**Ivory Tower**

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**Ivory Tower**

by **Sifl**

**Summary**

Dende is a Namek. He is neither male nor female, but also both, and he is in love with a boy that is both human and alien, and also neither.

(Post-Buu shameless Gohan/Dende in an honest-to-goodness relationship!)
Dende's dearest friend stood on the edge of the Lookout with his hands on his hips and his eyes fixed on the horizon. The night wind picked at his hair and tousled it gently like Dende had seen mothers do for their children while they slept.

Piccolo also played with Gohan's hair the same way as the wind, sometimes. The Grand Elder Guru touched the head of his children, too, except he did so in order to unlock potential whereas Piccolo went through the motion to soothe. It was a humorous dichotomy, actually. Guru was normally more the type to offer comfort, whereas Piccolo acted much more inclined to search out power and damn all sentimentality.

Again, Dende thought of Earthling parents and their children. It was so foreign to him, the whole concept of mothers and fathers- two creatures, one called male and the other a second sex, must unite to create a new life.

It only took one Namek to create new life, and thus there was no need to differentiate those who birthed and those who seeded. Namek only had the one sex.

Dende supposed that, here on Earth, he could choose to be either male or female, but it would be pointless. He was both sexes, as he understood it, and also neither of them.

Apparently, in the eyes and language of the humans here, this meant all Nameks were assigned male. That was fine. The Earth was another planet, and the rules Dende had first learned at birth were untranslatable- they were the rules of another world. *Piccolo*.

Trying to explain the concept further was a counterproductive headache, anyway.

The breeze grabbed at Gohan's hair again. He ran his own fingers through the black mess to keep it away from his eyes.

"Tomorrow's a brand new day," Gohan said, his eyes still searching the night sky for a wayward soul like he used to do many years ago.

Dende moved to stand by his friend. Lately, these visits were not uncommon- Gohan often came by on nights he could not sleep. Usually, he chatted with Mister Popo or Dende briefly, and then sat with Piccolo and meditated or read a book at his beloved master's side. Dende rarely had the opportunity to hold all of Gohan's attention for himself, and was grateful that Mister Popo was away on an errand and their tall, taciturn mentor was off finding his center in the wastelands to the south tonight. "Yes. It's a wonderful blessing," the Guardian said, planting his wooden staff in the tiles by his feet.

The two kept a vigil over the heavens together in silence. The camaraderie was nice, and Dende wondered how much of a difference it would make for the Earth to have two Guardians instead of one to watch over it and lay their hands upon it in comfort.

Gohan's thoughts were not so sweet- his dynamic and unsettled mood jittered in the air around them both. Dende's friend was no good at hiding his emotions despite all of Piccolo's insistences that Gohan control them, and the soft humming of anxiety eventually brought Dende's eyes to search Gohan's face. "What is bothering you?"

Gohan sent his hand back through his hair, but this time it was not because the wind had mused it up first. "You ever think that maybe you don't know what to do with yourself? Like, well, you sort
of know what you want, but not really, and you don't know how to go after it because you can't put your finger on exactly what it is or if it is the right thing for you to do?"

Dende fiddled with his staff. "I might. Why do you want to know?"

Gohan looked over, stunned, and then laughed. "That sure sounded defensive. Piccolo's really rubbed off on you, huh?"

Dende's eyes grew wide. "W-What? No! That's not what I was trying to come across as at all! I was trying to coax you into being more specific about your problem! I didn't mean-!"

Gohan laughed louder. The sound was familiar and warm. "I'm kidding. I know what you meant. It was just the way you said it, is all." He looked back to the open sky. "I'm just..." He closed his eyes and collected himself. "Buu really shook me, Dende."

"Buu shook all of us," the Guardian admitted. "I almost lost this planet and everyone on it. And I almost lost you to him, twice. No, three times. I..." How many times had fate forced Dende to stand on the precipice of a life without Gohan?

The first time was when Dende had met him. Gohan had flown straight into the mortal danger Dende was already engrossed in- glossy hair streaming from his head, fists clenched, teeth gnashing- and Krillin had been forced to step in and steal both children away from the reaper.

The rest of Dende's memories from Old Namek played out much the same. Their lives transformed into an endless game of hide-and-go-seek with murderers waiting for them at every turn. Was that two, three more times? Maybe four? It was difficult to keep track of how many times death almost cornered them. In fact, Dende had been caught, at one point, but Shenron gave him another chance at life.

That was very Earth, the idea of giving second chances to the dear departed. Nameks did not normally abhor their losses to the point of bucking the natural order of the universe.

But a half-year on Earth had been the prize for survival, and Dende learned that he loved this planet. He loved its forests and mountains, its inhabitants, and their potential for good. He loved Nail-made-Piccolo, and Krillin, and Bulma, and all his other new friends, and he loved learning about how day became night and the moon made different shapes in the sky.

And Dende had not realized that leaving Gohan to live on New Namek would make his heart ache so.

That was the fifth time, at least, that Dende might have never seen his friend again. He had felt that loss like someone of Earth, not like someone of Namek, and had jumped at the chance to change it when Son Goku arrived in search of a new Guardian.

"Dende?" Gohan gently pried. "Hello? Earth to Dende?"

Dende blinked. "You came here to talk about yourself and what's eating you, and I'm selfishly wandering off into my own little world. I apologize."

"No, no. I come up here unannounced all of the time and unload on you and Mister Popo. And Piccolo, if he doesn't get mad and fly off first." Gohan chuckled. "It's not fair of me to expect you to cater to me all of the time."

Dende stepped closer to his friend. "You are always welcome here! We are always happy to see you!"
Gohan considered Dende for a moment, and then sat down on the lip of the Lookout. "Dende, you're the Guardian of Earth. You've probably got more important things to do than humor me." He let his forearms rest on his thighs and his hands clasp together loosely at his knees.

Dende put down his staff and sat cross-legged next to his friend. "I want to help you if I can. Really. I want to make you happy. That's all I have ever wanted to do."

"Thank you, Dende," Gohan said after a pause. "Thank you, but you don't need to dedicate so much of your time and energy to me." He shook his head as the wind blew his hair around again. Dende fought the urge to brush it back into place. "It's probably not really a good thing for me to rely on others so much anyway, huh?" Gohan added.

"What exactly do you mean?"

Gohan sighed. "I've never been particularly fond of leaving my comfort zone. I've never liked fighting, or change, or having to sit and think about the fact that at some point I was most definitely going to have to make a choice between a normal life and the life of... Whatever it is you'd call my dad's role on the planet. For seven years, I avoided the choice altogether and we both saw how crappy the consequences of that turned out."

"Your father is here now, though. He and Vegeta are more than happy to protect the Earth and train for that possibility indefinitely so that you do not have to," Dende pointed out.

Gohan shook his head. "And I am so, so happy to have dad back, but what if that is not enough? What if he dies again?" He exhaled. "Again. How ridiculous is that. My dad came back from the dead again because I couldn't do his job. Again!"

