he can smuggle him aboard a rescue ship, but even that sliver of hope sounds better than... better than this.

Jared takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly.

“Okay.” He says and looks back down at the fading bruise.

It’s only light blue now, with uneven stripes of darker colours in it where the anklets dug in too hard. The golden chains are hanging loose now, their tiny pendants ready to jingle at the slightest movement. As Jared watches them glitter in the dimming afternoon light, the patterns begin to stand out, minuscule engravings in the metal, gemstone arrangements changing from anklet to anklet. Back in the village, he didn’t have the opportunity to study them up close long enough, but now he wishes he had, because the intricate details, the careful, deliberate placement of every notch and every precious, colourful stone give the jewels another layer of beauty.

All the carvings seem to have a purpose, and as much as he adores their charm, Jared bets it isn’t only aesthetic. “Why are they different?”
“Because they mean different things.” Jensen replies, picking at Jared’s palm with the hooks on his index finger. The sensation makes Jared shudder. “Have to earn them with different dances.”

“How?”

Visibly torn between the taboo and his desire to tell, Jensen purses his lips. His leg slips off Jared’s thighs and he draws it up to his chest, curling into himself. The fingers in Jared’s grip twist free, only to rake down along Jensen’s opposite forearm, leaving parallel blue lines on Jensen’s skin in their wake.

At this point, Jared isn’t above bribing him with affection. He’s desperate to know what’s going on, what Jensen actually means when he talks about dancing, what makes him so important. The puzzle pieces don’t fit together. And while he knows Jensen does dance, quite well actually, Jared isn’t foolish enough to think that’s the big deal. His sense of foreboding keeps hammering on his head, but the final clue still eludes him.

So, cuddling the secrets out of Jensen it is.

“Please.” Jared whispers and leans forward to press a kiss to Jensen’s temple, nosing at his hairline until he feels Jensen turn. “Tell me, mate.”

His lips curve into a smile in anticipation of an answer, but he finds himself knocked flat on his back instead and Jensen -

Jensen is kissing him within an inch of his life.

It’s clumsy and rushed, almost rough enough to bruise, but Jensen whimpers and pushes, pushes, pushes until Jared’s instinct to lead gives way and crumbles. Jared doesn’t melt, he dissolves, loses all the tension in his muscles and drifts into a world where there’s nothing but Jensen’s nose rubbing his, Jensen’s lips gliding between his own, the taste of mint cold on his tongue and his hands in Jared’s hair, the thumbs under Jared’s jaw holding him up even when the twigs and leaves vanish from his perception to leave him floating in air. Jensen’s weight settles on his hips, calves pressed to his thighs, and Jared’s hands travel up over the body-warm clothes, not to pull down and grind but to cling on. Mind gone into a haze, he wonders if Jensen can actually produce electricity and shock him, because that’s what he feels, a tingle in his fingertips that runs through the bones of his hand up to the hinges of his jaw.

Jared has never, ever considered the possibility that someone would push him out of the captain’s chair like this. People tend to think big means brutish, and no one thought to try and contradict that before.

He didn’t think submission, even just for a minute, would feel so liberating.

“You need to - give me - a stone first.” Jensen mumbles between wet-hot kisses and nuzzles, still not getting the hang of it, but so, so sure of being wanted that it ceases to matter.

“What?” For a second, Jared doesn’t even know which language he’s speaking. “Stone?”

“To be my mate.” Jensen rubs their noses together and Jared finds himself thinking, I could get used to this. The thought isn’t as scary as it probably should be. “In front of the gods.”

Jared will give him the shiniest stone in the whole damn forest if he finishes what he started.

He reaches further up without thinking, strokes along Jensen’s spine until there’s bare skin under his fingertips and something amazingly plush covers the back of his hand. “Oh.” He feels the sound rush
out of him at the realisation.

He’s touching Jensen’s neck, the vulnerable place under his feathers, and Jensen lets him, smiles with his lips all spit-slick darkness and his hair spun gold in a single ray of sunshine that breaks through the leaves. The light hits the side of his face and makes it warm to the touch of Jared’s free hand, and when he turns into Jared’s palm, his earring is an amber glint of allure on the curve of his earlobe.

Jared’s heart stutters and pumps out a wave of dizzying excitement, a joy that makes his entire body kick into sweaty overdrive. Everything he wanted to talk about falls victim to desire as he curls his fingers around Jensen’s neck and pulls him in for another kiss, one with intent and awareness this time, to get closer, to touch and stroke and claim all that uncharted land Jensen has just offered up for him. His grip slips in the sheen of sweat that gathered under half-tensed feathers, and suddenly, there’s something hard under his middle finger, a bump in the flesh that he can’t help but trace around in wonder.

Jensen bites down on his lip so hard that Jared tastes his own blood. He pulls back, pushing his tongue against the wound even though it’s already healing from Jensen’s remedial saliva.

“Ow.” Jared hisses. “Did I hurt you?”

The exact opposite, it seems. Jensen has his eyes closed, but the light glowing beneath his eyelids breaks through under his lashes, compliments how his freckles switch on and off like a pulse, like he’s completely losing control of his reactions.

“Good?” Jared whispers and presses down on the bump again, does a slow circle around its edge.

In response, Jensen bows his head and makes a string of inhuman noises that carry through the forest, birdsong-loud and lilting. His feathers get soft and downy again instead of metallic-hard and the noises keep coming, rumble in Jensen’s throat. *Fuck*, Jared didn’t realise that alien sounds could not only fascinate him but turn him on this much. He curses his spacesuit for its impractical design, because he will either have to get buck naked in a wild animal’s nest or risk coming into his pants.

“I didn’t know…” Jensen gasps, forcing his gleaming neon eyes open. “Dancers don’t…” Jerk off, Jared fills in the meaning.

“Can what?”

“Bad word.” Jensen makes a face, swallows and squirms on Jared’s lap. “It’s on the High Priest’s list of bad words. You say them and get caught, you get five lashes to your leg.”

“That’s one of the craziest laws I’ve ever heard.” Jared comments and rubs the strange little spot he found over and over again.

Jensen’s fingers worm themselves under the neck of his spacesuit and tug in desperation. “Stop that.” He groans. “It makes me want.”

“Uh-uh.” Jared grins, shakes his head. “What’s the bad word?”

“Mating without giving stones?” Jensen tries, but Jared just keeps teasing him further until he curses under his breath and gives in. “I will say it, but you don’t tell others.” Jensen raises a hand in what Jared would call the horn gesture, pinky and index finger pointing up.

Jared has seen this a few times before, knows it’s a silencing gesture, something akin to the human *zip your lips* sign, if a bit more macabre. He could guess where it came from - one night, Jensen read
him a story from a copper plate about a girl who talked too much about the gods’ matters. The Jade God, furious in his grief of losing his family, made a horned monster out of clay, breathed electricity into it and sent it after the girl to chase her all day and all night until she cried the last of her voice away.

Earnest as can be in spite of how silly he thinks this is, Jared mirrors the sign and laughs when Jensen tucks his face into his featherless neck to muffle the word he is about to say.

“Sex. Dancers can have sex, but no mate, no family and no self-touch.”

“But you gave me a stone.”

“Yes.” Jensen sits back up and cranes his head to get Jared’s massaging thumb just where he wants it. “I’m breaking the rules.”

Breaking rules. They are going to be quite the masters at that if they live to see New Earth, aren’t they?

“Jen.” Jared whispers and takes hold of Jensen’s fingers, guides them to the place where he can get the spacesuit to unfold. The cloth strips off his torso like silk, down his arms and down his chest until it stops bunched up around his hips, Jensen’s fingertips caught just under the hem.

Jared takes a deep breath of humid forest air and stares up at the leaves above his head, feels the goose bumps of excitement cascade down along his waist. “Don’t go back to the City.”

“Don’t go to the City. Find the ship with me.” Jared plants his hands on Jensen’s thighs and squeezes, feels it under his palms when Jensen raises his weight, and then the suit is gone, and there’s nothing, nothing but naked skin and trembling muscles where it counts. The air leaves Jared’s lungs with a whoosh of lead-heavy anticipation. “Oh God.”

Jensen hovers above him, lit up all over now and panting from nerves. “Tell me what is good, Jay, I don’t know…” He rambles, puts one hand on Jared’s abdomen and hooks a fingertip in his navel. “Is this like mine, like my neck-”

Jared flinches and drags the hand away. “No, no.” He presses on the pads of Jensen’s fingertips until they go soft and humanoid again. “No hooks.”

“No hooks. Okay.” Jensen starts, but Jared sits up and pulls him into another kiss before he can finish, licks his lips open and chases after the sweetness on his tongue until all he feels is the minty-fresh sting that can only be Jensen’s natural taste.

“Like this.” Jared sighs into Jensen’s mouth and leads his hand down to where he wants it, curls it into a fist and strokes.

He’s in the middle of a jungle, dozens of feet high up in a tree with a glowing alien in his lap who’s about to give him the handjob of his life, and there’s no shame, nothing that ignites the voice in his head that could say it’s wrong. He always thought he would feel some sort of dangerous thrill when he let an alien touch him for the first time, some aftereffect of the still lingering cross-species sex taboo, but it doesn’t come.

It all feels so normal. So good.
Sure, Jensen’s got no clue what else he could do with his mouth besides pressing it to Jared’s face like an afterthought, and he cares more for the fingers Jared has under his feathers than the hand palming at his ass, but it feels right.

“Press on my neck.” Jensen whimpers and lets go of Jared’s hard-on just long enough to unlace the front of his own pants. His cock bobs free, leaks something that shimmers blue in the dwindling afternoon light and makes Jared’s mouth water. “Please, Jay, please.”

“Jesus.” Jared gasps and reaches for it, thinks, I gotta keep the food tester within arm’s reach, and ignores how his face lights aflame at the thought. He gives it a light stroke and draws a blunt fingernail down that little spot Jensen is so desperate over.

Jensen bites into Jared’s neck and jerks under the touch, rocks back and forth, left and right in frantic circles while Jared just holds him and rubs, until every dot of light on him flickers and his body seizes. The sound that leaves him vibrates into Jared’s bones and shoots a shiver down his spine.

When the first drops of warmth hit his chest, Jared rolls his hips up as much as Jensen’s weight across his thighs lets him and grunts.

“Yes, that’s it, baby.” He moans and wraps his own hand around Jensen’s faltering fist until the pleasure takes over him too.

The afterglow, in Jensen’s case at least, is a literal one - Jared notes with a bemused smile as he shimmies his spacesuit back over his groin. He hasn’t seen Jensen’s pale skin emit light before, but it seems to be happening now, just a faint glimmer that radiates from him along with a massive amount of heat. It has become pitch black under the forest’s canopy in the last few minutes, but Jared can see perfectly well where they left their stains on his abdomen and Jensen’s shirt. Before he wipes it off with a corner of the poor poncho they are using as a bedsheets, he reaches for the food tester and waves it over himself.

This is the most awkward thing he has ever done, period. Checking the edibility of alien semen. But he needs to do it for, um, well. For other things he might want to do later. Jensen is too out of it to spare him more than a confused little noise, just lets Jared spread him out on his back and run the device above his body until every questionable area has been covered. When the last of the results show up, Jared sighs in relief and glances down at the cooling dollops on his stomach.

Well, it’s not poisonous, so…

“God, no, I’m crazy.” He shakes his head and cleans them both up before his thoughts take a deviant detour again.

Thoroughly exhausted after the hovercoaster of a day they had, Jared lies down when he’s done, pillows his head on Jensen’s feathers and noses at the skin above them. “Well, that was…” Unexpected. Amazing, flat-out ecstatic. “It was so great, Jen.” And they have barely even touched each other this time.

“What?”

“First try doing that.” Jensen murmurs into the darkness, halfway to dreamworld already.

Jared, however, freezes with his breath caught on its way out of his throat. The blissful fog lifts up from his mind. “What?”

“Sex. Didn’t know how it was.” Jensen repeats. He’s rhythmically pressing his hooks into Jared’s naked arm and back, lulling himself to sleep. “Did you?”
“But… Jeff?”

The kneading stops. “Oh. No. Not… we aren’t…” Jensen trails off in an uncharacteristic mumble, embarrassed. He coughs. “So-ry?”

“No, don’t be sorry.” Jared props himself up on his elbow. “You aren’t? With any people?”

“No one.” Jensen blinks up at him with rueful neon eyes. “I just play it.”

Jared can’t help but be a bit relieved that he didn’t assume what he did based on nothing, but hearing this admission still upends something fragile inside his mind. “Why?”

Jensen’s gaze fixes at a point above Jared’s shoulder. “Jeff teaches me things I’m not allowed to learn. How to know maps without seeing them. What to eat and do in the forest. How to climb the highest. He takes me out and shows, and we train. We make it look like sex, because we are breaking the rules.”

Jared runs a hand over his face. “You really don’t have sex?”

“No. Just play it.” Jensen begins pulling his legs up again, like every other time he feels vulnerable. “My parents are proud to think Jeff has sex with me. But he’s a… he’s like my dad, Jay.”

Jared huffs and tugs on his hair. Okay, so he wasn’t completely wrong with his theories, Jensen does think of Jeff as his father and they did pretend they were sexual partners, but… He feels like he has failed them or something. He thought of Jeff as this exploiting, selfish monster who couldn’t care less about how young Jensen was, and turns out he has been helping Jensen all along. By illegally educating him, no less.

It’s not his fault that they let him come to the wrong conclusions, but now he feels bad for being outright hostile to Jeff every minute they spent together.

Jensen strokes the dip of Jared’s clavicles and turns to curl into a ball. “Sorry I didn’t tell you.” He whispers.

“Fuck.” Jared doesn’t have anything for or against virgins, he’s not one of those neo-puritan cultists and no one else cares about chastity anyway, but… Is it bad that he’s kind of happy? It gives him a tendril of joy to know that they could explore this thing together, find out all the wonderful things they could do with each other. “I’m not mad. I’m not.”

“No?”

“I’m happy, okay?” Jared smiles and fishes their second poncho out of the satchel to drape it over them. He wiggles until Jensen shifts back into his previous position, then throws an arm over his stomach.

Jensen turns his head and gives him a tentative nuzzle. “Okay.”

Jared kisses him in turn, chaste and soothing. “Why does he teach you?”

“He says I will need it. Says I will be alone out here one day and he can’t come with me. I think… No person knows what comes after the Dance. He wants me to be ready.”

Jared’s hand clenches into a fist. “Don’t go to the Dance, Jen.” He mutters.

Jensen smiles and lets his light fade out into darkness. Around them, the jungle begins its night shift
to the peaceful whistle and hum of its residents, with the rustle of bushes and foliage as nocturnal predators set out on their nightly prowl. Under Jared’s palm, Jensen’s pulse slows down to a restful beat. His feathers still hold a trace of flowery scent from home.

Jensen pushes close enough for their noses to touch and settles down to sleep. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

The first thing they do in the morning after Jared shows how to use the sonic teeth cleaner is looking for the stream again. They need pearl producing crustaceans to restock on water. Jensen would probably be fine for a while with coppery plant juice, but Jared, learning from the mistake of his first day, doesn’t leave his survival up to chance.

It’s almost midday by the time they find a suitable creek and Jared has lost his sense of direction once again. There are strange trees along the riverbed, bowing over the water with the tips of their pendulous branchlets disrupting the currents on the surface. They have opalescent globs all over their trunks and fallen between their roots.

“Fruit.” Jensen says and walks away to hunt God-knows-what by the rapids with a sharpened stick. “Eat them only when you have no other food. Taste sour.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know you have a sweet tooth.” Jared grins after him, wading knee-deep into a colony of frightened crabs.

Out of the forest’s protective shade, the sunshine beats on his bare neck like invisible, liquid fire. In less than half an hour, the salt of sweat on his lips becomes a permanent savour to go with pearl-harvesting, which is officially the worst physical activity Jared had to do in weeks. The only upside of doing it and getting gross from mud, sweat and unfortunate bugs is the view. Because whenever he raises his eyes, he can see Jensen upstream, half-naked and flushed, trying to lure in hapless freshwater animals with a hand stuck under the surface, dots glowing. Jared’s surprised he doesn’t try catching them with his bare hands, using his hooks.

When Jensen notices him staring, he straightens up and reaches into his pouch.

“Look!” He yells and holds up a two-legged fish with a smile. “Big man Jay for big food!”

Jared snorts. “You nailed that word order, babe.”

“What?”

“Good work!” Jared replies and turns back to collecting water.

To take the pearls away from the slippery crabs, he needs to stay bent down and grab for the little fuckers, and while he does so, his hair keeps falling into his eyes and annoying the hell out of him. Completely fed up with how it sticks to the sweat on his forehead, he swipes it back and makes some quick, ugly braids in it as a temporary solution. Without a hair tie, they are going to fall apart pretty soon anyway, he learnt that from years of practice with Megan.

With the braids and the beard he’s still sporting, he thinks he’s kind of badass in a barbaric way, buzzes on a bit of a high from feeling manly. It puts him in a cocky mood until the back of his head starts prickling from the force of a hard stare. He looks over and spots Jensen a few feet away, scowling and dripping wet from head to toe, which doesn’t leave much to the imagination. Despite
the warning bells blaring in his mind, Jared’s body perks up in interest. He fervently wishes it wasn’t so obvious through his spacesuit.

“Only the High Priest can wear his hair like that.” Jensen mutters and holds up their stolen knife. “I will make it short for you.”

“Aw, don’t be mean.” Jared laughs and wades out of the stream, dumps the full satchel by Jensen’s feet next to the fish and leans in for a kiss. “Your priest can screw himself. I won’t let you cut my hair.”

Jensen keeps him at arm’s length with a hand on his chest, eyebrows high up on his forehead. “I hear you say. Bad you, Jay. Pull me do things I know bad.” He scolds and touches his own throat, warning Jared like a human would with an index finger held up. “Do know I know your talk.”

“Lovely accent.” Jared smirks and darts in, scores himself a peck before Jensen pushes him away.

“Fake you!” Jensen snaps, but he has to turn away to hide how his lips wobble to curve up. “I did not understand that.”

Jared collapses on the large buttress root of a nearby tree and laughs himself sick. “Ah, I teach you the worst things.” He wheezes.

He should be ashamed of himself as a linguist. Dropped into a miraculous first contact encounter with myriads of possibilities for scientific breakthrough and what does he do? Hooks up with a local and teaches him swear words. He’s an embarrassment for the Federation and his medal-hoarding family.

Right now, it feels fucking awesome.

“You should feel shame.” Jensen tells him playfully, right on cue. “You only teach me the bad words.”

“When did you start reading my mind?”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Jared snickers and makes grabby hands in Jensen’s direction. “Come here.”

Jensen snaps his fingers behind his ear, which is basically a less rude way of flipping Jared off, and drops the knife on the satchel. “I go look for wood and sunflower.”

“Sunflower.” Jared deadpans, but Jensen just clucks his tongue and jogs off back into the forest, missing the meaning behind the intonation.

“Sunflower. What the fuck is that?” Jared grumbles to himself. Something for the fire, perhaps?

With nothing better to do, he walks over to Jensen’s catch and checks it with the tester. The fish contains a mind-blowing amount of vitamin C, which is bizarre, to say the least, but Jared’s immune system could always do with a bit of a boost and the contents are otherwise ordinary. He should clean it before Jensen comes back, he knows, get it ready for cooking, but… it’s slimy and has its dead eyes fixed on him.

The knife is still there though, and he’s got time to kill, so he gathers some water in a hollow rock and kneels down to give shaving a try. He’s at the point where risking a few cuts is well worth it when the alternative is trekking in the jungle with this itchy madness. Manly qualities
notwithstanding.

He has half of a clean-shaven face a few minutes later and just a tiny bit of blood on the blade. He’s doing really well, he thinks, from a result-oriented viewpoint, since the beard is coming off just like he wanted. His skin is already burning on one side and he dreads what’s to come when he has to scrape over his chin, but he’s going through with this now because goatees are the shit nowadays on Tellar Prime and he wouldn’t be caught dead with a look similar to a Tellarite.

He is just about to take the plunge, when he hears wood falling on dirt, then Jensen circling around him and kneeling on the other side of the rock.

“Hi.” Jared grins sheepishly.

Jensen purses his lips and holds out a hand. “Give.”

“What?”

“Give. You do it like one who fell off his ant.”

“Oh. Okay.” Jared hands over the knife, then startles when Jensen’s free hand clasps around his jaw and squeezes like a vice. He’s pulled forward until he’s staring at Jensen so closely that he can see a barely perceptible asymmetry in the tattoos lining his forehead. Jensen has a pinched look of concentration on his face that falters for the tiniest of seconds when Jared wriggles his nose.

Jared does his level best not to laugh. Good to know he has some attractive features to go with the clumsiness.

Jensen growls. “You laugh, I cut you.”

“Yessir.” Jared replies and puts his hands on Jensen’s thighs to steady himself. A bitten-off giggle slips through.

If looks could kill… well, they can kill some species, but if looks could kill humans, Jared would be on his way to the great alternate galaxy, that’s for sure.

Jensen does not cut him, but his feathers go ramrod straight and threatening. Some of them point at rather sensitive parts, but Jared isn’t exactly worried. The shiny green vanes fascinate him too much to leave time for reconsidering his actions. The way they glitter in the sunlight like precious stones reminds him of something he should have asked about way earlier than today.

“Jen?”

Jensen hums in acknowledgement and brushes Jared’s cheek with his thumb, like he wants to say he’s still a little exasperated, but likes Jared all the same. The blade goes scraping up on the underside of Jared’s jaw, never once nicking the delicate skin there.

Jared swallows and turns his focus back on Jensen’s gaze. “When those men caught us… they talked. Wanted to… cut things?”

“My things?” Jensen asks, the embodiment of calmness. “Many people want that.”

“Why?”

“For pebbles.”

Jared rolls his eyes. Didn’t take a genius to guess that. “How much is a feather?”
“One pebble.”

“No, I mean… Your feather?”

“One of mine?” Jensen murmurs and finishes off the shave with a lick to Jared’s poor, abused right cheek. He doesn’t answer the question, just keeps nuzzling Jared’s skin until it begins to heal.


Jensen drops his forehead to Jared’s cheekbone and sighs.

“A house.”

“What?”

Jensen sits back on his ankles and makes a show of ruffling his feathers. “You can get enough pebbles for one of mine to buy a house.”

Jared has the sudden urge to pull a chunk of his hair out in frustration. “Why?” No answer. “Jensen? I’m not letting you stand up until you tell me.”

“I do not -”

“Just tell why.”

Jensen starts wringing his hands. Probably wants to bite them but tries to restrain himself. “I can’t.”

“Can’t or not want?” Silence. Jared goes for the coaxing tactic. “I promise it will not scare me away.”

Which ends up being a mistake in retrospect.

“Promises!” Jensen scoffs and wrestles himself away, stalking over to the pile of wood and picking up a piece.

Jared bows his head. He deserved that, he figures, for intending to break the one he made in the village. “Sorry.”

The wood drops back into the pile. “No, so-ry I.” Jensen mutters. “I’m not mad. Just… Yes, I don’t want to tell. I want you to think of me like you do now.”

Jared just nods and stands up. It hurts, no kidding, but everyone has boundaries. He has no business poking around where he’s not wanted.

“I found a nice sunflower.” Jensen throws in the change of topic like a lifeline and shows Jared a green, five-legged starfish creature.

Jared takes a hasty step back.

“Don’t…Jay, this is…and that is…and…” Jensen goes on, but the whole damn speech flies over Jared’s head in a cloud of unrecognisable words. All he can think of is dozens of this creature’s six-legged cousins running towards him while he’s puking copper.

“Look.” Jensen drops the animal on the ground. Why the fuck is it called sunflower? It’s not a freaking plant and has nothing to do with the sun, what the hell…
Except, the creepy-crawly starfish turns a few times in place, then settles and grows a red petal-like mimicry on one of its arms. To confuse predators, most likely.

Jensen points at it and extends an arm in a parallel direction. “There you find the dying Sun.” When Jared just continues to stare, he kneels down and draws a circle in the sand, then three wavy lines next to it. “City.” He points at the circle. “Lake.” He gestures at the waves and draws another circle where the fake rosebud points. “Dying Sun.”

Jared slaps his chest. “Oh my God, is that a compass?”

A living, moving... thing used as a compass that points westward and has five directions. Holy shit.

Jensen smiles up at him and motions at his whimsical little map. “Your... ship. From the City, where to go?”

“Uh, West, I guess.” Jared mumbles, still not quite believing his eyes. “Dying Sun?” He crouches down and draws an X on the area he calculated.

“Okay.” Jensen glances at the “sunflower”, planning their route in his head. “We eat, then go find your ship.”

The grin that takes over Jared’s face grows so wide it aches. “You will come with me?”

“Yes.” Jensen blushes. “No dance. No going back to the City. Only what you promised, Jay.”

They have been on the way to the ship for ten days when they break through the treeline on top of a hill and spot a barren, burnt area in the distance that could be nothing but a small crater and its surroundings. Jared isn’t ashamed to admit he cries at the sight, has to ask Jensen to sit with him there in the off-white grass looking at it just a little longer before they have to enter the forest again.

It’s there, resting in the clearing, that Jensen tilts his head at the orange-red sunset and says, *that’s the Sky fighting with the Jade God.*

“Yeah?” Jared leans back on his elbows, long legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankle. “Who’s winning?”

“The Jade God wins every time in that body. He kills the Sun too and leaves darkness for the night.”

“That body?”

Jensen cards a hand through his feathers. “He has more.”

“Like what?”

Jensen pulls his knees up to his chest and rests his chin on them. His expression is shifting from sad to fearful as he glances between Jared’s face and the crater a few miles away. “Are you sure I won’t die on your... ship?” He asks, pausing like usual before he names the vehicle.

He must be scared out of his mind, knowing he’d be the first of his people to fly. Jared knows verbal reassurance won’t go far enough to calm him, but he offers it anyway. “Yes. I am.”
It just seems to send Jensen further into anxiety. “I shouldn’t go up there.”

“Why?”

“The Sky won’t like it.”

Jared sighs, sits up fully and slides an arm around Jensen’s back to hold him close. “The Sky isn’t alive. It’s not a living thing.” He brushes the warm skin where the feathers start growing out. “Look. I was up there. Right?”

“Right.”

“I saw it.” He reaches for their battered satchel and pulls out a small fruit, one that reminds him of a grape. “You know what the Sun looks like?” He holds it up. “It looks like this.”

“No.” Jensen laughs. “Don’t joke.”

“No joke.” Jared says with a firm nod. “This is the Sun. And this is… this is us, where we are. We go like this -” He picks up another fruit and twirls it around the first one, holding them in front of Jensen’s face. He lies his head down on Jensen’s shoulder. “- around the Sun. There are many, many other suns out there. And the Sky? It is just air. Air like this.” He waves a hand around them. “A bubble around us.”

“I know the Sky is air.” Jensen agrees indignantly. “But he’s a god too. He must live beyond what you saw, with the Sun and the Moons.”

Jared shakes his head. “When you look up at night… The stars around the Moons are other suns. So far away that their light comes here that small. There are many other people who live on worlds circling around them.”

A light breeze blows over the hilltop and combs through the grass, tumbles down and disappears in the undergrowth where the trees start again. The moisture on Jared’s forehead dries up and leaves his face pleasantly cool. He’s ready to drop and have a nap right here, but they are so close now, he has to drag himself the rest of the way there. The thought of waiting another day when they could get to the ship by dawn is unbearable. If they are lucky, and it damn well seems so since the crater isn’t the size of Yuty, then the automatic emergency mechanism managed to bring the atmospheric thrusters and the landing struts online. Which means that the ship’s communicator system might have preserved. And that’s all they need to get out of this place.

If they get there by sunrise, they could greet tomorrow night on New Earth or Mars.

“Come on. Let’s go.” Jared pulls himself together and stands, holds out a hand.

Jensen curls his fist around Jared’s index finger and just swings it back and forth with a faraway look in his eyes. "You say strange things, Jay. Wonderful things. Sometimes I think you turned back on the Way to get me and you remember what it's like there where I can't see now. Where gods are fruit, their tears are tiny suns and I'm just a… just me." He trails off for a second. “I want to think you are saying the truth.”

Jared sighs and bends down, drops his forehead to Jensen’s. “I do. I came from a place that circles another sun.” He bumps their noses together and straightens up. “Come on. I’ll tell you about it on the way.”

“Okay.” Jensen shakes himself, and off they go.
Something is wrong. It’s not long after nightfall when the realisation truly settles in Jared’s mind. He should have had a hunch as soon as they reached the clearing, because places with a clear view like that aren’t exactly common around here, but the thing that tips him off is the path they end up taking after a while.

It’s not an animal’s trail to its den.

“Jen-”

“Shh.” Jensen stops in his tracks, his back to Jared’s chest, a hand stretched out behind him. They listen with their hearts in their throats, but only the forest’s lullaby breaks the silence enveloping them. Chirping insects and hoots fill the muggy quiet. Nothing advances on them. Careful not to move his ankles at all, Jensen crouches down and picks at a cluster of rocks abandoned by the roadside. After a few minutes of contemplation, he leans his head back against Jared’s hips and blinks up with his luminescent eyes.

“I think there is a village ahead.” He whispers.

“Dangerous?” Jared murmurs back just as cautiously.

“I don’t know.” Jensen stands up. “This road wasn’t used in at least twenty quincenas.”

Three hundred days local time, Jared counts. “Did they leave?"

“Only way to know is seeing.” Jensen replies.