"Gohan, I don't think that is an entirely accurate or fair way of looking at the situation," Dende tried. "If Son Goku had not returned in the first place, Vegeta would not have chosen to-"

Gohan put his forehead in his hands. "Vegeta. I couldn't do anything for him, either. Or against him, really, when he attacked the crowd. With my dad gone, he waited in his gravity room and stewed and just..."

Dende pried his friend's hands away from his face and held them. "Stop this," Dende pleaded. "That is not your job. It should not be your job. The Earth should not be one person's burden to carry alone."

That earned Dende a slow, wry smile. "Says you, of all people."

Dende was torn between smiling back and closing himself off. Instead, he kept his face blank and held Gohan's hands more tightly. "I chose this," Dende said. "And the difference is, I did not entirely do it because I thought it was my duty. I wanted to come back to the Earth because I," Dende was actually unsure about what words to use. "I selfishly thought that," the concept of loving a single something or someone that you wanted to stay by its side forever was not Namek, at least, not in the specific way Dende was trying to express. "Moori volunteered me to come here because he thought it would be best. And he did it because he knew that I, um," Dende struggled. Could particular human concepts still apply to him?

"It's not like you to be so ineloquent," Gohan observed.

Dende tried to smile this time, but he ended up just showing his fangs in a grimace. "This is difficult. May I," he swallowed. "May I just show you?"

Nameks relied on their minds for communication far more than other creatures. All their relationships
were classified by how intimately they chose to communicate. Beyond fusion into one being, which was the closest thing Nameks had to marriage, the closest form of communication was to press foreheads and antennae together and be connected through the mind uncensored for as long as desired.

Such a mode of expression was the truest form of a meeting of the minds. The social connotations of the gesture differed greatly from those of Earth, but Dende supposed it was comparable to a kiss.

Gohan did not know all of that, though. "Show me? Sure, but I don't entirely understand."

"I'm going to," Dende's mouth felt dry for reasons he did not know, "I am going to try and connect our minds directly. You do not have antennae, but it should still work well enough."

"Like telepathy?" Gohan asked. "Piccolo has done that before."

"It's more," Dende faltered. "It's more in-depth than just that." He rubbed his thumbs on the back of Gohan's hands. Concepts, feelings. It communicated ideas before they were lost and cheapened inside of words. "I'm going to put my forehead against yours."

Gohan nodded. "Okay."

Dende cautiously released one of Gohan's hands and held the stray locks of hair away from his face. Gohan leaned down so that Dende could reach him more easily.

Gohan's big, kind eyes smiled at Dende when he hesitated. "It may be a little strange and confusing, at first," Dende stalled.

"Name one thing in my life that has not been," Gohan challenged, laughing. "And don't you dare say something like trigonometry or ancient literature."

This time, Dende did smile as he slid his fingers through Gohan's hair. It was softer and more pliable than he had expected it to be. "I see your point," Dende said, and closed both his eyes and the distance between their faces.

At first, Dende edged around Gohan cautiously and only let pieces of information slip through to him- how much the Earth amazed him, how happy he felt when Gohan visited, how wonderful it was that he had the privilege to be here on the Lookout at this very moment with just him- but progressively grew bolder and more specific as Gohan slowly caught on to how he could absorb the information presented to him.

Dende thought of parents holding each other's hands and the hands of their children, of two swans on a lake lit up by moonlight, and how the moon and the sun both orbit the Earth, and how they can eclipse one another but never touch. He thought of white flowers and black hair, the smell of Gohan's clothes and the sound of his laugh, and how silly he looked whenever he studied with a mountain of books bigger than he was sitting next to him. Dende remembered how much it had hurt when Gohan stopped visiting during the seven years after Shenron was reborn, and how much he wanted to ask Gohan to never do that again, and stay on the Lookout with him today and tomorrow and the next day and the next day, and then--

Gohan pulled his forehead away and gently pressed his lips against Dende's. It was the kind of kiss a child would give another, free of desire or impurity. It was the kind Dende was able to understand even then, with as little experience as he had about what it meant to love and be wholly dedicated to someone else.

At some point without his knowing, Dende had put both of his arms around Gohan's neck and
Gohan had wrapped both of his around Dende's back.

Dende flushed purple.

Gohan's face was impassive as he gently disentangled himself. "I think I should go," he quietly said, and drifted away from the side of the Lookout. He hovered in front of Dende for a moment, and then turned away. Dende watched him grow farther and farther away until he disappeared into the starry night sky.
Flower Fortunes

Chapter Summary

Gohan returns to the Lookout and has a little chat with Dende.

Chapter Notes

Okay so this opens with a slightly unrelated scene with Piccolo but I couldn't make myself cut it. I just couldn't do it.

Also, this ship is made of sugar even if it gets kinky. That's the best part. The dynamic of (most) of it is thinly veiled in this chapter, actually.

Besides acting as a moderator for the planet and as a liaison between the Earth and the World Beyond, Dende's primary job was to learn about the Earth's past and use that knowledge to guide its future. Most of the texts he adhered to were very old, and very dry. Still, he found them fascinating- Dende loved to learn, and it never ceased to amaze him how very new and different this planet was from his home.

At least, that was usually Dende's attitude.

It had been three days since his dearest friend had come and watched the night sky with him, and three days since Dende had last been able to sit still long enough to read more than a few paragraphs of anything at a time. The Guardian looked away from the scroll in his lap and gently rolled it up in defeat. His everyday life was very taxing, lately.

Besides, this writing was about the ancient wars in the time of the third Guardian of Earth. Dende did not want to think about war and hate today. He wanted to think about...

Dende peeked beyond the pillars of the pavilion porch and searched the afternoon sky for any sign of Gohan, but saw and sensed nothing.

Dende reminded himself that he should not feel so let down- Gohan had school and responsibilities, and now a father who lived in the house with him. If Gohan should choose to visit, it would be at night.

And honestly, Gohan may not actually want to return. He had avoided coming to the Lookout most of the seven years his father had been dead, after all.

Dende fiddled with the old parchment in his lap and sighed.

Piccolo swept onto the pavilion porch, his pristine cape swirling behind his sure, even strides. He walked with a purpose, as he always did, and stopped in front of Dende with crossed arms and a cross expression.

"I was gone for a night, and when I came back, you were moping. And when you stopped moping,
you scurried around here like some kind of annoying little brat with too much energy. And then you started moping again, and then scurrying again, and then moping again. You have done this for three days, and worse, you broadcast whenever your moods are changing so I have to know about it even when I can't see you. Stop. You're driving me crazy."

Piccolo never was one for sympathy. Dende smiled despite himself and conveniently failed to mention that it was just as much Piccolo's own nosiness that drove him to eavesdrop on Dende's moods than it was Dende's own will. "I am sorry," the Guardian said. "I am often alone up here and forget that I am not always the only Namek who can feel my thoughts. I had not meant to trouble you."

"If you don't mean to trouble me, then don't trouble me," Piccolo huffed, and walked away.