They share a look - nothing good would come of crossing paths with unfamiliar villagers. If they are still here, but too poor to maintain their roads, they will tear Jensen apart as soon as they see him. A house for a feather… How much would an arm worth?

“If people come, you run, okay?” Jared says and moves to walk ahead of Jensen, raising the burning torch in his hand to see the trees.

“I can protect myself when you aren’t taking my eyes away from the danger.” Jensen bites back, but lets Jared lead all the way until they get close enough to the end of the road to see the houses.

They look like they have been hit by a bomb.

“Empty.” Jensen frowns and enters the clearing before Jared could stop him.

There’s nothing waiting to catch them there though. The village is in ruins, blown up almost beyond recognition, with walls torn down and appliances scattered around on the ground like trash. Nature has already began taking back its territory - there’s vegetation breaking in through shattered windows and thickets growing around an abandoned wagon. Everything seems to have been dropped in the middle of an ordinary day, as though sentient life stopped here within a second, no time for defence or hiding.

It must have been a surprise attack.

“No bodies?” Jared whispers.
“No.” Jensen replies and raises three fingers to his forehead, eyes wide open. “And no funeral.”

Jared puts his torch down at the foot of a crumbled barn and gapes at the rubble lit up by the light of three almost full moons. His gaze catches something shiny in the dust. He reaches down and picks it up, frowning as he wipes the dirt off the metal.

“No way."

It’s a phaser emitter.

No question about it. Jared isn’t an expert by any means, but he did grow up in a family where the lowest military rank within generations was lieutenant. He could recognise phaser parts anywhere. This is the barrel of a directed energy weapon, something that a pre-contact race, especially a race like Jensen’s, couldn’t have developed. This came from a space-faring civilization, from a group that doesn’t hesitate to use it against civilians either.

Perhaps from the very group that shot Jared’s ship down.

“Jen…” Jared calls out and hurries after Jensen to the small stage that’s miraculously still standing undamaged in the center of the settlement. “We have to go.”

Jensen takes off his sandals and steps up on the stage, anklets clinking around his bare feet. “The Moons turned their faces to us.” He says, ignoring Jared’s words. “They want me to dance for these people.”

“No now -”

“Now.” Jensen bows his head with grief. “Do you think it was Miquitzli?” He asks quietly.

Why would anyone resort to this cruelty? Jared shakes his head. They didn’t even take the farming equipment, it doesn’t add up. “I don’t know.” But if it was him, he didn’t come alone.

“You know why he chose that name?” Jensen sniffs and pulls his poncho over his head, drops it on his discarded sandals. His neon eyes bore into Jared’s with such a furious intensity that it borders on scary. There’s something otherworldly in it, a mystical strength Jared hasn’t seen before. It feels like even the forest sensed it and has gone quiet in the face of that rage. “Because it means death.”

Jared takes Jensen’s hands and tugs, tries to pull him down from the stage. “Please. Let’s go.”

Jensen squirms away and raises a hand, presses three fingers to his forehead, then to Jared’s, and strokes down. “When you meet a person, you greet them with the protection of the Moons or the protection of the Sun and the Sky.” He does the two-handed salute.

“Why are you doing this?” Jared groans. Currently, he couldn’t care less about the gestures. The guys who did this could still be nearby, armed with their goddamn plasma weapons, and out in the open he and Jensen would be easy targets. They are going to get into trouble if Jensen does his funeral dance, he feels it in his guts, he knows. “It’s not your work to give them a funeral. The… The Jade God will protect them.” He adds, waving his hand in sceptical impatience.

Jensen huffs and traces a finger down Jared’s nose, almost reverently, until his gaze hardens again with determination. He raises his chin up. “The Jade God does not protect.”

“What does he do then?”

“Right now?” Jensen steps back and begins tapping with his foot, thumping on the wooden stage
and jingling his anklets to the beat in his head. He starts turning in maddening, rhythmic circles, spins again and again until his feathers are one fluid circle of light. Lit up by the pale rays of the moons, he tips his head back and spreads his arms wide. “He’s dancing in the moonlight.”
Death is the beginning

Chapter Summary

Jensen has a lot to tell, but Jared doesn't have the time to properly cope with it.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, I know, it took me forever. Existential problems can be like that.

But do not worry, my enthusiasm in the story hasn't waned. I promise that if I feel like I can't write more, I will share my detailed draft instead. I won't leave you guys hanging. ;)
I'll do my best to speed up with the rest of this! xo

This chapter will be mostly hurt-comfort and lots of talking. :)
Something shocks his legs and probably leaves a smattering of thorns in the outer layer of his suit’s thick fabric, but he doesn’t care, just keeps cutting his way through the jungle until his knees buckle from the strain. He doubles over behind an old tree, a dark one among a bunch of faintly glowing trunks, and tries not to lose a lung while he wheezes through the burn. He can hear the clinking of gold as Jensen closes the distance between them, but he can’t deal with him that close now, can barely keep it together on his own. He pushes away from the tree and swears under his breath, sticking his free hand into his satchel to feel the reassuring coldness of the taser. For the first time since he met Jensen, he wants to punch him in the face.

Straining to hear over the rush of blood in his ear, he almost misses it when Jensen whispers behind his back. “No one’s coming.”

Although it instantly curbs the fear somewhat, Jared has to recite his go-to list of Andorian adverbs before he calms down enough to talk like a civilized being. Jensen isn’t glowing when he whirls on him, which must be him being repentant and shit, but Jared’s too angry to just let it go that easily. If this little incident messes up his chance for a way out, he won’t even - well, okay. He will. He’s that pathetically deep in his crush. He knows he will forgive Jen just about anything. Even if he misses his only opportunity to get out.

What a sad case he is.

“Do you have any idea what this is? Do you?” Jared hisses, holding up the phaser emitter he should have just tossed back into the dust. “What if they heard us, huh? What if they are going to kill us?”

Jensen touches his wrist. He almost slaps him away. “You speak fast, I not can -”

“Why the fuck did you have to do that?” Jared takes several calming breaths before daring to open his mouth again, this time in the right language. “This is a weapon that shoots. You know those?” Jensen nods, mimicking the human gesture for Jared’s sake. “This one can make people... not here. Make them gone. Forever. And someone brought it here from the places up there.”

Jensen starts glowing again and squares his shoulders, jaw set. “I fear no weapon from the sky.”

“Like hell you don’t.” Jared scoffs. “That fucking bravado of yours.”

“Please say words know I.” Jensen tugs on Jared’s hand until Jared drops the barrel and reluctantly lets him thread their fingers together.

“What did you say on the stage?” Jared whispers.

“Forget.” Jensen squirms. “You aren't to hear the bad things.”


“Okay!” Jensen jerks in his hold, grapples at Jared’s forearm with both hands. “Jay...”

“Sorry.” Jared lets him go, sagging against the tree trunk. He doesn’t know what has gotten into him. He never resorts to physical intimidation, never. That would be cheating, right? Sort of. He had nothing to do with what his mom ordered in the gene lab while others weren’t fortunate enough to afford it. “Sorry, Jen.”
Jensen’s luminescent fingers stroke down his cheek, accepting the apology. “Gods have many names and many forms. Some we can say, some not. The Jade God has a name you can only say when he is there with you. When he hears that name, he won’t hurt you. But when you say it when he isn’t there, his anger will bring destruction to your home. That name is Quetzalitzli.”

Jared frowns hard enough that the skin between his eyebrows hurt. He knows what he heard, has figured out where this is going, but he doesn’t want to believe it. Can’t, not really. Theoretically, he gets it that gods are nothing but a matter of belief system. Mere concepts, liquid, transformable things. They could be anything, a leaf, a cluster of meteors, a man, an idea - as long as someone believed in them, they would truly be deities. If Jensen says people think he is a god, he is. But to face the notion in reality, to call someone a god… That’s too much for Jared not to get hung up on.

“That is your name.”

“Yes.” Jensen watches him with his big neon eyes. “When the Lights come, the Sun comes down here because she wants to calm him. So they dance. This time, she chose you as her body and…” He pauses. “…you are going to dance with me.”

“I know that.” Jared snaps. “I don’t know what we do and why. I play her and you play him… That’s it?” He throws in as a last-ditch attempt to see this in any other way than the obvious.

“No, I don’t play him.” Jensen stresses, spreading his arms wide. “I am him.” He admits. “I’m Quetzalitzli, the Jade God. I told you the first time you asked for my name.”

And there it is, the truth.

Everything Jared wanted to hear for a while now, and everything he feared Jensen would say since he stepped up on that stage. How is he supposed to deal with this? What could he say after an admission like that?

“How - What the hell do you -” He swallows, starts pacing in a small circle. “A god?”

“Yes.” Jensen replies, almost shyly. “They say.”

“You say you are a god, but they treat you like a prisoner? They wanna cut off your fingers? What kind of worship is this?” Jared fumes. He can’t even explain why that’s the part that bothers him the most. Back in high school, he read a book about a race that defines the purpose of its existence as hunting down its own gods. He personally knows a couple of people who believe in malicious immortals whose scalps are trophies. But, despite everything he learnt, the default in his thoughts is still reverent devotion for celestial entities. It’s hard to wrap his mind around the ambiguous treatment he witnessed around Jensen.

“The Jade God has more than one body. He is around here -” Jensen gestures at the forest. “- but in here too.” He points at his chest. “I am a part of him. In here. But my body is just a…” Vessel, Jared guesses. “…has to become good enough before I go on the Way.”

“How?”

“Anklets and dancing.” Jensen speaks with a patience in his voice fairly universal in humanoid races when they are talking to a child. He no doubt feels like Jared does when a born and bred New Earthishian asks him why his skin isn’t green. “Quetzalitzli is a god of twelve. So I have to earn twelve.”

He shifts his weight from foot to foot, but when Jared doesn’t offer a way out, he grudgingly goes on. “When I danced around the fire was the first. Death. Death is the first one, because everything
begins with it. Everything. With a life that goes on the Way and crosses the darkest Sea. Miquitzli chose his name because of that. He says he is the one who will bring a new life to us people.”

Death is the new beginning. Quite a brilliant concept if one wants to lead a society based on casual violence, huh? Jared can picture it easily, the tribe leaders of the old ages encouraging a religion that enabled war after war against each other. In a jungle full of small, divided clans constantly fighting each other, it must have taken root easily and spread fast.

“Death. Okay.” Jared lets out a long exhale. There can’t be much worse than earning “Death”, right? And all it took was dancing on a funeral. Maybe things aren’t as bad as Jensen’s behavior suggests. He hopes they aren’t. “What are the others?”

“Wind, rain, forest, river, earth, stone, metal, poison, war and darkness. Twelve anklets.”

So they combined a nature deity with a war god to create something they can fear and hate with all their might for the destruction life may bring their way. Then they decided to project all that onto something tangible, something they can name and touch and blame. A person. Or rather, a group of people. Truth is, Jared knows nastier belief systems, but this isn’t going to be his favourite either.

Jensen raises a hand to his mouth, then pauses, aborts the gesture. Jared’s face hardens in suspicion. “I still need poison, war and darkness.”

“You need four, not three. I can count.”

Jensen casts his eyes down, caught in his omission. “Sorry.”

Jared nods and rubs at the centre of his chest. The impact of the last few minutes spreads frostbite-cold under his skin. “The last?”

“Get the last one… during the Dance.”

“And? What is it?”

“Tlamictizque.” Jensen murmurs, the light of his gaze flitting up to the branches above them. He’s so uncomfortable that his arms are trembling, as much as Jared can see them.

“What does that mean?” When Jensen can’t get past the first syllable, Jared purses his lips. “Please.”

Jensen’s eyes flicker. “An offer of life to pay the price of the Way.”

“Fuck.” Jared exhales, heart plummeting. He knew it fit the profile of the local religion, he just didn’t realise, didn’t want to realise who they intended to kill to appease their other gods. “A goddamn sacrifice.” He groans.

“It's not that bad.” Jensen says defensively. “We walk the Way in different forms, but it is the same Way. For gods too. Every circle starts with death and ends in sacrifice. Sacrifice leads to a new death and a new circle. The Way doesn’t stop.”

He puts a hand on Jared’s shoulder for reassurance. “I don't fear Tlamictizque. My soul will go to the forest or the wind, or the river, and start a new circle. It joins - you know, the rest of me. And the body… it doesn’t hurt forever.”

A gentle breeze blows into Jared’s eyes and makes them sting. His lips are chapped and dry, and he gives them a compulsive lick, tastes salt and dirt. He thinks of Jensen in the pebble house, watching his friends go for their dances, never to come back, and the last ripples of his adrenaline rush quiet
down to leave a washed-out, vague sadness behind. Now that he spilled some of his secrets, Jensen looks brittle, in sharp contrast to how he danced on the stage just half an hour ago, and neither is right, neither is him. He is soft and bright and stable, not blinding or dim, not shaky, but never steel-hard either. Above all else, Jared wants to whisk him away and wrap him up in safety and acceptance. It’s already too late though, he knows - an entire childhood of training isn’t something a new world will be able to wipe out, unless they turn to illegal memory altering practices.

“But Jared…” Jensen squeezes his shoulder, trying to draw his attention back to the conversation. The warmth of his palm seeps under Jared’s suit and down into Jared’s skin to fight the residing cold there. “I hope you truly came back through the dark Sea. To find me and tell it is not time for the Sacrifice, because you need me to live more in this circle. Together, maybe in another place. And I hope… that you will not leave me after my Tlamictizque either.”

*I’m not a zombie,* Jared’s knee-jerk response makes it to the tip of his tongue, but he keeps it there and sighs. He doesn’t really know what to say. Jensen’s utterly confused - sometimes he believes Jared’s world view, other times he clings to explanations that fit his beliefs like a security blanket. If they do make it out of here, the transition to modern mentality is going to be rough for him.

Oblivious to Jared’s worries, Jensen slides his hand up and combs it through Jared’s hair, just once, then withdraws. He rocks up and down on his heels. “Say words to me. Tell me what in your head is.”

Jared clears his throat and looks away. Even he himself doesn’t know the answer to that. His mind is a turmoil of swirling, restless thoughts. “I need to think.” He says and steps back. “Let’s go now, okay? I will talk to you once we get there.”

“Okay.” Jensen replies with a subdued tilt of his head, even though it’s not likely that he understood what Jared meant. He’s hurt, it’s obvious, but Jared can’t handle this right now. He has no clue what to say, so, for once, he wants to stay silent instead. Today has been too much of a mess - he will sort this out when they can finally be sure that the rescue team is coming.

Jared wishes he could say reaching his ship sets off a joyous ray of relief in his heart, but it wouldn’t be the whole truth. His lips do quirk up into a toothy grin for the initial flare of hope, but it melts off just as quickly as it came to push his emotions into a well of anxiety instead. This is it. His chance. If he can’t make it work, he’s as good as done for. If he can’t, for once in his life, muster the capability to breathe life into a broken system, he’s a dead man walking. And, he thinks with a sharp pain in his sternum, that would mean Jensen’s death sentence as well.