Dende half-wished that Piccolo would be a little more open to conversation. He had once been, in a complicated fashion, the last Guardian of Earth, and might be able to illuminate Dende's dilemma in a way Dende himself had not learned about yet. As it was, though, Dende found the idea of approaching Piccolo with the situation to be an abysmal undertaking.

If Piccolo made it known that he was willing to lend an ear, however, that would change things entirely.

Apparently, Dende had not been so secretive with that thought, either, because Piccolo turned on his heel and stared down at Dende with an exasperated look in his eyes. "I thought I made myself clear— I don't want to know about your emotional problems," he said. "Go to Mister Popo if you want a shoulder to cry on."

Dende sighed and opened his scroll again. "Of course," he said, and tried his best to absorb the meaning behind the words written on the parchment.

"Bah." Piccolo tapped his foot on the tile a few times and then stormed away.

It was true, though. Gohan might not come back now that Dende had so selfishly projected his feelings into his mind. He might not want the same things, not really, not once he had taken the time to think about it. Dende could be pining for a lost cause.

But Gohan had kissed him, so perhaps there was something to it after all?

Dende's thoughts pulled him back and forth between hope and despair. The war written about on the parchment suddenly felt very relevant after all.

*I'm going to throw you off the Lookout.* Piccolo announced through the airwaves. *The Dragon Balls be damned.*

Ah, yes. The Dragon Balls. A little piece of Dende entertained the idea of using them to wish for knowledge and guidance, but the Guardian knew, by design, that Shenron was more savvy with literal wishes directed at tangible goals. Porunga would be a better choice for what Dende was after even if Porunga tended to grant wishes in riddling ways.

But the whole idea was ridiculous— how irresponsible it was for a Guardian to consider, even in passing, using the Dragon Balls for something so selfish and small! Dende was acting so foolishly!

A gentle tap on the Guardian's shoulder pulled him from his internal misery. Mister Popo was at Dende's side holding a single daisy.

The genie handed it to Dende.
"Oh, has your garden bloomed? It's a very lovely daisy," Dende said. "Thank you." Honestly, he was a little puzzled as to why Mister Popo was giving him a flower, but he liked flowers so he supposed it did not matter.

"Pluck the petals. He loves me, he loves me not." Mister Popo mimicked the action of plucking petals as he said each phrase.

"Huh?" Dende asked.

The genie shrugged. "Up to you."

Dende considered the bright yellow daisy in his hand. Why would Mister Popo ask the Guardian to do such a thing? What good would tearing apart a flower accomplish? There was a joke here that Dende did not understand. He was sure of it.

Still, the daisy had already been cut from the stem. It would be a shame to let it go to waste.

Dende pulled a petal. "He loves me," the Guardian said, feeling exceptionally silly as he grabbed a second petal, "he loves me not."


Eventually, Dende made it to the last petal. He gently rubbed it between his fingers, and then jolted upright. The scroll fell out of his lap.

Gohan's energy was faint, but it was growing closer by the second.

Mister Popo smiled wider and looked out into the sky. "He loves you," the genie said, and disappeared inside the pavilion.

Dende stood up so quickly that the discarded petals around his feet scattered about in the air around him. He left his staff where it lay and moved as quickly as he could to the edge of the Lookout.

"You are just obnoxious," Dende heard Piccolo mutter from where he sat meditating in the sky. "What could possibly be so special about Gohan coming to the Lookout?"

"I am not entirely sure," Dende admitted, his hands clenched together tightly around the stem of his ruined daisy. "But thank you for taking enough interest to ask!"

At that, Piccolo cursed and levitated over to the other side of the Lookout.

Dende chuckled to himself and let his smile take a more permanent hold on his face as Gohan touched down onto the pristine white tile of Dende's home.

"Hello," the Guardian greeted. The anxiousness in his core transformed into a whole new kind of nervousness.

Gohan's face mirrored his friend's. "Hi, Dende." He fiddled with the strap of the bag slung across his body.

Dende held his friend's eyes and toyed with the remnants of the flower in his hand some more.

Gohan looked down at his feet. "Would, um, would it be okay if I studied here today?"
"Of course," said Dende, and attuned himself to the sound of Gohan's heartbeat.

"Thank you," Gohan said.

"You are welcome. Anytime," Dende added.

Gohan shifted his weight. "I'm, um, I'm just going to go get myself settled in the study, then. If that's not a problem."

"No, no, never. Go right ahead." Dende absentmindedly squeezed the head of the daisy within his fingers.

"Alright, then."

"Yes."

"Okay."

"Right."

Neither of them moved.

What is wrong with you two?

Dende accidentally crushed the daisy when Piccolo's surly third wheel entered his head. He could tell from Gohan's suddenly straightened posture that their mentor had startled him, too.

Dende inexplicably felt like he had been caught doing something private. Nothing is wrong, he told Piccolo, and briskly walked across the Lookout and past the flower carnage on the top steps of the pavilion's porch. Gohan followed and noticed the petals and abandoned scroll and staff, but did not mention anything about them.

Dende lead his dear friend to the study. It was a homey room with a fireplace in the center and books lining the walls in shelves and piled on the floor. The only other furniture in the room was a desk and chair nestled between the stacks of books and a plush armchair flanking the unlit fireplace. Dende offered Gohan the armchair.

After a glance around the room, Gohan put down his bag and cautiously took a seat. Dende wondered if he should squeeze himself between the armrests next to him so the two could share it.

What an odd thought.

He pulled out the desk chair instead and sat down next to Gohan. Then, as Gohan fiddled with his books, Dende realized he had left his scroll on the ground outside.

That was fine. Dende did not plan on reading it much more today, anyway. "Gohan, are you thirsty? Would you like some water? Or maybe something to, um, eat?"

Gohan produced a book from his bag and cracked it open. "Uh, maybe some water. If it is not too much trouble," he said, glancing at Dende rather than the textbook in his lap.

The Guardian leapt to his feet and hurried to the kitchen.

Even though Gohan had only asked for water, Dende knew he was probably hungry, too- Gohan was always ready for a meal. The Guardian set down the glass of water and rifled through the cabinets to try and find something suitable.
All he could find were sugar cubes and different kinds of tea.

Tea! He should make tea for his guest. That was only good manners, or so observing Earth's culture had taught him. He should have had some ready from the beginning. But what kind? Black or green? Rose or breakfast? Chamomile or the one of the teas made with all the spices Dende had never tasted? The Guardian pulled them all out of the cabinets and examined their labels critically.

He stood there deliberating over the tea for a good ten minutes before he realized he should just ask Gohan what he would like.

Dende made his way back to the study with his heart in his throat and the glass of water in his hand.

Gohan smiled in relief when he came back and accepted the water gratefully. "Oh, good. I was almost scared you had gotten lost," he said to Dende.

"What? Oh! N-no. I was just, um. What kind of tea would you like?"

"Tea? Oh, no. I appreciate the offer, but you don't have to make me any tea. You won't drink anything besides water anyway, right?"

"I would drink tea if you wanted me to drink tea," Dende said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I mean," Dende realized he still had the destroyed daisy clenched in his fingers and looked down at it, "if you wanted any tea, do not let your perceptions of my preferences discourage you from asking for any."

Gohan nodded slowly and followed Dende's stare. "Well. Um. Thank you for your consideration. Um." He swallowed and tapped on the water glass. "Say, what is the flower stem for? If you, ah, don't mind my asking."

"This? Oh, it's nothing." Dende panicked and tossed what was left of the daisy outside the nearby window. "Mister Popo asked me to complete a particular task with it and its purpose has been fulfilled," the Guardian said, settling back into his chair and feeling heat rush to his face in embarrassment and exasperation.

Gohan nodded slowly. "If you say so," he said, and watched Dende fidget in his seat before returning to his book.

Eventually, Dende's face returned to its natural color and he quietly looked over and watched his friend read.

Gohan's dark hair stood away from his face in soft black peaks and his sharp features were softened by his gentle expression. He moved through the pages relatively quickly, and sometimes his lips would move to form the words he was reading when he started a new page. Dende absentmindedly leaned over and rested his forearms on one of the armrests to watch him more closely and hear his heartbeat and the almost-words he periodically mouthed more clearly. Gohan paid the Guardian no mind- he was oblivious to everything besides the text he was looking at.

Eventually, though, the boy noticed that Dende was staring. "Is there, um... Don't, um, don't you have anything to read? I don't want to keep you here and bore you," he said as he looked up to find Dende hanging off the side of his chair.

Dende blinked. "Bore me? Oh, no, I am not bored. I was enjoying watching you."
Gohan raised his eyebrows.

"I mean," Dende backtracked, "I was perfectly content to sit next to you and observe."

"That doesn't sound much better," Gohan admitted.

Dende panicked and tried one more time. "I'm so happy to be able to be near you. That's what I am trying to say."

Gohan closed his book and set it aside. "Dende, that's..." He sighed. "Fine. I'm not just here to study. We both know it."

Dende cocked his head. "We do?"

Gohan shook his head. "Well, now we do. I came up here to talk to you."

Dende felt a disproportionately appropriate amount of pleasure balloon into his heart from Gohan's words. "I am so happy that you have done so," he said.

"Really? That's, um, good. That's good! I just, um," he nodded slowly and his eyes darted to and from Dende's face. "I'm not sure I know, um, what you want from me and if I've done something wrong, or... I don't know what you want. Not entirely. Let's, um, let's start there. Three days ago, I saw what you were thinking and I thought that, um. Well," he tried, and ran his hand through his hair. "I don't, uh, really know what to say for myself."

Gohan's mood warped and pulsed in the same uneven rhythm Dende's had been riffing for the past three days. The solidarity of feeling assuaged the Guardian's nerves some, but Gohan only became more anxious as the seconds ticked by.

"Do you not want me to be here and so close to you, Gohan?" Dende asked, shrinking back from his perch on the armchair.

"What?! No! No, that's not what I mean. What I'm getting at is that I," Gohan held up his hands and deliberated what to do with them for a moment before gently putting them on Dende's shoulders, "I don't know how this will sound to you, but I do not know how this works."

"Works?" Dende asked, putting more of his weight back onto the armchair. "This is not meant to be a chore. I never meant to be a burden. I was only trying to tell you that I am always so pleased when you come visit, and hopeful that you will stay longer and will visit more so that we can spend more time together."

Gohan's thumbs tapped against his friend's shoulders. "It's not about it being a chore, it's.... I think you've told me a lot more than all of that, Dende."

Dende nodded. "That had been the idea. But I do not know how to say to you in words the rest of what I was thinking and what I showed you three days ago." He smiled weakly. "It is embarrassing, actually, for a Namek to be so utterly confused when it comes to communication. The mental Namek kiss works much better than Earth's common speech, don't you think? It is much more personal and intimate."

"Namek k-kiss?" Gohan was suddenly very intrigued by the floor. "W-well, yes. I suppose it does," he said, and Dende noticed that his beloved friend was turning pink. It was a very sweet color. "But, um, I gave you a kiss, too, after... After the... Intimate... Um..." Gohan's coloring went from blush to fire engine red. "I thought I had been the one acting too bold but I think I have this situation backwards," he said. "How, um, exactly how personal is the, um, what I mean is, h-how far did we
"Gohan?" Dende asked as his friend's stuttering grew worse. "I do not understand what you are asking."

Gohan kept monologuing. "My, uh, m-my mom says that intimacy is reserved for the, uh, th-the person you m-marry because... In... Intimate... Kiss... H-how do you and I, um. How can you and I, um??

"Gohan?" Dende tried again. The boy was beginning to squeeze Dende's shoulders, and it hurt.

"Am I still a--?!" Gohan inhaled. "Did you and I-I-I don't know how to ask this, um, but an i-intimate--? Intimate--! H-how, um, i-i-intim--!!"

"Gohan!"

"Does it c-count if we h-have our c-clothes-- do you even-? Eggs? Babies? H-h-how? C-can you go to h-hell e-e-even though you are a go-"

Dende leaned forward and pressed their foreheads together.

Dende was first met with a jumble of chaos and then a total void as Gohan's mind blanked from surprise at their sudden closeness.

The quietness of Gohan's mind intensified into white noise and then opened up into a gradual crescendo of stimuli- tongues of fire, an anatomy diagram, and a flower being ripped to pieces. Gohan's mother burst through all of it and roared obscenities at her son along with proclamations of damnation for failing to wait until he was married- repeatedly, now! Her distorted face drew closer to Dende and the flames around her cast a wrathful glow upon her until her hair glowed gold and her eyes flashed green. Videl Satan screamed in the background while green babies and eggs rained down from the blackened sky.

Dende was unable to absorb anything specific beyond that, but he really did not need to see any more to understand what was going through his friend's mind.

The Guardian willed the skies open in a torrential downpour to beat back the madness. Chi Chi screamed to the heavens and fought the sudden flood, but eventually Dende's will conquered all and swept both her and the rest of the mess away in giant, uneven waves of water. Slowly, the roiling currents stilled into a calm ocean and the clouds parted to reveal a bright sun.

It was an inelegant and highly literal solution, but it had worked.

Gohan's immediate response was to think about dolphins, and so a school of them leapt through the scene.

Dende imagined Piccolo riding one of them just for fun.

Gohan laughed and moved his face just far enough to break the connection. The Guardian smiled brightly back at him. When Gohan eventually quieted down and opened his eyes, too, his expression sobered.

"The way you feel about me, I don't know how to respond to," he finally said.

Dende shrugged. "I do not know how you should respond to it, either. And I did not know I could even feel this way, if that helps you any."
"You... didn't know that you could?" Gohan asked.

"No," the Guardian said. "I truly did not. And I still would not if you had not, well," Dende pushed his lips against Gohan's. "I learned a lot from that," he added as he pulled away.

Dende liked being close enough to smell his friend's breath and hear more loudly the steady sound of his heartbeat as it changed pace. The Guardian wondered what he could do to make the boy laugh again, because he loved seeing him happy.