“Here goes nothing.” He mutters and starts climbing down the steep walls of the hole the impact carved into the planet’s surface.

All things considered, his ship is nothing but a wreck at the bottom of a barren crater. Most of the bridge and the captain’s chair are, of course, missing, since those transformed into the escape pod Jared landed in when he pressed the wrong set of buttons. The outer hull is irreversibly damaged, the control panels are burnt out, and the landing unit has been crashed to smithereens. There isn’t much of the ship left, and Jared has to swallow the bitter taste of disappointment in his throat. It was silly to expect more. It was an old model that wasn’t equipped with up-to-date safety measures, it’s a miracle in itself that the helm station, where Chad would have sat were he not a colossal douche, is in acceptable condition.
It leaves a meagre chance alive that the navigation console’s still working and that Jared can read his own coordinates, send a precise distress call so that a rescue team could find him on the planet. If he tinkers a little with the subspace radio, he could probably blast it out and someone could catch it on the trade route one system over. His ship sucks at subspace communication, but this much every vehicle of the Federation has to be able to do.

“Don’t you fail me now.” Jared mutters and pats the dusty metal that carried him here. Normally, he isn’t one to treat his vehicles like his girlfriends, isn’t one of those engine-brained idiots Mars seems to be packed with nowadays, but he figures even the most superstitious encouragement counts.

“Jay…” Jensen crowds up close behind his back. If Jared didn’t know him better, he would say he was hiding.

“Stay outside. Watch.” He tells Jensen without looking back, too busy assessing the still usable panels smashed into the forward bulkhead. “They could come.”

Apparently, it doesn’t need further explanation, because the ghost-warmth of Jensen’s chest is gone and Jared is left to work in silence. The lack of reply gives him a pause, but he bites his lip and decides to deal with that later, when they are finally, at long last, safe. It isn’t anything too bad or urgent between them, it can wait, he assures himself. Getting out is much more important right now.

Jared’s hair is matted with sweat by the time he finishes patching up the radio. The nail file, sole survivor of the first local metallophage Jared’s come across, has come in handy as a makeshift screwdriver. Who would have thought it would be the tool to save him? He sure didn’t, but he will never again underestimate the value of the simplest of objects. Glancing out through the spiderweb of cracks fanning out in the ship’s viewscreen, he can see how the wind is tearing into treetops in the distance. It’s going to rain. Since he came inside and left Jen to himself, the sun has come up and disappeared behind the looming shadow of a storm cloud. Not a pink cumulation of fluff either, this time - it’s a dense, dark grey thing, the no-nonsense kind. Jared’s gotta hurry up, or the fucker might interfere with his emergency message. He blinks the haze out of his eyes and runs a hand over the panel’s surface.

“Be a good girl now.” He mumbles as he turns on the subspace transmitter, sucking the remaining energy out of his ship’s drained generator. “Come on, come on, come on…”

The intact part of the screen flickers on and instantly welcomes him with lines upon lines of data about how damaged the ship is and how Jared has ten minutes before the environmental conditions of hostile, uninhabited Saxet-d kill him.

Good thing that not every nook of the quadrant has been correctly labelled over the years.

“New Earth media’s gonna flip their shit.” Jared laughs to himself, already woozy from the massive amount of hope building in his mind. He’s so close, he can almost touch it, can all but feel the tingle of dematerialization, of the transporter taking him apart only to put him back together up in the rescue ship. He types in the instructions with his fingers on fire, codes the SOS for two humans and prays the commanding officer will buy it long enough. Then hits send and drops down to his knees.

It has to work. It has to.

He tries weighing his options in case it won’t, but his mind is a blank page except for the desperate
sentence stamped in bold, *this gotta work*. He stares at the watch in his spacesuit, counts the seconds, and wishes he remembered how long it usually takes for first responder stations to answer. There *must be* a medic station in the neighbouring system. With the cargo route going that way, it should be there, it should have received the message already, shouldn’t it, it should have…

The screen above him beeps and flashes red - running out of power. They don’t have much time left.

“Please.” Jared begs and everything stills in him, his heart, his lungs, even his blood, waiting.

Then the screen beeps again.

**Transmission received.**

“Yes!” He crows and jumps up to his feet, staggering from the sheer relief of it. “Oh my God. Oh my…”

He laughs, hand on his forehead. “We’re saved, baby!” His whoop echoes between the ship’s walls, feels like it resonates back to him like a heavenly sign. He’s not quite sure if *we* meant him and Jensen, his ship or his whole freaking world in general -

- but he knows he’s saved.

Saved. It’s only a few hours now and he can bid this humid dirtball farewell forever and beyond, he can get away from its crude violence and return back to comfort and peace. He just has to make sure… Just has to make sure they beam Jen up with him. Once he’s inside a starship, they ain’t gonna dump him back, they are way too afraid of political conflicts for that.

“It’s working!” He calls out for Jensen again, the troubles of their last conversation momentarily wiped from his mind. “Come, look!”

No reply comes. He frowns and glances at the beeping screen again, reads the message confirming what he already knew before the panel flickers and shuts off.

**E.S. unit dispatched. Hold position.**

Hold position. Well, he sure can do that, if only Jensen came inside. Jared will have to hold him in case the starship officers notice he isn’t human before using the transporter. If he’s touching Jensen, it’s less likely that they can separate them for beam-up, which means transporting both of them. He won’t lose Jensen just because they had a tense conversation - he wouldn’t even call it a quarrel, it wasn’t that bad.

“I can't believe it.” He kisses the console and leans his forehead against it for a moment to compose himself. Looking at his watch again, he shakes his head. He forgot to consider the time differences in his estimation - it will probably be the ass crack of dawn on New Earth when they get there. It’s so easy to imagine his friends as they get the news… They will look either hungover, half-asleep or like they had been running on synthesized coffee in the middle of an all-nighter. Jared can’t stop his lips from deepening the dimples etched into his cheeks at the thought. God, he can’t wait.

“Thank you.” He whispers to who or whatever made this happen and carefully detaches himself from the device.

As he bounces out of the wreck, his hands instantly twitch with alarm. Jensen’s nowhere to be found. He’s not close to the ship, but isn’t further away either, can’t be seen by the crater’s walls or even up by the treeline.
“Jen!” Where’s he? Did he - What if -

No.

Jared refuses to panic. Jensen isn’t stupid. He must be on the other side of the wreck. Perhaps he’s giving Jared the silent treatment again. He’s fine. Resisting the guilt that starts welling up in his thoughts - should have kept him close, should have talked - Jared clenches his teeth and jogs around the bulkhead.

Jensen’s sitting cross-legged next to a bunch of thick wires that trail out of the wreck like the bowels of a carcass. He’s dozing with his head tilted to the side, utterly exhausted. His feathers are stiffening and relaxing every time he jerks half-awake.

The poor thing isn’t used to staying up for more than a day.

Jared exhales around a smile and slows down to a walk. “Hey there.”

Jensen startles and grabs for the taser gun on the ground beside him, then spots Jared and deflates. “I’m not good at watch.” He groans.

“I can see.” Jared snorts and holds out a hand, pulls him to his feet.

Thunder roars above them, angry and all-powerful, an eternal target of sentient admiration. Thank Fate ion storms aren’t in the local weather range - Jared had just about enough catastrophes in the last two months for a lifetime. Lightning, though, could still be a problem if they stay out in the open like this. The hull should be able to withstand it, even damaged as it is, so huddling together inside the ship’s remains is their best bet. All that copper in the forest will probably draw the electricity to the tallest trees instead, he hopes.

“Come on, it’s going to rain.” He tugs on Jensen’s hand, surprised to find resistance there. “What? We get inside from the rain.”

Jensen gives him a skittish look. “Sure I can go inside?”

“Yes.” Jared lets out a confused laugh. “Of course.”

“Would it be… safe for me?”

“Oh.” Of course. He’s scared. Anyone would be, presented with technology they wouldn’t have even dreamt of before. Even as a wreck, this ship probably looks like a magical artifact. A dark one too, since flying is apparently forbidden in Jensen’s religion. “Yes. Don’t worry.”

“Sure?” Jensen stresses and looks so tense that Jared just has to draw him into a squishy hug. Rocking them in place, he barely resists the urge to try picking Jensen up. It would probably put a crick in his back, since Jensen isn’t exactly small, but Jared can’t help but want it. He can get really excited about showing affection. At times, he wonders if his mom messed up something that involved the canine genome editors working in the hospital where they inseminated her. “How come that of all things, it’s my ship you’re afraid of?”

“Do not understand.” Jensen mumbles his usual catchphrase and burrows closer, going slack. His arms lock around Jared’s waist, warm and familiar, and Jared’s imagination promptly detaches from reality andwanders into the future. He pictures Jensen in his dorm bed, gripping a pillow like that in his sleep. Bathed in the programmed morning sunshine, snuffling into a crease in the sheets… It’s all he dreams of, all he wants right now. Would Jensen want that too? Is he going to stay, once he realises how wide the world truly is?
“I’m sorry.” Jensen says. They both know it isn’t his language proficiency he’s apologizing for.

Jared nods, rubs his chin against Jensen’s temple. He isn’t yet certain how to handle this in the long term, but one thing he’s sure he needs to get across. “I’m not mad that you not told me.” Not anymore, anyway.

“Okay.”

“But I’m taking you away. That Sacrifice will not happen.”

Jensen’s hands spasm. “It always happens. That is said. It is my life.”

“Only you can decide your life.”

“The Dance is the Way, I always knew.” Jensen’s hold tightens, as though he wants, needs Jared to contradict him and strengthen his will against the determinism of his faith. “Not flying.”

“You can never know, baby.” Jared murmurs and closes his eyes. He thinks of his mom, of her disappointment and the resignation in Old Gran’s eyes, how Jeff could never understand how hard it was to leave the centre of his parents’ galaxy behind to explore the edges, be barely accepted. After all he has gone through on this planet it feels… inconsequential. Bland. Nothing like the spicy-hot anger he was brewing in his heart before he crashed here. He hopes that one day Jensen will be able to reach this point too. Shoving aside his own guilt over not fulfilling the destiny his world expected of him.

“I told you my dad is a… warrior.” He starts. Jensen clucks his tongue. “Well… My brother too. And the father of my father, and his brothers and sisters too.” Jared makes a face. Told this way, it sounds quite honorable, huh? Too bad the bare facts don’t show what this level of ambition can do to the things that truly matter.

“Everyone wanted me to… be big and hurt others and go on ships and… and die for others. As a boy, they made me go to a place where…” Military elementary school. How does he explain that? “To… to a warrior house, and told me not to keep not-human friends because they can turn into enemies. And they sent me to train and use shooting weapons and… I couldn’t do it. I didn’t want it and I was bad at it. I didn’t want it so, so much that I got sick.” He sighs, ignoring the sudden pain the shadow of an iron band makes around his lungs and heart.

“And now I have something in me that can make me too sad to move, that makes my hands weak when I have to fight. But I didn’t become a warrior and I did what I wanted. And now I have… I have you and I don’t care if they think I am weak for that and for not doing what they do. Because this -” He flops a hand behind Jensen’s back. “- makes me happy.”

Winded, Jared pauses to collect his thoughts. He can hardly believe he got through such a long speech in Jensen’s language in one go. He’s surprised he managed to talk about this at all. Last time he did - granted, he was a lot angrier and went into too much detail - last time, Genevieve left him. Because who the hell thinks like this about the Fleet, right?

“You don’t have to be what they want you to be. Just be you.” Jared whispers into Jensen’s hair. “It starts with saying the truth.”

The storm is catching up to them, raving and fierce. They should really get inside the relative safety of the ship before they get drenched. But if he doesn’t let Jensen work this out in his head now, he doubts he’ll ever say what pains him out loud. So Jared waits, watches the eerily whooshing forest in the distance, a rim of sage-green brushes on the edge of the crater, and strokes Jensen’s back until the
words make it out of his throat and into the warm space between their bodies.

“I don’t want to do the Sacrifice.”

Jared wants to hear that confession again, make Jensen truly feel it. He hums and tightens his grip, glad that he doesn’t have to bend over for this hug. There’s dampness on his skin, and for a split second, he thinks it’s the first drop of rain, then Jensen’s eyelashes brush his neck and smear it around, and he realises he would find teal-coloured tears on his throat if he reached down right now.

“I don’t want to die.” Jensen sobs, just once, then squashes it down. “I don’t. Want to die.”

“All right.” Jared breathes out slowly. This is what he wanted, isn’t it? But the satisfaction eludes him. Only sadness comes. “It’s okay. Shh. My people are coming. We’ll be safe soon. No dying.”

He figures they still have a few minutes before the rain starts coating the crater and maybe half an hour or so until the undoubtedly jaded medics in the neighbouring system get their asses into the E.S. So he lets Jen have a bit of silence and calm down. They are both too tired to have normal emotion control now and this confession has been a long time coming, he suspects. Jared hopes they can get a day of peace in a hospital when they arrive on New Earth, because God knows they need it.

He buries his nose in Jensen’s hair and inhales. His thoughts keep running wild - now that his escape is so close, they churn with homesickness and fantasies. Dozens of superficial questions bubble up from the crevices of his mind. Will Jensen lose this scent in a new environment? He finds himself wishing the answer to be no. It’s just… He really likes it, okay? Maybe he associates it with safety, or perhaps it’s an evolutionary thing, or something he picked up on Mars. Either way, it never ceases to amaze him how much that earthy scent allures him.

“You smell like summer rain.” He breaks the quiet, smiling.

“Because other parts of my soul make the rain.” Jensen chuckles and pulls away, wiping his face. There are creases on his right cheekbone, where the material of Jared’s suit pressed criss-crossing lines into the skin. He’s flushed blue in embarrassment and there are dark circles of exhaustion under his eyes, but this is the first time he looks calm again since they noticed the road and the destroyed village. “What summer is?”

“When it’s really warm.” The concept of seasons doesn’t exist in Jensen’s vocabulary, so Jared decides to leave the precise explanation for later.

“Warm rain?” Jensen smiles again. “You can name me that.”

“Yeah?” Jared smiles back. Then a blob of water hits him on the nose, and another catches his ear, a series of three disappear in his hair. He ducks his head on impulse and takes off, running from the drizzle. Jensen follows with a wide grin on his face and soon enough they are nestled in Chad’s super-wide, super-comfy chair - because God forbid he does not have the best model, even if it’s technically Jared’s ship. To Jared’s utter surprise, the thing Jensen seems to be weirded out by the most are the ship’s ceiling and floor. It’s supposed to be a cool design, a paint that resembles a starry night sky so that the pilot can feel like floating in space when the inner lights are in sleep mode and the autocontrol system is on. But for someone who’s wary of the sky, it must not be too appealing. Jensen’s aversion is actually quite convenient in this case, because Jared doesn’t feel like contorting himself to sit half on the armrest, half in Jensen’s lap. It’s much more comfortable with Jensen doing it instead. It’s a win-win too - Jared can stretch his long legs out and Jensen can keep his feet off the floor.