Whatever Gohan was thinking manifested itself as another blush on his face. "You are the Guardian of Earth and a Namek," he said after a long, quiet moment. "I am human and a Saiyan. I can't really promise anything yet, and I can't promise forever, but what do you think you want from me?"

"Before I answer that, what do you want, Gohan?" Dende challenged.

Gohan's fingers rubbed against Dende's shoulders. "Specifically? I don't know. I've never thought about it before. But I want to make you happy," he said. "I like you. And you are one of the few people who really knows me. At all. And you know who and what I am and aren't bothered by it." Gohan swallowed and nodded. "You are very important to me, Dende. I want you to know that, first and foremost."

Dende smiled and pressed one of Gohan's hands against his face. It was smooth and soft, and as warm as Gohan's words.

"Dende, that's, um," Gohan's embarrassment was replaced by resolve. "I need your answer," he prompted after a minute.

"Oh!" Dende chuckled. "Specifically, I do not know what to tell you, either. But for now, if you do not mind," he said, "Come visit the Lookout more. Come spend time with me and talk with me. But most importantly," he experimentally kissed the palm of Gohan's hand, "let me make you happy."
What's Michael?

Chapter Summary

Gohan introduces Piccolo and Dende to some quality literature.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dende and Gohan sat in the center of the plush armchair in the Lookout's study with their backs pressed against one another and their legs hanging over the armrests on each side. The Guardian had another ancient scroll in his hands- this one was about the great calamity that separated Papaya Island from the rest of the Southern Continent hundreds of years ago- and Gohan had his own book open and leaning against his thighs.

"All of the past Guardians' writings are about great catastrophes," Dende remarked. "Even the population census records only take special care to record wartime numbers or those at times during famine or disease."

Gohan shrugged against Dende's back. "Well, I guess when things are fine, nobody takes notice. People don't learn as well from peacetimes as they do from war. That, or they are too preoccupied enjoying the good times to bother writing them down."

Dende frowned. "Perhaps if they did, they would learn what exactly made life so easy before they created a new disaster for themselves." He shook his head. "On Namek, most records are kept telepathically and written down only when they were needed to convey messages to other races. Here, everything must be written down or spoken aloud. The whole attitude towards the medium is different. It's fascinating, but... These are nothing like the scientific works. It takes so much effort and time to write all of these accounts down, and all of them are depressing!" His brow furrowed. "And then I have to become depressed from reading them!"

Gohan looked over his shoulder at Dende and grinned. "Are you pouting back there?"

"You might be as well if you were in my shoes!"

Gohan laughed and went back to reading whatever was in his lap.

Dende frowned. "Perhaps if they did, they would learn what exactly made life so easy before they created a new disaster for themselves." He shook his head. "On Namek, most records are kept telepathically and written down only when they were needed to convey messages to other races. Here, everything must be written down or spoken aloud. The whole attitude towards the medium is different. It's fascinating, but... These are nothing like the scientific works. It takes so much effort and time to write all of these accounts down, and all of them are depressing!" His brow furrowed. "And then I have to become depressed from reading them!"

Gohan looked over his shoulder at Dende and grinned. "Are you pouting back there?"

"You might be as well if you were in my shoes!"

Gohan laughed and went back to reading whatever was in his lap.

Dende turned around and peeked at it in curiosity, too. This book was thin and full of pictures- it was nothing like the other textbooks Gohan usually lugged up to the Lookout. The Guardian rolled up his scroll and focused his attention on getting a better look. He moved his legs to the front of the armchair and propped Gohan against his chest as he looked over the boy's shoulder.

Gohan absentmindedly moved to accommodate Dende's new position and turned the page.

"Wait! I was not done reading that part yet!" Dende objected.

"Huh?" Gohan looked to his right and got a face full of Dende. "You were reading this? What about your doom and gloom... thingy? Your Guardian homework?"

"I am taking a break!" Dende announced. "Besides, this is just as enlightening. I have never seen a
book like this before."

"Oh! Well, it's a comic book. It's got pictures to tell the story along with the words." Gohan turned back to the book in question.

Dende nodded against Gohan's cheek. "I see. And what subject does this teach?"

Dende could hear the blood rushing to Gohan's face. "It, um, it doesn't teach anything," Gohan said. "It's a fantasy story to read for fun. It's all pretend." His closeness heated Dende's ear. "Please don't, um, don't mention to my mom that I'm not reading my science book the entire time I am here, okay?"

Dende's ears twitched against Gohan's face in affirmation as he absorbed the comic in his friend's lap.

The pair read a few more pages in comfortable silence.

"Who makes these?" Dende eventually asked.

"Oh," Gohan looked down. "Well, artists. And writers. Sometimes just one person is both, sometimes two people split the task, or maybe a team of people do."

"There are entire social roles dedicated to entertainment?" Dende asked. It had not occurred to him during that half-year he had first spent on Earth as a child, but now that Dende was older and had literally spent years pouring through the more mundane and practical products of the written word, the significance of the Earth's value in imagination expressed through literature was clear.

"Oh, yes," Gohan told him. "There are lots of types of entertainment, too, besides comic books. Films, television, fantasy novels, the theater, board games, um..."

"I know about the others, but I meant in written form, specifically." Television and movies were an interesting concept and no less worthy, but they were not as novel- pun intended. Moving pictures struck Dende as a type of synthetic mental link, where the creators had the opportunity to show the audience exactly what they wanted them to see through the screen rather than using the mind's eye directly in the way that Nameks do. "This book is about cats. Are they usually about cats? Or are the other entertaining writings also usually about war?" Dende asked.

Gohan eyed the book in his hands. "Um, no, not necessarily. About... About war, not cats. Frequently, though, some kind of war is involved. Or they at least have some type of conflict."

"I see," Dende said.

"But all stories have to have a conflict. And most of the time, the conflict is resolved and the story ends happily." Gohan fiddled with the corners of the pages. "The conflict is what makes the resolution so satisfying, I guess."

Dende smiled. "That's amazing," he said. "The people of Earth craft pretend stories and dedicate time to put them down in writing, and other people dedicate their time to reading them."

Communication was still so important to the people of this planet, even though it was not so convenient as glancing directly into someone else's mind. He had never thought about that before today.

Gohan glanced at Dende again. "You know, eventually you are going to have to write down your account of your time as Guardian and the status of the Earth throughout it."

Gohan was right, of course. But other than the bizarre incidents behind Cell and Majinn Buu- both of
which were resolved in a matter of days, despite how dire of a threat they had been- Dende actually
had no clue if he should even write about anything.

And as boring as that sounded, Dende hoped it stayed that way. Peace really was wonderful in its
uneventfulness, he decided, and swallowed his earlier complaints about the written records.

Gohan closed the comic and twisted around to face Dende. "So? How is your story going to start?"

"I suppose it will begin where Kami's ended," Dende began. He frowned. "Actually, since Piccolo
has been so available, I cannot say I have taken the time to read Kami's accounts yet. I am not sure
how in-depth they are about the end of his time."