Closing his eyes in contentment, Jared drapes his arm around Jensen’s waist to keep him steady. “Is
that how they knew you, uh…? From the rain smell?”

“No.” Jensen wiggles and almost falls off. “Why have I to sit here? I’m too big.”

“Because I need to have a hand on you when my people come. We can sit on the floor.”

“No. There not.” He grumbles, then goes still. “When a baby has green eyes and green feathers, he is sent to the pebble house to grow up there. But since Miquitzli, there’s no house and no more green babies. Only me.” He makes the equivalent of a shrug. “People think this is the end. When I go, all bad things come and everything will be dark, like before Creation.”

“Green feathers?”

“Yes. That is the sign. It is very rare.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Jared curses. It always comes back to this, doesn’t it? A goddamn mutation or a recessive gene allele. If you don’t luck out, it shows up in your phenotype and people think you are something that warrants discriminative treatment. You should act a certain way, they say, do what fits the code printed in every single cell of your body, must not toe the line of old customs. They forget, oh, do they forget that genes aren’t a definite script for your life, but a range, a pool of possibilities you can put together into as many combinations as there are stars in the universe.

And Jensen was taken away as a baby because of this. How cruel is that?

“That’s why you don’t really like your family, huh? They gave you away.” Jared huffs. “This is so fucked up, Jen.”

Picking up on the only part he understood, Jensen scoffs. “My family fears me and gives things - my mother and father too - but they do not care. Only Jeff. Jeff...me.”

*Not just him. Me too,* Jared thinks, but shies away from saying it in any of the languages he knows. He can’t be sure that Jensen’s word meant what he thought and he shouldn’t… Yes, he said it to others sooner than two months before, but this is different… Jared can’t say it now, when he could win or lose everything in the span of a few minutes. If they get to New Earth, if the docs don’t whisk Jensen into quarantine, maybe then. Maybe.

Jensen fiddles with the embroidered decoration on his pants. “First time I’m away this long.”

What a shocker. Jared bets the kids in the pebble house didn’t have yearly school trips to broaden their horizons. “How do you, uh…?”

“Feel? Like when you can’t decide and everything is over everything.” *Confused,* Jared tries translating to himself. “But happy.” Jensen smiles and kisses Jared’s cheek, digging his nose into the soft flesh. “Waiting to see your world.”

“And not die.” Jared adds. He’s going to repeat this until he stops feeling like Jensen isn’t confident in it.

“And not dying. Yes.” Jensen kisses him again, just above his lips this time. “Yes.”

Jared tips his head up and licks after the taste of mint on Jensen’s tongue. The chair creaks and protests, but it fades into the pitter-patter of the drizzle heralding the storm. Jared can’t wait to do this in an actual bed next time, where he can savour the moment. God, to think that he might have that in a few days… He slides a hand to the juncture of Jensen’s shoulder and imagines getting naked for once.
He isn’t about to start fooling around when the rescue team can beam them up anytime, but he can be somewhat absent-minded at times, and after staying up for an entire day standard time? His focus leaves a lot to be desired. That’s how he manages to forget that touching Jensen’s neck under his feathers is like groping someone’s ass - it’s the exact opposite of calming. Jensen grunts, wriggles and pinches Jared’s wrist for it.

“Sorry.” Jared snatches his hand back, unable to keep the grin off his face. “I forgot.”

“How could anyone forget.” Jensen grumbles. “Don’t you, featherless hu-mans, have the same? It’s hard here.” He rubs the knob of Jared’s spine. “I’ve been trying to touch it when we... do things.”

Jared shudders and cran his neck to get away. “Ow, no. That is bone.”

“Bone?”

“Yeah. Why, what is yours?”

“A scar.” Jensen makes a noncommittal noise. He has yet to let Jared have a look. “Should be a little… you know…” He holds up a hand with his thumb and forefinger forming a circle. “You know. Very little.”

Jared feels cringeworthy awkwardness just thinking about it, even though he has seen some seriously weird shit in alien species. Perhaps it’s because Jensen looks so humanoid that he forgets their differences don’t end at luminescence and a metallic plumage. Why would he need an orifice there? “A hole? Okay.”

“They sewed it closed. So that I couldn’t make children and think only of my work.” Jensen starts tracing circles into Jared’s palm just to avoid looking at him. “After I saw the Lights for the fourteenth time.”

Which means he was fourteen when Miquitzli burned down his home. How long has it been since then? “How many times have you seen them?”

“Twenty-six.”

Twenty-six in local years. So, if Jared calculates with twenty hours a day, three hundred and thirty days a year and twenty-six years, that would be… something between… perhaps... eighteen and twenty in standard time? Nineteen? Yeah, that sounds about right if Jensen’s species matures at the same pace humans do. Jensen would be considered nineteen if he was a Martian. But does his species have a life span similar to humans? For all Jared knows, his people could live for a mere sixty years or two hundred.

Bored by how long it took for Jared to calculate, Jensen pokes at him and nuzzles his neck. “You?”

“Never seen the Lights.”

Jensen’s glare is just as unimpressed as Jared’s grin is wide. “Ja-red.”

“Twenty-three.”

Jensen’s face literally lights up. “I’m older!”

“Sure you are.” Jared lets out a low laugh. He isn’t ready mentally and vocabulary-wise for an argument about orbital periods and Federation standards. He’ll let Jensen have his dorky joy for now. “Why do the Dance now? Why twenty-six?”
Jensen’s feathers ripple. Is that a suggestive gesture? “Want to hear the words of the wiser, boy?”

“What are you so smug about, jerk?” Jared grins and smacks Jensen’s leg, careful not to shove him off. “Don’t call me boy.”

“Okay, young one.”

“You are such a brat.”

“Brat. Like bay-bee?”

“No.” Jared chuckles fondly. “Don’t change the topic. You said nothing to my question.”

Jensen’s expression is the textbook example of long-suffering. “Because there were twenty-six dancers during the First Dance. It is a good number.” He drawls.

“When was the First Dance?”

“Not long after Creation. The books in the Big Temple say that the Sun broke little pieces of Quetzalitzli’s soul when she left him. He made the first jade dancers from those to bring light to his forever darkness. But we were not…” Enough? Satisfactory? Something like that. “…he got angry. He made rain - so much and so long, for many quincenas, that only the poison and electricity were left to eat in the forest. Then the First Priest thought, if he gave the jade dancers to the Sun, the Sun will come and help people, bring back the light. He made the first Sacrifice, and after fifteen days of dances, the Lights came and she took a woman to dance with the last dancer and finish his Sacrifice. That is why we count quincenas and make dances.” Jensen’s feathers puff up in pride as he finishes.

Jared feels like he has gone through an unstable Einstein-Rosen bridge and managed to live through the time jump. “Why would the Jade God be happy that you kill his… whatever.”

“Because our Sacrifice is a gift to the Sun.” Jensen repeats patiently. “The broken parts of his soul return to him as the bodies die and the Sun comes down. So it’s good for him too. But too many dances mean weakness and… wanting too much. That’s why he got angry when… you know.” He casts his eyes down. “Before the Sickness, every jade dancer did the Sacrifice but me. I was small - the High Priest thought I should wait. After the Sacrifice, they take the bodies to the… river, give them back to the Jade God, which makes him… But he didn’t take them that quincena. They were in the river for a long time, until it was too disgusting to drink from. That is what Jeff said.”

Succumbing to the weariness weighing down both of their bodies, Jensen yawns and pillows his head on Jared’s shoulder. “I think the Jade God is still angry that the High Priest sacrificed too many. Because he didn’t give us more dancers since the Sickness.”

Or perhaps killing everyone who expresses the recessive trait effectively decreases the frequency of new cases.

Jared would rather trust the second explanation. And he doesn’t think it helps that Miquitzli put a bounty on everyone’s head who happens to have green feathers because killing them quietly furthers his agenda.

“Jay, do you like Jeff?”

“I don’t know.”

“He likes you. You are my first good friend since…” Mumbling, Jensen shifts into a good position for sleep. He pulls Jared’s arm across his thighs until Jared gets with the program and keeps them
secure. “I had many friends in the pebble house. We climbed up into our tree and talked what we wanted to be. Wind or rain or earth. Sometimes poison, when the High Priest took someone we liked.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, it was good.” Jensen says with a smile in his voice. “The priests taught us many things. Drawing too. I really liked painting. We had twenties on twenties of all colours and many beautiful…” Tools that Jared doesn’t know. The thought that he likely never will catches him off-guard.

Jensen laughs, immersed in his memories. “I said to my friends, I wanted to be a painter. They all laughed, but not Jeff. He always took my paintings to the market. Once he let me come too. Put big robes on me, said I was sick so people wouldn’t look close. People thought he painted himself, but he was hookless when they asked questions. It was a laugh.” He chuckles. “He bought me nice things with the pebbles. But after the fire, we lost the paint. And the High Priest wanted me to do nothing but train.”

Jensen raises his head and gives Jared a hopeful look. “Maybe in your world I can paint again?”

“You can do anything. Anything.” Jared leans in and rubs their noses together until Jensen kisses him in return.

“What did you want?” Jensen asks when he pulls back. 

*Normal kid stuff*, Jared wants to say. Nothing that started with death or ended in sacrifice. He just wanted to have fun.

“I wanted to be a terraformer. To make more snow.” He smiles and doesn’t need to look at Jensen to know he understands neither word. It wasn’t exactly a common dream, but Fleet captain lost its charm when your smelly cyborg uncle terrorized you with the stories of his robot parts. Terraformer sounded both peaceful and exciting at the time. “A terraformer is a man who makes weather with big, big… uh, machines.”

“A god.” Jensen says flatly.

“No, just a man.” Jared insists. “He can make snow. Snow is cold, hard water. It’s white. Hard like… like hair. It falls from the sky like rain.” He raises a hand and wriggles his fingers as he draws it back down. “When it is cold for a long time, in winter, we have a big celebration. The Solstice.”

“Saltiss.”

“Yeah.” Jared laughs, makes a sound low in his throat. “We dance and drink and play games. There is snow on the ground and at night, we shoot… fire into the sky.”

“Hard water and fire?” Jensen shudders, eyes wide.

“Twenty-two quincenas from this day, I will show you. It is beautiful. I will make a ball of snow and throw it at you.”

“I don’t think I would like that.” Jensen looks so sceptical that Jared has to kiss him again.

“I’m tired.” Jensen whispers into it and keeps his eyes shut even after their lips part.

“Go to sleep then.”
It doesn’t take more than a minute after that for Jensen’s breathing to slow down into the almost
death-like depth of the truly exhausted. He is tucker out. Jared too, but he has the anticipation of
what’s to come going for him. Not just the big things, but mundane comforts too. Like taking a warm
shower again. Not a quick sonic one, a real water shower. Bathing in streams, while kept them
sufficiently clean, wasn’t something to soothe sore muscles and harrowed minds.

He’s going home, but Jensen is leaving his. It’s not a surprise that Jensen is full of fear and
uncertainty - and those emotions can put a strain on anyone’s stamina.

Jared doesn’t know how he earned the trust Jensen puts in him by braving this adventure. It’s crazy.
Humbling, even. They have only known each other for two months. It must have been a fickle stroke
of luck that Jensen had an empty space in his life shaped just right for Jared to fit into. He missed
love and excitement, and Jared brought them for him.

But what if the need stops, once Jen got his fill? What if he doesn’t want Jared anymore after seeing
all the fascinating opportunities the Federation offers? Jared wishes his experience in similar
breakups had strengthened him enough to face this without fear.

“Will you stay with me?” He whispers, not expecting an answer. He thumbs at the soft skin on the
inside of Jensen’s wrist and thinks about how much he loves this delicate joint and the hidden
strength in it.

What is he going to do if the Emergency Starship doesn’t pick Jensen up? It’s unimaginable. He has
no doubt he would go as far as threatening someone with his family, which would be a new low, but
he wouldn’t care.

“C’mon guys, do you have warp drive problems?” He mutters to himself. The rescue team should
have gotten here already. Maybe they are waiting for the storm to quiet down.

Jared rests his temple on the top of Jensen’s head and watches the fat raindrops trickle down the
viewscreen until his slowing blinks stretch into a light doze. Jensen’s body is so warm in his lap. I
won’t let him be cold ever again, Jared thinks and falls asleep too.

Ice. There’s ice, hard water around Jared’s legs and fire on his shoulder. He’s paralyzed, can’t feel
his legs, and knows the emergency medic is freezing them off before the merciful amputation. In a
few months, they will grow him new ones in the lab or he can get a robotic implant. He will have
something in common with Uncle George at least. But the cold hurts so much now. So much.

Jared flinches awake with a gasp and makes a feeble kick with his right leg. “Shit!”

It’s completely dark outside. They slept through the afternoon, and now he’s got a severe case of
pins and needles from Jensen’s weight. And he’s shin-deep in freezing water. “Fuck.”

Jensen wakes up at that and jumps off, flailing when his feet splashes into the water. Jared’s
numbness isn’t pins and needles anymore, but daggers and knives stabbing into his thighs. He
attempts to stand up and finds that he can’t, not yet anyway. The darkness and the water is terrifying,
and the dull rumble coming from above suggests the moons won’t be much help, hidden behind
stubborn storm clouds.

“Jen, can you… can you see?” Jared pants, rubbing blood back into his poor legs. He is an idiot.
Water flows downward, of course the rain flooded down into the crater. But... they should have been rescued before that. Where’s the starship?

Jensen’s eyes flicker on and remind Jared why he mistook him for a predator the first time they met. “Yes.”

“See a... string, like this?” He makes a circle with his finger, trying to mime coiled. They need some equipment if they want to climb out of the crater on their own. “Big ball on one end?”

“Rope?” Jensen glances around. “No.”

Jared stumbles to his feet and gestures in the vague direction where he suspects the storage room is. “Look in the container there.”

Jensen wades through the water and rummages around, then makes an annoyed sound. “There are many here I don’t know how to open. I’ve never seen ones shaped like this!”

Breathing as evenly as he can, Jared stretches his arms out in front of himself and shuffles towards the light of Jensen’s body until Jensen grabs his hands and places them on the boxes. “You see colours?”

“Just shades.”

Damnit. Things would be so much easier if Jen could guide him to the blue container. God, Jared hopes he packed the grappler. He knows it has been lying around somewhere before he stuffed it into a box, but did he take it out again? Fumbling around, he presses every single box open until Jensen exclaims. “There!” He pulls it out and curls Jared’s fingers around it, showing him the shape.

“That's it!” Finally. Jared hangs it on his left arm and gropes for Jensen’s hand. He doubts the water flow stopped outside. Whatever’s holding up the rescue ship, he and Jensen have to get back to solid ground before the crater becomes a new lake. “Let’s get out of here.”