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear- Piccolo chose then to enter the study. Dende knew Piccolo
had been listening in on the two of them even more intently ever since Gohan had begun making a
beeline for Dende during his increasingly frequent visits to the Lookout. The boy had been spending
less and less time with Piccolo, and he felt left out.

Of course, Piccolo would never admit to any of it.

"Say, Piccolo, did Kami ever write an account of his time as Guardian?" Gohan looked up at his
mentor.

"He started one," Piccolo said. "Then he stopped."

"Oh?"

"He had been trying to teach it directly to Goku in the hopes that he would become the next
Guardian some day." Piccolo gave a throaty chuckle. "He knew Goku would not take the time to sit
still and read it all if he wrote it out. At least, not while he was young and had Kami to abuse as a
resource." Piccolo's grin turned more maliciously characteristic of his old self. "Unfortunately for
Kami, expecting Goku to sit still and focus on anything besides training for any length of time is still
a fool's errand to this day."

Dende looked back down at the scroll sitting abandoned on the armrest of the chair. "I had not
realized that. It seems I will need to write the parts of Kami's account that I know about to try and fill
in the holes."

Gohan nudged him. "You? Why? Why wouldn't Piccolo do it? He has Kami's memories. Surely he
would be the one to write it out." He looked at Piccolo expectantly. "Right, Piccolo?"

Dende knew that Piccolo was not about to admit that he could not read or write anything besides
ancient Namekian well enough to record anything useful. Instead, the taller Namek crossed his arms
and hunched his shoulders up as if to try and hide within the folds of his cape. "No," he said, and
turned on his heel.

Gohan blinked. "Oh. Wait, Piccolo, I didn't mean to-" he dove forwards to stop Piccolo and only
succeeded in yanking himself and Dende off of the chair and onto the floor. They fell in a pile of
arms and legs. "I wasn't trying to point out how uneducated you are!"

Open foot, insert mouth. Dende hid his smile where it had landed- in oblivious Gohan's neck.

Piccolo whirled around. "Uneducated?" He ground his teeth. "Maybe I ought to go tell Chi Chi that
you were reading about," he stomped over and snatched up the comic book and gave it a once-over,
"dancing cats instead of science." He dangled the book out over Gohan's nose. "I'll show her just
how much more educated you are, mister "I'm going to be a scholar because I am too lazy to
train"!" Piccolo dropped the book on his pupil's face.

Gohan scrambled to catch the comic, "Piccolo! Please don't do that! You'll damage the pages!"

"So?!" All seven feet of Piccolo countered.

"It's not mine!"

"Yeah?! Well, that's too--" he paused. "You mean you stole this?" Piccolo sounded equal parts horrified and impressed.

"What?!" Gohan spluttered. "No! It's from the library!"

"Oh." Piccolo huffed. "What a mindless thing for a library to have."

"B-but this isn't mindless! It's, um, it's got a story!" Gohan held up an open page depicting a grown man in cat ears and gloves attempting to groom himself in the same manner as the tabby cat next to him. The other page showed a group of dancing cats. "See?" Gohan tried.

Piccolo stared hard for a minute and, to his credit, did actually try to make sense of the chaos on the page. "Gohan, this is just stupidity and you know it." He finally gave up and called it as he saw it.

"N-no! It's... It's funny! You just... don't get it!" Gohan defended. "H-how can you even judge the quality?"

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, uh, you know..." Gohan's voice grew smaller and smaller. "I just mean that, um, you can't... even... read... it..."

The lightning of Piccolo's indignation struck on his face first and the thunder of his voice came after.

"What did you say?!"

"I mean--!" Gohan panicked.

Dende smashed his face deeper into Gohan and hoped that Piccolo did not notice his shoulders shaking in mirth.

His hopes were dashed. "You! Shut up! It's not funny!" Piccolo commanded Dende, who rebelled and balled his fists into Gohan's shirt as he laughed louder.

"Piccolo, we aren't trying to hurt your feelings," Gohan tried again. Dende's continued reaction unfortunately made the whole gesture sound entirely insincere.

"Harrumph!" Dende and Gohan both were slapped by the ends of Piccolo's cape as he retreated. "Of all the stupid, childish nonsense..." He muttered to himself the whole way out the door.

"P-Piccolo! Wait!" Gohan tried to get up.

Dende held him down as his laughter petered out into giggles. "Let him be. He is not actually that upset. He only wanted your attention."

Gohan watched their mentor go. "I know," he said. "I just feel like there are more direct and pleasant ways to go about it than that."
Dende played with his friend's collar and listened to the sounds in his throat mixed with his heartbeat. "And you expect Piccolo to take the initiative to be pleasant?"

Gohan's eyes were still on the door. "No. But I am the one who initiated the whole debacle. I should have started somewhere," He searched for the right words, "less exploitable than writing and reading."

"It is not your responsibility to cater to him all of the time," Dende said, pressing his nose where Gohan's neck met his shirt.

"Maybe, but," Gohan looked down. "What are you doing?"

Dende stroked his friend's throat. "Hm? Am I bothering you?" He looked up at Gohan.

"No, not really. It just makes it harder for me to sit up when you keep smashing your face into me."

Dende let him go. "I apologize," he said.

Gohan sat upright and braced Dende's back so that he pulled the Guardian to his chest and up with him. "You don't need to apologize," Gohan said. Then, he flipped open the comic book and found where it was he had left off.

Dende laid his head against Gohan's chest and idly looked down at the book, too. He did not bother to absorb the text, though- he was too preoccupied thinking about the kind of work he wanted the account of his time as Guardian to be. He played with the top buttons of Gohan's shirt and stroked his neck some more.

"That tickles," Gohan mentioned, but did nothing to stop Dende, who moved on to touch Gohan's earlobe and trace over its distinctly rounded tip with his fingers. Dende's own ears were much more pointed. The contrast was fascinating.

Gohan smiled and leaned into the touch as he happily continued reading.

Dende pressed his nose against the side of Gohan's neck once more. Nameks did not have as developed a sense of smell as humans or Saiyans, but he could still separate Gohan's own scent from the detergent Chi Chi used on his clothes and the lingering presence of his school. It was comforting, actually, to know that Dende's favorite person had a distinct smell and so he tried his best to commit it to memory.

Gohan moved the arm he braced Dende with so that his hand rested on the Guardian's side rather than the spine of the comic book. "Do you want the scroll you were reading?" He asked, looking over at where it lay on the side of the chair.

"No thank you," Dende told him- the Guardian was tired of thinking about events that did not involve him. Dende's own story, however would probably need to include an introduction about himself and about how Namek related to the Earth, and then another chapter on how Son Goku and the shattered Saiyan race came into play. Frieza's organization would also need to be explained...

This business of writing books was incredibly difficult!

Perhaps, since Dende would be going to so much trouble to pen the thing at all, he should mass produce it and sell it as a fantasy story for the unknowing people of Earth to read. He could call it Dragon Ball, after the catalyst that inadvertently caused the meeting between the Earth and Namek.