Leaving the shipwreck makes Jared more despondent than ever. If the clean-up guys got here with the E.S., he would have been able to salvage some parts, or at least take a keepsake. But neither team has come and as Jensen drags him through the dark, muddy, creepy water, he feels his hope and happiness shatter. Why are they still here? What’s going on?

When they reach the crater wall, he glances back at his ship once more and mouths goodbye. He can’t see it now and knows it in his heart that he never will again. A few dozen feet away from them, a new waterfall opens and dumps dirty clumps of earth in the filling pond. Jensen looks at him with worry in his eyes and Jared sighs, swings the grappler’s ball and throws it as far up as he can manage. The mechanism takes care of the rest - even though its primary usage is towing, it’s programmed for precisely this as well. Snaking up a vertical wall and using magnetism to hook onto the first horizontal surface it detects.

Jared ties the rope first around Jensen’s waist, then his own, and prays the tool will stick it out until they both make it up there. Just a few hours ago, he wished for a warm shower, but now he feels like he doesn’t want to see water ever again. He’s so fed up with these wild deluges and the constant suffocating rain. He had no idea how bad uncontrolled environments could get if you have nothing resembling modern weatherproof technology or infrastructure.

As the grappler starts tugging them up, he looks up at the starless sky and wants to scream.

The E.S. team should have arrived ages ago. What the hell are they waiting for? What happened? Where are they?
Where are they?!
In most parts of the jungle, unbroken rays of sunshine rarely reach the lower levels. It’s harder to tell how far along the morning is when all you can see is foliage, but Jared would wager a guess and say it has been an entire day since he sent that signal. He lost another day of his life. What the hell happened? Did he hallucinate the transmissions from the station?

Well, what does it matter anyway, he never had a real purpose to live for. Nothing much to go back to, no career or kids. He’s not one of those whiz kids his brother surrounded himself with at the Fleet either. Why would he, why would anyone care that he disappeared in the swirl of the galaxy? He’s nothing but a stray asteroid in the dark matter. His existence is completely bereft of meaning.

It seems crystal clear what he should do now, rid himself of the prolonged suffering. He’s sitting on the lowest branch of a tree though - even if he untied the grappler he looped around himself for the night, the fall would likely just result in shattered bones. Maybe, he could let an insect bite him. There’s one crawling over his leg right now, big as a saucer and splattered with neon spots like those giant ants he rode on just a few weeks ago. Its poison or an infection spreading from the bite could do the trick. He might even get some pleasant fever dreams as his last moments tick by.

Unfortunately, Jensen isn’t on board with that plan at all.

“Think you are clever, walking on Jared’s stripe. But can’t hide from me.” He mutters under his breath, reaching down from the branch above. He’s talking to the bug - probably thinks Jared is asleep. “I would eat you if Jared wasn’t...by your look. Jeff says I should dip your kind into...before...but I’m too hungry.” His deft fingers capture the unlucky thing and pick it up by its leg. Jared almost gives himself away by flinching as it rises past his face and up to where Jensen’s perching. “I could be quick before he wakes. He won’t see. But what if he wants a kiss? Mates don’t like legs between teeth.”

Something rolls and rebels in Jared’s stomach at the picture. “Jen, please throw that away before I puke.”

“Jay!” Jensen exclaims and jumps down onto the bough between Jared’s dangling legs. It shakes like a motherfucker but doesn’t break. Jared isn’t sure if he’s relieved or disappointed by that. “Hungry...
you? I can give you body no legs.” He holds up the thrashing insect.

“Fuck.” Jared recoils and gags. “Throw it away! I don’t want it.”

Jensen’s hopeful face falls, but he disposes of his breakfast without complaint. He’s barefoot - his sandals are stuffed into Jared’s worse-for-wear satchel. There are tell-tale blue areas around his ankles, thin, rubbed-raw lines. He must have tried to take off the anklets again. The noise they make annoys him.

Jared contemplates starting an argument about it, one they have had before, but in the end, he doesn’t have the willpower for even that, for pushing Jensen away.

“How long?” Jensen asks, craning his neck to look straight up. He looks curious rather than impatient or disappointed. God, so he didn’t even realise… Well, why would he? He has no idea how fast a starship is, neither does he know how far it was supposed to come from.

Jared shakes his head and covers his eyes. He doesn’t want to see Jensen’s reaction, would prefer to be blind right now. “They aren’t coming.”

Jensen’s weight shifts on the bough. “Something is wrong?”

Jared shrugs. Wrong and right depend on context. Maybe the rescue station had to deal with a cargo ship crush and Jared’s transmission has been forgotten.

Jensen makes a weird thrilling sound that startles Jared into looking up. Was that a whine?

“We need food. I need food.” Jensen says and looks so forlornly at his stomach that the hint of a smile makes it to Jared’s lips. It vanishes almost as soon as it came though.

“Okay.”

“We can go back to that village. They stored dried fruit.”

The forest is full of food at any given time. It’s impossible that Jensen wants to go back for that, Jared isn’t going to buy that bullshit. He either wants something else or, more likely, he’s trying to rile Jared up, get a reaction, anything. It’s a good attempt, Jared has to give him that much - even with the growing apathy in his heart, he would restrain Jensen physically from doing that if needed. But he knows it’s just a trick, so he drops his head back until it thunks on the tree trunk behind him, rests against the rough bark. He doesn’t care what Jensen does as long as he doesn’t risk a capture. He could leave Jared here to dry up on this branch and he wouldn’t care.

Jensen’s hands, too-warm for the suffocating humidity, land on Jared’s cheeks. “Are you… sick?”

Jared just shrugs and folds in on himself, pulling his knees up. He is the “sickest” he has ever been. This doesn't feel like the slowly creeping numbness of depression he has dealt with before in waves. No, this is a sharp pain, a complete devastation. How could he get up from this? He believed in the system with his entire soul, knew that if he did his part, they will save him. But what the fuck did he really know after all? Nothing. He can throw his illusions into the decomposer.

Is this how Jensen would feel if Jared managed to disprove his faith? Then they are better off with this outcome anyway. Jared won’t wish this feeling on anyone. Being utterly lost is something he never thought he would experience.

He can’t help but think that this has been his end-of-life rally. A brief flare of flames before the inevitable snuff out. How does his family feel now? How long are they going to search until they
realise they will never find him? He remembers his mother and thinks, despite all her faults, he really, really misses her. She has the best hugs in the world. They had such a rocky relationship, but he knows she loves him, she must, right? Even if that doesn’t come with pride, even if Jared never lives up to her expectations. When was the last time they spoke? What did he say? He knows he was too full of resentment to let the chafing, inflamed conflict between them go. He was so stupid. They could have resolved it, he’s sure now. If only he got to hear her voice one last time... He just wants to say goodbye, is that too much to ask for?

Jensen tugs on his ear. “Are we close enough for your people to see?” Jared nods. If anyone came, they could still detect him and arrange a beam-up. But that isn’t going to happen, is it? “Then we stay.”

“Stay?” Jared’s eyes fly open. Here? In the middle of nowhere?

Jensen smiles and drops his hands. He’s so good at taking the lead when Jared needs him to lean on someone. What would Jared do without him?

“Yes. Sleep. Think. Do what makes these -” He pokes the frown lines on Jared’s forehead. “- gone.”

After two weeks of living from day to day with Jensen, Jared should have gotten used to him building nests to rest in, but no amount of experience seems to dull it into an ordinary skill. Jensen is scary good in the wilderness and can actually make himself comfortable up in a tree, which is a feat Jared hasn’t seen achieved before without any sort of equipment whatsoever. He could make it on his own, live alone in the jungle, if it wasn’t for one huge hole in that plan. Jensen craves social contact.

It’s more subtle than Jared’s usual tactic with his friends, hugging them into submission, but no less apparent. He leans into every touch, listens attentively to every stray bit of conversation Jared offers, talks to animals and always, always keeps looking. He has been lonely in his gilded cage for too long. Jared suspects it’s going to take a while until he gets used to the security of having someone watch his back.

But for now, it’s impossible to imagine him as a lone wolf, and precisely that is why Jared knows Jeff must have had a more complicated plan than just setting Jensen free in the forest.

“Hey, Jen!” He calls out, standing on the massive roots of a tree. High above him, a curtain of white epiphyte flowers part and Jensen’s head pops up. He has petals in his hair. “Why did Jeff train you?”

Jensen breaks a peduncle in the inflorescence around him and throws the branch of flowers on Jared’s head, grinning. He can’t possibly know that giving flowers used to be a courting gesture on Old Earth, but Jared feels wooed anyway. “To get me ready for the Way.”

Twirling the pliable stem around his fingers, Jared considers that idea. In Jensen’s stories, Jeff always came off as a guy who wanted to make Jensen’s life happier in this world. Years of training for a transcendent goal doesn’t fit that picture too well.

“No, I don’t think so.” Jared mumbles to himself, then looks back up. “Where did he want to send you?”

“Send me?” Jensen scoffs. “No place. He will give me to the City.”
He still speaks like it’s a certainty, an inevitable closure to this little adventure. It’s really disturbing on a motivational level. Whenever Jared feels a bit of triumph, thinking Jensen decided to keep his life for himself after all, Jensen slaps him with a nonchalant comment like that and he’s bummed again.

Jared waves a hand. “Think. If he sent you.”

“He never said he didn’t want me to do the Dance.”

Why is he so resistant of this notion? “Just think.”

“O-kay.” Jensen sighs and picks at his feathers. “We know of other people across the Sea. I heard ship men can take you there if you have enough pebbles.”

*And you are a walking bank,* Jared thinks. But, of course, that would be more of a difficulty than an aid, wouldn’t it? A greedy smuggler would have no problem mutilating Jensen to his gain. Jensen would have to be disguised. They can probably find something to dye the feathers with, but what to do with the eyes? Jared doubts they sell colour-changer solutions in the local market.

“Those people aren’t afraid of the gods, I think.” Jensen goes on. “They fly. Jeff would send me to a place where others don’t fear me.”

It’s going to be dangerous, but what better choice do they have? Going back to Jensen’s village would be suicide, but running and camping in the jungle for the long term isn’t a viable lifestyle. Not for Jared. And if they settle down in another city, Jensen could still be found out and hurt. Staying here isn’t an option. Come hell or high water, they have to try getting across that sea.

That’s the least Jared could do for Jensen, right? Get him to safety. He’ll figure out what to do with himself after. “What if we go there?”

Jensen snorts and throws another flower at Jared. “You want to climb a branchless tree.”

If Jared had a credit for every time he heard that… “Why do you think it’s stupid?”

“I don’t know.”

“No Dance, no Sacrifice… Just you and me.”

Jensen bows his head. “Make a fire? I’ll be down and we can eat soon.”

He really does want to avoid this topic. Does it sound scarier than leaving the planet? “What’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t know.” Jensen repeats and starts making his way down the tree. “Please make fire, Jay.”

It isn’t until later, curled up in their brand-new nest with a shirt as a makeshift pillow, that Jared realises what the issue is. The idea of a clean break must sound better than living far away but close enough that you will always hope for your loved ones to step through the front door. If Jensen goes to the place where Jeff would have sent him, he will never stop waiting for the day when Jeff comes after him. That’s why he clings to two extremes - dying as a sacrifice or leaving the entire world he knows - he doesn’t want to agonise over endless uncertainties.
It’s startling how similar a situation Jared is in, only for him, it means he doesn’t want to stay around. As long as they are camping close to the crater, he’ll never get any rest from the perpetual disappointment and mornings of maybe. There are moments when he wants to die and forget the struggle, other times he wants to get to the other side of the planet and start a new life.

They are at an impasse.

Could he convince Jensen to risk that journey? Perhaps if he found another route... But what if that other race is just as bad, if not worse? Jensen thought it was Miquitzli who destroyed the village they found in ruins, but he had to have allies. Could it have been these people? But why would they do that to the villagers? Are they planning to conquer Jensen’s nation? Then seeking them out for refuge is no better than going back to Jensen’s home and dying to please the High Priest.

But Jared’s jumping into assumptions here. He doesn’t have even half of the facts, he can’t discard the possibility that they had good reasons. It’s just as likely that only some militant renegades were involved in that destruction. This race could be similar to Old Earth humans before the Great War.

“How do the other people look like? Across the Sea?” Jared shifts to lie on his back and watches the play of dimming afternoon light on Jensen’s face.

“Like us, only bluer skin.” Jensen explains. He’s rubbing a handful of peculiar leaves over his skin, his usual ritual when he wants to sleep undisturbed by insects. He's shirtless, and the tattoos snaking up his arms unfurl over his chest like a wide collar, a web of swirls and dots. If it wasn’t for the questionable substance he massaged himself with, Jared would spread him out and trace those lines with his tongue until the only taste in his mouth is summer rain.

“Can’t sleep?” Jensen asks with a small smile, misinterpreting the silence.

Jared shakes his head. He knows he should rest now, because it’s wiser if they stay up in shifts at night, but his thoughts keep him up. It’s not nearly often enough that they have a couple hours of peace to themselves. Something always has to be done in order to stay alive or get somewhere fast enough - but they won’t be on the move anytime soon. They should make use of this free time while they still can.

Some mindless fun would go a long way to relax them too.

Jensen nudges his shoulder. “Bugs?”

“They can’t bite me through this.” Jared gestures at his spacesuit. He still has some bites on the backs of his hands, but between his outfit and the herb Jensen rubs on himself almost every night, the worst of the nearby critters avoid their vicinity. Which is going to be a blessing if things progress how he wants them to. “You’re okay now too. Put that down.”

Jensen sets his leaves aside and lies down on his side with a hand under his head. He smiles as though he knows now what Jared has in mind. “Don’t you like the smell?”

“I can’t smell anything.” Jared turns, presses his nose to the soft inside of Jensen’s upper arm and inhales. Rainwater and sweetness, that’s all he finds. He can’t detect another smell. Jensen’s olfactory system is much more sensitive, he figures. Which leads to the question of how he puts up with Jared’s constantly sweating body, but Jared doesn’t care as long as he does. Underneath his lips, Jensen’s biceps flexes and makes both of them laugh. “Show-off.”

Jensen rolls onto his back and pulls Jared up over himself. “Mother used to say dancers stay soft. Nice. But I always wanted to be like Jeff.” He raises a hand, then turns it palm up. “It’s you like this.
Not a warrior wants to be one.”

*It isn’t that simple,* Jared wants to explain, clarify what he said by the ship, but he isn’t confident enough in his vocabulary to attempt that. He wanted his family to be proud and that meant wanting, sometimes, to become a soldier. It was a gray area, but being a kid, he could only shift between black and white. He dreamed of being one of them, the next in line, wanted them to accept him, but when it came to actually doing what it entailed and completing military school, he hated it and wished to be anything but similar to them. It must have been that mix of utter hate and secret want that poisoned him and essentially made the decision before he could grow up enough to make his own choices about it. When they tested him and deemed him ineligible to stay at Pre-Fleet school, he was crushed and relieved at the same time. He sulked alone a lot, trying to make heads or tails of the disappointment, fear and relief churning in him. And when Jeff finally enlisted, he was so angry that he turned against the world, envious enough, even years later, that he left Mars behind.

It wasn’t simple at all. It was everything, his big, ugly, complicated secret right until he crashed down here and realised it shouldn’t have even mattered that much. That whole bag of issues is nothing but a single charged particle in the grand scheme of things.

He doesn’t think Jensen lived through a mirror of that, but it’s obvious that as a child, he was consumed by a turmoil of feelings too. Wanted to be loved and be good enough, and never really felt like he achieved either of those. Perhaps it really isn’t that far-fetched to see their stories as parallels of each other.

“I don’t think teraformer gods have power in this world.” Jensen breaks the silence. He trails a finger down from Jared’s forehead to the tip of his nose, then around his nostril and back up to the mole on his cheek. It’s weird, but Jared doesn’t mind - he’s starting to find these little touches somewhat intimate too. It must be just as strange when he presses his thumb to Jensen’s bottom lip and watches how softly it gives under the pressure.

“Teraformer.” He kisses Jensen’s palm.

“Teraformer. Yes.” Jensen repeats without success. “The Jade God didn’t want them here. It was his rain that kept them away. I think it’s only you he allowed to come back from the Way.”

It’s astonishing, really, how easy it is for Jensen to twist his perception to fit his religion. It makes Jared wonder - what would it take to turn his blind trust in his own beliefs into something else? To Jensen, it’s his faith that seems to have proof, not Jared’s. How long would Jared need to stay here, disconnected from the science-driven world he learnt to navigate, to pick up the comfort of a new god?

Which is the right way of thinking, if there is one?

“Why me?” He asks out of curiosity. Jensen’s culture is different enough that he can’t always guess what explanations Jensen deduces from their situation.

“Maybe he wanted to show I can try but I won’t be able to run from the Sacrifice.” Jensen loops his arms around Jared’s neck and pulls him into a hug. “The Lights will be here in two days.”

Jared makes a noise then, something he can’t quite name, because he thinks it’s unimaginable but knows it’s possible, and he fears, shakes inside from the thought that someone might find them soon enough or Jensen might do something stupid just to be good. He kisses Jensen’s lips open and settles between his legs, to keep him pinned and safe and stripped of all the dangerous thoughts he voices like facts.
“Jared.” Jensen mumbles into it, rugged and hurt. “I’m afraid of dying the wrong way.”

“Stop that, okay?” Jared mouths against Jensen’s jaw. “Don’t talk about that.”

It’s wrong of him, he knows. If Jensen needs to talk it out, they should, but yesterday’s disappointment weighs him down so much now that he can’t keep thinking. He wants to be careless and happy, if only for a few minutes at a time.

“How strong is your nest?” He groans as he grinds down. He’s hungry for it, desperate to fill the gaping emptiness he’s been feeling since they left the crater, wants to straddle Jensen and ride him until all he sees is blessed oblivion.

“Very.” Jensen grabs him tighter and fumbles with the button to get Jared’s spacesuit open. What a pity that Jared can’t fulfil his wish today... They don’t have anything to ease the way. If only Jared went to a clinic on New Earth for the routine temporary modification... But who would have thought he would need it? He rarely had relationships with men.

Pouting, Jared unlaces Jensen’s pants and pushes them down under the curve of his ass, palms the plump flesh and squeezes. This is about as far as they have ventured up until today, and as much as he wants to tip into complete debauchery, he knows this isn’t the time. But he’ll have Jensen in a real bed at least once in this life, he swears.

There’s one thing they could try out though.

He grabs Jensen’s right hand and pushes it down along Jensen’s stomach until his palm is flat over his own cock. “I want you to touch yourself.” He mumbles into Jensen’s cheek.

It’s quite a surprise when Jensen just stares back, uncomprehending. “Why?”

Jared raises his eyebrows. Why? “Because it helps... helps knowing what’s good.”

“You touching me is good.”

“But you can do it yourself too.” Jensen’s fingers twitch on the back of Jared’s neck, but he doesn’t move. “Come on, just try it.”

“Try.”

“Uh-huh.” Jared smiles and rubs their noses together. “I can close my eyes. And I can kiss you. Or do this...” He nips at Jensen’s jaw. “Anything.”

Jensen snorts and pushes his face away. “You can look.” He mutters with a haughty, put-upon look that makes Jared laugh.

Batting Jared’s hand away, he takes a half-hearted hold of himself and strokes. His movements are stilted at first, but grow from awkward to smooth within a few minutes. Jared is about to reward him with a kiss, but Jensen stops almost as soon as it’s starting to get good and huffs in frustration. “I only want you.”

There’s a thought scratching at the back of Jared’s mind, but he can’t quite grasp it yet.

“Jen, do you even want to have sex?” Or is it just the physical affection that he needs? For someone without any experience whatsoever, Jared can imagine it might be confusing to see the difference. “I can touch you without sex too.”
Jensen looks lost. He’s blushing, too embarrassed to come up with a reply. Jared can already feel his knees pulling up to get into his favourite defensive pose, and that’s no good. He should try a different angle.

“Tell me a thing. How many times do you want it in a day?” He doesn’t really know how to ask about Jensen’s libido, especially with the High Priest’s taboo hanging over them that Jensen is still reluctant to break, but he reckons this is as good a measure as any. Not counting the times when he’s on the brink of dying, Jared feels the low thrum of desire that comes with a new love non-stop.

“No... many days.”

Jared doesn’t mean to gape, but the confession catches him off-guard. That can’t be normal in a polyamorous society, he thinks. Even less so for such a young person. What’s wrong?

Unfortunately, Jensen is good enough at interpreting his expressions by now that he gets really flustered at that. “Never wanted it before you. I’m wrong like that.”

“No, no, no. Not wrong. Just different.” It’s important to make him understand this. Even if it’s something they can’t resolve. Jared hates how fast his thoughts jump to the worst conclusions, but the first thing that comes to his mind is the scar on Jensen’s neck and its story, how they forced him through that surgery without caring about his consent. “They uh, sewed your neck. Did they do other things?”

“No.” Jensen says, then amends. “Tattoos. Not more.”

Perhaps it’s hormonal then? He can’t determine that without a medical tricorder. If it isn’t a psychological issue, Jared can’t figure out the exact reason why Jensen has a lower sex drive. But regardless if it’s natural or not, the real problem is that Jensen wouldn’t have mentioned it on his own. Jared can deal with a lot, including asexuality, but hurting his partner because he would not speak up about not wanting it isn’t okay in his books. He has to make that clear.

He braces his forearms on either side of Jensen’s head and looks him in the eye. “You tell me when you only want touch and not sex, okay? I need to know.”

Jensen watches him with a small smile on his lips and clucks his tongue. “Okay. I want both now.”

Thank God. Jared grins and shimmies his spacesuit down to his knees. He needed some luck after the shit that went down yesterday. “Me too.”

As they resume kissing, Jensen’s belly quivers and breaks out in goose bumps under his hand. It’s strange, but fascinating that the valley between his abs is unbroken, no belly button to dip into and tease until laughter turns into moans. Jared would like to run his tongue along that long line and nibble on the groove of a hip, but he hasn’t yet mentioned blowjobs and he’s afraid Jensen might think he wants to eat him - again. He kind of regrets that he will never be able to tell Chad about his crazy xeno-sex adventures. Starting with a handjob in a giant nest established what sort of escapades he could expect to go through with Jensen, but he can’t seem to adequately prepare himself for the next surprise anyway.

“God, I wish we had a bed, babe.” Jared groans and shimmies his spacesuit down to his knees. He needed some luck after the shit that went down yesterday. “Me too.”

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“God, I wish we had a bed, babe.” Jared groans and leans back down to taste the flush on Jensen’s chest. He’s mouthing his way up Jensen’s collarbone when he decides to wander under the feathers and kiss his throat for the first time since they started doing this. It takes a minute of sucking hickeys into the untouched skin there to realise that Jensen’s squirming has taken direction - he’s trying to roll over.
“What are you doing?” Jared snickers. He can’t see Jensen’s face, but he bets it’s a spectacular shade of blue right now.

“I don’t know.” Jensen flops a hand around, panting. He wriggles some more, ineffectively scrabbling at Jared’s bulk, then tangles his fingers in Jared’s hair. “It happens without my say. But very good.”

Oh. So is it instinctive? Well, as long as it’s enjoyable, Jared doesn’t need further reassurance. He just dives back in and mouths at the sweat on Jensen’s pulse point. It has a metallic flavour there, by the roots of the tiny, delicate down feathers that tickle Jared’s nose, but it’s not unpleasant at all. He can feel the ripple of small, non-human muscles under his touch when he lifts up and lets Jensen turn how he wants. To control the feathers, he muses, sitting back on his haunches to see what Jensen’s body is trying to achieve. Knees under his stomach, arms alongside his thighs, forehead mindlessly rubbing against the “bedding” they used in their nest, Jensen looks like he’s closer to pain than pleasure.

“That better?” Jared asks, at a loss. He thumbs at the back of Jensen’s neck and stares as the feathers rise away from his skin.

Jensen catches his forearm and pulls it away. “Yes.”

And there it is. Jared can see the scar now.

It’s a purple, round bump. Looks like it was deliberately done to make a raised welt, to leave a prominent mark. Jared knows some races find scarring attractive and cut shapes into themselves, filling them with herbs to aggravate the wound, but this is a horrible power play instead of tradition. It doesn’t make things better that he knows Jensen doesn’t find that scar pretty at all. And it isn’t, it’s a jagged and badly healed blemish on the otherwise beautiful skin. A reminder of status - to Jensen himself and to anyone who gets close enough to see him like this.

Jared feels responsible to show he doesn’t care when he thinks of that.

“I’ll make you feel so good, Jen.” He promises and smooths his hands up Jensen’s spine until Jensen shudders and loses himself to the comfort of that touch. This time it’s him who surrenders, and the beauty of it is so distracting that the loss of his world stops aching with the ferocity of a black hole inside Jared’s heart.

It’s the middle of the night when he wakes up to a hand on his mouth and Jensen frantically tugging on his hair. He looks up to Jensen’s glowing eyes and knows it’s something horrible by the sheer panic that flares in that gaze. Jensen holds up his free hand in the horn gesture. Be silent. Jared nods, and the palm lifts from his lips to latch onto his sleeve instead.

“Little bird, the rain is coming, the wind above is…” Someone’s crude singing voice drifts through the jungle and fades into the darkness. The air around them is warp core hot and still, but Jared shudders.

“I say…again…Why don’t we…up in the trees?” Another voice says, gruff and pissed off.

“Because Tlamacazqui said they can’t climb.” Chimes in a third.
“What god can’t climb?” Grumbles back the second, and stomps on a dry branch until it snaps.

*Shit shit shit.* They have come for Jensen. From the High Priest. They have come for - They are here to - How did they - *No, please no.* Why is Fate so cruel?

They will go away, won’t they? They won’t notice the footprints under the tree. They will go away. They have to.

*Please.*

A dead leaf crunches under a heavy step, and the cacophony of noises that echoes through the jungle seems to come to an abrupt silence in Jared’s head as Jensen’s eyes snap back to him and widen in horror.

“They know.” Jensen whispers, so quietly that Jared almost misses it, and as fast as the silence came all the sounds rush back to Jared’s ear and morph into one constant, buzzing ring. Someone shot through the bottom of their nest with some kind of firearm, missing flesh and bones but taking a chunk out of the wood.

“Little bird!” The boisterous singer guy yells up at them. He must be the top dog in his ragtag team of bastards. “Good to see you at last.”

“Who thought he can’t cli-” Hisses the second mouthiest in the trio but gets smacked before he can finish it.

“ Took us two weeks of watching the forest around that deadly machine, but here we are. Come and greet us!”

Jensen’s fingers let go of Jared’s sleeve.

“No.” Jared reacts lightning fast, grabs Jensen’s wrist so tight he knows it will bruise. “Do not move.” He growls.

“You still have your little friend? We are taking him too.”

Jensen stares back at Jared without flinching, holds his gaze. He must find something there, a hidden strength, a motivation, Jared doesn’t know, but an odd mask of calm takes over his features. He nods and reaches for the knife in the satchel.

They won’t be taken without a fight.

The trackers start cussing on the ground. Jared can’t understand a word they are saying, but soon enough he can see a giant fucking rifle pointing at his head from a branch three feet under them. Fuck… They need Jensen in one piece, most likely, but him? Him they can put as many holes in as their ammo can take.

“Oh God.” Jared’s family didn’t manage to make a soldier of him, but they taught him one thing well - never to be a coward. He ain’t gonna give up if they don’t make him.

It happens too fast for him to stop it.

Jensen bolts into motion and jumps - in front of him and between Jared’s heart and the barrel - and the guy’s eyes flicker with recognition. His hand jerks. The movement kills his aim - he curses and flails to correct, but the shot blazes past to blow into another tree. It’s a miss, but Jensen’s response isn’t. His knife cracks through the man’s forehead like a pickaxe pierces butter.
The man falls, a heavy, motionless heap of bone and muscle, no longer holding a spark, and almost immediately, the holes in their nest crack and the entire structure crumbles apart.

The next time Jared opens his eyes, he’s tied to a tree. Around him, the forest isn’t pitch black anymore, but a dim gray of dewy leaves and tweeting animals. It’s the crack of dawn. His left arm and his head ache with the burning roar he learnt to associate with Jensen’s remedial saliva. They healed him then, patched up the concussion that must have knocked him out. Why? Is there a bounty on him too? Why didn't they leave him to bleed out in the dead foliage?

Where’s Jensen? Is he okay?

“I’m bored.” Complains the smaller of the two guys sitting on a fallen tree a few feet away. His buddy doesn’t respond, just keeps picking his nails with the knife Jensen sunk into the third guy in the group. He wipes the residual blood on the blade in his shirt.

He’s a fucking psycho.

Whiny Dumbass growls and stands up, kicks at the wet leaves on the ground. “Why aren’t we going? I’m bored.”

“Then see if he can walk now!” Snaps the other man - the group leader. Great. Jared was hoping it was him that Jensen sent into an early death.

Dumbass throws up his arms and stomps into the shadows.

Only then does Jared see Jensen.

His face is covered in blue blood, from a head wound probably, but aside from a slight limp as the guy drags him closer, he moves and stands just fine.

“Looks good.” Psycho Leader comments and grins. “Real good.”

“Fuck.” Jared stomach rolls. He tries to twist free, but the ropes hold. These bastards aren’t amateurs.

“He could give me...nose rub. W asn’t said he has to get back without us touching...” The creepy guy goes on, standing up and stepping into Jensen’s personal space. Jensen’s eyes light up and narrow in a glare, but knowing he has the upper hand, the tracker isn’t fazed. “I don’t mind the blood.”

Dumbass fidgets nervously. “But the spots...sick?”