The Guardian finished with his friend's ear and instead toyed with Gohan's Adam's apple.
Gohan swallowed. It was interesting to watch. "Careful there," he said. "It hurts if you press too hard."

Dende moved his hands down to Gohan's chest in penance. "Oh! I apologize."

"It's fine," Gohan said. Truthfully, he could exude more ki in the area and make himself basically indestructible, Dende knew, but that would defeat the purpose behind letting Dende touch him- Gohan would be unable to really feel it at all.

As it was, Gohan was notorious for letting his guard down during his everyday life and it vexed Piccolo to no end.

"I trained you to be a warrior, not a nursemaid!" The huge Namek would sometimes scold.

But then, Gohan never had been much one for the warrior's lifestyle, even when he had been forced into the role. Now, when he had the freedom to choose what kind of life he wanted to live, it was even more obvious. Gohan often stressed about how he had not made a choice about his life, but Dende knew that this was not true- Gohan made his decision seven years ago and held to it. He was not a warrior, he was not bloodthirsty, and there was not a damn thing anybody could do to make him be otherwise ever again. It was a done deal.

Perhaps that was what made Dende so fond of Gohan- his determination to hold to his own ideals and dreams even while his family of friends pushed for him to be something else.

(Truth be told, even Chi Chi was not always in line with her son's newfound personal goals- she wanted Gohan to become a doctor, not a scholar.)

Dende petted Gohan's throat some more, but gently this time, and brushed his hand over his collar bone. Gohan chuckled at something in his book and leaned against the front of the armchair. He moved Dende to lean back with him.

Dende wondered if writing about his experiences with Gohan in his Guardian's scroll would be appropriate. Son Goku's hand may have appointed him as its Guardian, but it was Dende's childhood introduction to Gohan that had initiated his relationship with the Earth.

Since the person in question was preoccupied with reading, Dende kissed his throat instead of his mouth. When Gohan did nothing to discourage him, Dende did it again, this time under the corner of his jaw.

He could feel Gohan's face heating up and his mood growing a little less relaxed, but Dende could detect absolutely no intent to make him stop. It was odd. Gohan grew jumpy at the strangest of things- he could face down monsters and jump headlong into space travel, but public school threw him for a loop almost daily. This was probably a similar situation.

The Guardian figured these kisses were about the same as the pecks they had been exchanging whenever Gohan left the Lookout, but just in a different place. Gohan was most likely surprised only at how many Dende was giving him.

The Guardian kept at it and slowly made his way down to Gohan's collarbone and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and kissed him there, too.

Gohan laughed, soft and nervous. "That, um, well, that is, uh... what are you doing now?" He said.

Dende rubbed at the newly exposed skin. "Am I upsetting you?" He might as well confirm in words that he was not, since Gohan was feeling chatty.
Gohan shook his head. "No, I just... I've, um, I've never done this kind of thing before."

Dende nodded and reached up to kiss Gohan the way they normally did. "It is like that, but somewhere else, yes?"


Dende frowned and kissed him again, but Gohan decided on a dime that he was not done babbling. Dende intercepted Gohan's tongue mid-word and they ended up in one another's mouths by accident.

It was pretty sloppy, by anyone's standards.

Gohan turned the color of Mister Popo's roses and stared at Dende, who pulled away and cocked his head.

"That was new!" The Guardian said, smiling, and returned his attention to Gohan's neck.

"Y-yeah," Gohan said, swallowing, and looked back to his book. Dende kissed his throat as it moved. "Dende, um, maybe, um, maybe you should stop doing that for now," he said.

Gohan's words did not match up with his emotions. It was confusing, but Dende supposed that everything else was, too. The Guardian obliged and rested his head against Gohan's chest so he could follow along with him in the comic.

The humans in the story were discussing how cute their cats were and decided to regard them fondly. It was the setup for some punchline, Dende knew. This story was a comedy.

Gohan turned the page.

The two cats were copulating.

"What an odd resolution to the chapter," Dende remarked. "Why would the author choose to end it that way?"

Gohan slammed the book shut so fast that his fingers left tiny tears in the cover.

Dende lamented this. "Oh, you've damaged the library book." He looked up at Gohan.

The expression on his face and the vibes he was exuding made Dende think of two gears fighting one another as they rotated against each other and announcing the friction as a constant, grinding, internal scream.

Gohan gently pried Dende off of his person. "I need to leave now," he said, and promptly exited the study and took off from the Lookout.

Dende sat on the floor, dumbfounded.

What had he done wrong?

Chapter End Notes

In case the chapter title did not give it away, the manga Gohan is reading is *What's*
Michael? and is in fact about dancing cats and sometimes cats screwing on the last page of the chapter for the occasional shock value.

I personally love What's Michael? (except the latter shock value) but Piccolo makes an undeniably valid point about it. ;)

The weather was bleak and awful below the Lookout. Dende peeked down the clouds from over the side of the tower and shook his head. Then, he looked back at Mister Popo and the bag of books the genie had been kind enough to fetch from the surface.

"Thank you," Dende said to Mister Popo. This was the second time Dende had sent Mister Popo to the surface this week, and the Guardian felt exceptionally guilty about asking him to make so many trips. "I am so sorry that the sky opened up on you during your return."

Mister Popo pulled down the hood of his yellow raincoat and smiled. "Don't worry. I am mostly dry." He handed Dende the bag, and the Guardian gathered it in his arms.

It was almost as big as he was. "Can I do anything for you to help you warm up?"

Mister Popo shook his head. "No thank you. Enjoy the new books." He snapped his fingers and the raincoat, water and all, evaporated into nothingness.

Dende peeked into the bag and pulled out the book on top. It was not one he remembered asking for. "Intimacy for Dummies," he read aloud. Dende shrugged- he had only requested a few alphabet and elementary grammar workbooks, a beginner's reader, and a pack of pens, but this would surely be useful, too. "Piccolo!" The Guardian called, stuffing the little volume into his belt. "I have some things for you!"

Piccolo did not answer, of course. He was sitting midair behind the Lookout pavilion and had most likely been taking what equated to a meditative nap. Now, he expressed his disgruntled displeasure at his rude awakening by signaling his mood directly to Dende, who bravely took to the air and floated over to Piccolo anyway.

"These are for you," Dende said, holding out the bag to his mentor.

Piccolo did not move.

"Pretending that I am not here is not going to make me leave," Dende told him. "In fact," he raised his voice, "it may encourage me to speak louder!"

The frown on Piccolo's face deepened, but he did not look over.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" Dende shouted. "I am having trouble hearing you over the sound of your silence!"

The Guardian earned himself a glare. 
"Wonderful! I am so pleased that you have chosen to engage me in conversation." Dende created a bubble of energy around the bag of books to keep it afloat and rifled through it until he found the level one workbook and a pen. "I thought it would benefit you to do a page of this a day, and then when you finish the whole thing, you could start on the level two, and then the three, and so on."