The leader falters in the middle of leaning in at that. Jared starts struggling in earnest now, damn near spraining his wrists and rubbing his skin raw with the ropes. He would rather die than watch as they molest his love. He has to help.

Jensen, however, doesn’t seem to need a rescue at all. The second the guy’s eyes widen in doubt at the sight of the sea-green dots, he spits right into those neon blue orbs.

Psycho Leader clutches at his face and screams while Dumbass rushes to his side, fretting.

“Jen! Jen, you okay?” Jared shouts over the noise, almost dislocating his shoulder as he tugs on the bonds with his whole body. Jensen’s glowing eyes blink at him for a few seconds, then he gets a small nod in response. Dumbass has begun pouring water from a pearl into his boss’ eyes.
“What are they saying?” Jared jerks his chin at them.

Jensen cracks a small smile. His feathers fluff up as though he’s proud. “They think it make not see. Poison.”

Jared huffs and slumps back against the tree. So they think Jensen spits poison that blinds them. Pea-brains. For all their posturing, this must be the first time they see a dancer and they are afraid. What if Jared used that to his advantage?

“He made me sick too!” He exclaims and ignores the worried glance Jensen shoots him. “I can’t speak good. And my hooks are gone!”

Both trackers pause.

“He’s lying.” Says Psycho Leader, but his expression is doubtful.

“But look, his feathers fell out too!” Chimes in Dumbass, the idiot.

Even though they are smarter than the previous two men who captured Jared, they are stupid enough to believe his bluff and leave Jensen alone. Not even a bag of pebbles worth dying like that, they say, and never touch Jensen again until they reach a road around midday and get into their waiting vehicle.

*Back to square one,* Jared thinks as they take off in the direction of the City. At least they made it out alive.

Jensen has his face tucked into Jared’s neck during the whole ride. Jared wants to nudge him up and console him with kisses or words, anything he can offer, but he doesn’t want their captors’ full attention back on them, so he stays still and quiet. He doesn’t want to admit it, but along with his fear and sadness, there’s resignation in his heart, acceptance. As though after the Federation let him down, he knew in his guts that their journey wouldn’t end in happy absolution.

Dumbass is in the truck bed with them, and his anxious, beady eyes suggest he won’t hesitate to pull the trigger in panic to save his own ass if they were to attempt running away.

As the treeline breaks and gives way to agricultural land, Jared gets his first glimpse of the other side of the City. From this far, he can’t make out much, but there’s something huge towering over the outskirts, a deformed grape of a building that glitters in the sunlight. It’s blinding, too bright to bear its sight for longer than a few seconds, doesn’t seem to have any colour other than that absolute, tear-bringing beam.

It isn’t until they reach the first houses that Jared forces himself to squint at it again and gasps in realisation. The building’s entire surface is covered by mirrors that reflect the sky. Real glass mirrors, not obsidian, clean and adjusted just-so to catch and spread as much sunlight as physically possible. It’s a temple and a palace in one, a sanctuary that for all its warmth conveys a deeper, scarier ruthlessness than black walls and shadows ever could.

Jared won’t doubt why common citizens fear the High Priest ever again.
When the truck comes to a halt, Jensen kisses Jared’s neck before Dumbass pulls him away. It’s his way of saying goodbye, Jared knows and wishes that he knew how to handle that and reciprocate. Nothing he could come up with would satisfy him because he doesn’t want any of those to be the final thing he does for Jensen.

The temple isn’t less intimidating once they are inside. Its walls are decorated with gold leaf mosaics of various shades, like scales on the inside of a monster’s stomach. There are mural tiles inlaid into the floor, gigantic paintings of a ring-shaped world around the centerpiece. Each dome has an oculus surrounded by engravings, collecting light and letting it stream down in the center of the sky-blue tiles. This way, sunshine seems almost tangible, neverending spun gold you can stroke with your fingertips to reach your gods. Every breath echoes in the unnatural silence until the walls resonate with them and you think they can hear the pounding of your very blood.

Pulled through hall after hall by the rope around his wrists, Jared feels smaller than a flea and just as unwanted, a dirty pest in the face of divine power.

All the guards they pass stare. Some raise their fingers to their foreheads in reverent greeting, others back away into the walls. As the domes they cross under start shrinking in size, the gold on the walls fades into large sculptures of mythological scenes decorated by gemstones. Where there’s no opening in the ceiling, brass wall lamps provide light.

The lower ranking priests mingling around come forth at times to try touching Jensen, but one flash of his warning neon gaze and they always flinch back. Jared thinks of how removed from the poverty of commoners they are and knows that to them, even as a prisoner half-naked and filthy from dried blood and dirt, Jensen looks every piece the god they imagined. Wild and unknown, more fitting for darkness and storms than the sunlight temple they live in, he’s the scariest thing they have ever seen in their pampered lives.

The High Priest is in a small room enclosed in a half-dome. It’s only accessible through a set of doors with electronic locks. A guy in green robes is just about to roll out a mobile shelf of copper plates – books or liturgical texts, Jared assumes – when they enter and everything freezes.

Everything except for the figure by the opposite wall who rushes forward and throws his arms around Jensen, nuzzling his temple.

It’s Jeff.

“Did they hurt you?” Jeff starts, then trails off into hushed whispers that only Jensen hears. For his part, Jensen just raises his bound wrists and grabs onto the front of Jeff’s shirt with a force that almost tears a hole in it.

Jared isn’t jealous, not after the secret Jensen told him, but he feels inexplicably guilty that Jensen got into this situation in the first place.

The High Priest, reclining in a swing further inside the room, waves a hand. He’s bathed in a ray of light coming from the device above him that makes the gold particles floating around him glitter. There’s an enormous installation behind him made of feathers, shaping a sun - the plumage of those he executed personally, Jared presumes. He’s horrified to note that some of the displayed contour feathers are green.

The stuck-up guy beside the swing about jumps out of his skin in his haste to obey the movement the High Priest made. He announces something, but the language is too formal for Jared, he doesn’t understand a single word of it. That’s why he isn’t prepared when someone yanks his ropes and pulls him to the door, not caring if he stumbles or stops. Jensen leaps after him, but Jeff holds him back.
All he can do is leaving red scratches with his hooks on the inside of Jared’s palm as they are pulled apart.

The last things Jared sees in the room is Jensen's worried face and behind him, the High Priest with his stupid braided hair and bored eyes.

They put him in some kind of prison. His cell only has one actual wall, otherwise it’s closed off by an electric fence, and it’s surprisingly rectangular. To unnerve the inmates, Jared guesses, and thanks his lucky stars that this is actually more familiar to him than the round rooms and burrows these people prefer. What does aggravate him about the place is the absolute lack of privacy the nonexistent walls and see-through fences create. There’s nowhere to hide, nowhere you can cry yourself raw or retreat from watching eyes.

And when someone looks like Jared in this place, there are one hell of a lot of those.

Jared has no idea why he isn’t sitting on the floor in hysterics, rocking with his knees pulled-up right now. Perhaps it’s the shock, the violation of the most basic human fault he possesses, the firm belief in a just world. The hope that if you are good and fight for yourself, a better day is to come. The tables will turn, salvation will be served. But why would that be the truth? It isn’t. Things always turn for the worst eventually. And at the end of all things, you die. You always die. The magic wears off and your particles become pieces of something else.

He doesn’t know how long he paces the small space he has been confined to, but through his cell’s window, he can see that the sun is setting when someone finally comes to interrupt him.

“I knew you would get here.” Jeff growls at him as soon as the guard unlocks the door and lets him in. He looks like he aged ten years since they ran away from the market. “Knew you would make things hard.”

Jared crosses his arms. “Ain’t gonna apologise.”

Jeff sighs and casts a glance at the guard, who’s busy counting the pebbles he got in exchange for this little visit. “Learn your talk why. To we speak and they not...” He begins in his unpractised words. “...not...”

“Understand?”

“Yes.” He clucks his tongue. “I want Jensen good. No hurt.”

“I know.” Jared gives him a small smile. “He told me.”

“I need man who not run tell other.” Jeff tries to explain. It’s easy to imagine his dilemma - who to trust when one word to the wrong person could cost his head and with that, Jensen’s too? Jared must have been a miracle. No status or investment in this society, no credibility as an outsider, a strong body, a secret language and not only a debt but a love for Jensen too. There couldn’t have been an easier choice. “I want save him.”

“Me too.” Jared whispers, surprised to find that his eyes are getting wet now of all times.
Jeff studies him for a moment, then steps closer and presses three fingers to Jared’s temple, just behind his eye socket. “You touch him head here.” He pushes a little harder. “Strong.”

Jared nods. He can’t figure out where this is going, but sure, he can apply pressure to Jensen’s temple no problem.

Jeff lets his arm fall. His frown is slowly smoothing out as he manages to mangle his way through what he wants to say. “You touch, he sleep. Go… soft.” He mimes an unconscious person. “You hurt throat - they see blood, they happy. But you not kill. Because he sleep, not die.”

What the fuck. “You want me to cut his throat?”


“I can’t do that!” Jared protests. No, Jesus. How is that a good plan? If he cuts just a tiny bit too deep, it’s game over, they can’t risk that. And how is he going to get to Jensen in the first place? Is he still in the dance or whatever, the fight or die show the High Priest entertains his devotees with? What’s his role?

“Ja-red, you… you do…” Jeff groans and switches languages. “They can hear this part. Didn’t he say how the Sacrifice goes?”

“No.” Jared doesn’t like what Jeff’s implying. Nope, not at all.

“When it’s time, you join him on the stage and fight him until he gives up.”

It's not a surprise. It's a goddamn horse kick to the chest. “You said -” Jared has to stop to swallow his anger. He hates this fucking culture. War and bravery and sacrifice, bloodshed and ritual massacres. Who wants to live with this?

“You said it was a dance.”

Jeff clucks his tongue, smiling like it’s the same fucking thing. “The bravest dance of all is for your life.”

“That’s great. Just fucking great.” Jared fumes. Really, he just can’t with these people. Jensen was born to the wrong world, he’s sure of that now.

“You’ll go up and dance with him. Then you put your knife to his throat and wait for the High Priest’s sign. If he raises his fingers to his forehead, you do what you have to. What we talked.”

Uh-huh. Jared has a hard time imagining that conceited dictator granting Jensen the easier path. The High Priest decides if my body was good or not, Jensen told him once. I stay with him if it was bad. What are the odds that the bastard will keep Jensen for a little fun? Jared will eat a living starfish-critter if he throws away that kind of entertainment.

“What if he doesn’t?” He asks Jeff.

Jeff’s thick eyebrows draw into a firm, determined line. “Then I’ll do my part.”

Can’t they get away with a prison break or something instead? “I don’t like this.”

Jeff puts a hand on his shoulder. “It is said. When the Lights come, a Sacrifice is made.”

Jared runs a hand through his hair and lets out a long exhale. “Okay. Okay, I will… I will do my best. What happens after the dance? After I cut throat?” He simplifies for Jeff.
“My dader…”

“Daughter.”

“Dade - My girl.” Jeff starts. “She lead you and Jensen from stage.” He pauses. “Since the Sickness, we burn bodies and don’t put them into the river.”

Jared snorts. Yeah, that’s probably wiser than letting them pile up in the LWD and contaminate the water supplies.

“She lead you to forest and bring fake body for burn. You meet Lightwalkers.”

“Lightwalkers?” The ones Miquitzli has been trading with? Hell no. That smells like a trap.

“I have deal.” Jeff says gruffly, averting his eyes as though he, too, knows he has done some shady turncoat business going behind the High Priest’s back to bargain with the rebels. “I did give all stones. All gold. All green feathers. Everything.” He emphasizes. “They promise travel on… sh- sh-”

“Ship?”

“Yes. Travel to other land. Good land. No dances on other land.” Jeff raises one hand, then the other, like two plates of an antique scale. “They say, you bring boy out, they take boy away. But I not believe. I say yes, but I take this. To bring on ship and keep Jensen good.”

He reaches into his pouch and pulls out a weapon. “After dance, you take my boy and keep good with this.”

Jared almost drops it when he gets a good look.

It’s a phaser. A fucking phaser.

And not an ordinary one either. Jared would recognise the signs anywhere - the overkill second type-1 phaser mounted on the original weapon, the mismatched trigger and type-2 barrel that are from two different decades and the tasteless hand-painted decoration. It’s so obvious that he wants to kick himself for not realizing it earlier, back in the destroyed little village. That single phaser has the capacity to blow out a chunk of a starship if overloaded. It’s likely to be unstable and highly dangerous to handle, and its widespread popularity among outlaws makes it a top priority for planetary police. His Dad has been complaining about this shit just a few months ago.

That gun is typical space nomad tinkering with technology.

Which means that the fuckers haven’t died two hundred years ago, but settled down and made a hefty gain from Saxet-d’s wrong classification.

Jared’s mind is about to explode.

Holy crap. Space nomads...

This planet must be a gold mine for them, Jesus Christ. They are known for settling down around pre-contact races to hunt them down and to take their inventions and commodities, trading with one group of the locals while selling their less fortunate neighbours for credits on the black market. The slavery business and collectors would kill for something as exotic as one of Jensen’s people. Space nomads are usually cruel bastards who tend to make deals with pirates and other scum too if they benefit from the process. And God, there’s the remedial saliva too. Not every medicine company makes sure its test animals are truly non-sentient.
And Miquitzli has an agreement with them. Christ, what if he doesn’t kill the dancers but sells them to the nomads for weapons?

“Oh.” Jared gasps as his thoughts complete the circle. Oh. Everything is clear now, it all makes sense, why didn’t he think of that...

It was the space nomad settlement that shot his ship down. He was close enough to report a misclassification and then he went and waved his research ship certification around like a badge. Of course they shot him down, there’s no way a Federation scientist would leave a newly discovered habitable planet alone. If these nomads do people trafficking from here, they wouldn’t want the Fleet’s First Contact Unit close enough to sniff out their stink.

What if they shot the E.S. too and that’s why it failed to show up? But that means someone from the Fleet has been notified, right? Did Jared’s brother hear about it, or did it go overlooked in the face of the threats at the Delta quadrant borders?

“I have to go.” Jeff interrupts his swirling realisations. He takes back the weapon and hides it in his pouch. “My daughter will give it to you. Do you understand the plan?”

Yes, but it won’t work, Jared wants to argue. We need to come up with something else! But the guard is already there, opening the lock and ushering Jeff out, and there’s nothing to do but nod and pray that they can get Jensen off the stage alive at the very least.

“Will you tell him?” Jared calls after Jeff when the door closes and the electric fence buzzes back into operation.

Jeff gives him a sad look and shakes his head. “He won’t be thinking right.”

Jared wants to pound on the wires around him and demand answers. How can he save Jensen now? Is there someone coming to take him home? “What do you mean?”

Jeff raises three fingers to his forehead and turns. “You will see tomorrow.”

End Notes

Feedback is welcome and appreciated. :)

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