"No," Piccolo said, and resumed meditating.

"Piccolo, I think you would feel differently about my proposal once you knew how to read and write more than one language," Dende coaxed. "Gohan would be very proud, I am sure."

Gohan had been missing from the Lookout for a week straight. It vexed Dende to no end that his friend would disappear for such a long period of time without saying why, but the Guardian knew better than to worry about it openly in front of Piccolo and thus had not pointed it out.

At first, Dende had occupied himself during his friend's absence by reading a slew of relationship and human sexual function guides that Mister Popo had been kind enough to supply him with, and, after he had absorbed them all cover to cover, then decided that educating his hulking Namek mentor was a suitable alternative to tearing his antennae out in frustration and nerves.

And, truthfully, Gohan and Dende both would be exceptionally proud of Piccolo for caring enough to bother becoming literate. It was not a lie.

"No," Piccolo repeated.

"Are you sure? Mister Popo already went to all of the trouble of bringing them up here. It would be a shame if his efforts went to waste," Dende could not help but project his own efforts towards researching what might have bothered Gohan onto Mister Popo's quest for educational materials. "Will you please at least try to finish a page of this before you decide outright?"

"No."

"Not even for me?" Dende tried, wondering to himself if it would be taboo for him to spy on Gohan using his Guardian privileges.

Piccolo whipped his head around to look at Dende and fumed. "No! And stop bothering me when your thoughts quite clearly tell me that you are really concerning yourself with Gohan!"

Piccolo might be perceptive if he was not constantly relying on his ability to pry into minds. That was his great secret- he was actually a hack in terms of raw intuition, but nobody besides Dende could tell.

The Guardian decided that he ought to punish Piccolo for looking in places he should not be. "Well, if that is how you feel, perhaps we should discuss my feelings outright and keep no secrets. I know how much you dislike subtext."

"...Go away, Dende."

"Oh, but Piccolo, you know Gohan best. Humor me. You and Mister Popo are the only others I have to talk to up here."

"Then go climb down the Lookout ladder and bother Korin and Yajirobe."

That was a good idea, actually. But Dende was not ready to give up this opportunity. He laid his staff across his lap and sent the bag of books down to the floor of the Lookout. "Why would Gohan become upset with me-"
"Shut up, Dende!"

"--for kissing his neck when his emotions were clearly not adverse to it?"


Dende nodded. "Yes. It's an Earth gesture where two individuals display their affection by--"

"I understand what it is!" Piccolo hissed. "What I don't understand is why you would be kissing anyone at all, let alone him!"

The Guardian was flabbergasted. "You did not know?" He asked. Dende had figured that Piccolo, who had lived on Earth all of his life, would have a deeper understanding of the language of emotions common to the planet even if he did have a stick shoved up where his legs met his torso. "You have been spying on us the whole time! I do not understand how you missed this development."

Piccolo did not even try to deny it. "Well, I did. And I would have been perfectly content to have continued missing it." Piccolo levitated higher into the air and away from Dende.

The Guardian gave chase. Moori had told him he should never give up so easily, and Dende planned to take the advice to heart. "Wait! Please do not leave without your educational materials!"

"I don't want them!"

"My, I take it you would still like to talk about kisses instead, then? According to one of the books I most recently read, kisses are often a precursor to human sexual activity. Do you think that perhaps--"

Piccolo's eyes grew huge. "Fine! I will learn to read if you stop talking about this!" He shouted.

Dende smiled sweetly and handed him the introductory workbook. "It is so wonderful to know that you will be training your mind as well as your body."

"I've always trained my mind," Piccolo grumbled, and deliberated over which side of the workbook was the front.

Dende flipped it the right way for him- Piccolo had at first opened it upside-down.

"The first letter is "A"- it makes the "ah" sound, or the "ayy" sound," Dende offered helpfully.

"I know," Piccolo snapped. "I know most of this already, so I could do without your commentary." He hunkered down over the book.

"The rest of your books are sitting down below. And I would like to check that page when you are finished," Dende said.

"Stop adding conditions." Piccolo snorted. "And go away! I've had all of your company that I can stand."

Dende smiled at his success. "Then I will leave you to it," he said, and returned to the surface of the Lookout.

No sooner had he made it into the study and cracked open the *Intimacy for Dummies* book did he sense Gohan on the wind. He closed the book and put it on the top of his existing stack of research
on the topic before heading outside.

Honestly, Dende was not entirely sure if he wanted to cry in Gohan's general direction or throw his arms around him. Maybe both.

Actually, he should probably withhold any of that nonsense until after he had listened to what Gohan had to say for himself. Dende planted himself in the center of the Lookout and eagerly awaited his friend's arrival.

When Gohan finally summited the Lookout, he was sopping wet. "The rain got me," he said to Dende with a smile as he landed.

The Guardian leaned his staff against his shoulder and moved his hands to Gohan's chest. Dende frowned when the boy stiffened. "I am going to use magic to dry you off," the Guardian explained as his palms began to glow.

"Oh," Gohan said. "Of course."

Mister Popo appeared next to them and moved Dende's hands. "Waste of energy, he said. "Have a bath instead. Warm up."

"That's very kind of you, Mister Popo, but I think this will be fine," Gohan said. "I don't want you to go to any trouble on my account."

The genie's enigmatic smile widened. "Oh, no, it is no trouble. The bath is ready. At first, it was for only Dende."

"You drew a bath for me?" The Guardian was confused. He had asked Mister Popo to do no such thing.

"You needed to relax," Mister Popo said. "Come. Now you shall relax together." He put his hands on both of their backs and gently, but insistently, led them both inside the pavilion.

"I trust you had a good week?" Dende asked his friend.

"Well," Gohan said, eyeing Mister Popo as he herded the two along, "I guess it was better than I expected it to be."

"Busy?" Mister Popo asked, still smiling. "Your stress will melt in the water."

Gohan fought him. "Mister Popo, are you sure that-"

"Yes." The genie shut him down. "Very sure." He shoved Dende and Gohan into the bathroom and closed the door.

Every color of rose and their petals covered everything except the bowl shaped indentation in the center of the room, which was filled with softly steaming water. The white of the tile peeked through the flora like fresh snow lit by the sun.

Dende wondered if this had anything to do with the flower fortune he had performed with the daisy not terribly long ago.

"Do you always take baths like this?" Gohan asked, looking around.

"No," Dende said, baffled. "I rarely take baths at all." Normally, he would wash himself down with the shower head on the other side of the room if he even needed to be refreshed- he was a Namek,
"Are, um, are there usually flower petals everywhere?"

Dende shook his head. "No, never. Perhaps Mister Popo had been using the room to make a bouquet and did not have time to clean up the trimmings?" It was very unlike the genie to leave a mess of any kind or show an obvious rush in anything he did. The Guardian leaned over and began collecting flowers and petals off of the floor.

Mister Popo already did so much. Dende could at least take care of this small chore.

"Dende, I think he put them here on purpose." Gohan played with one of the petals using the toe of his comically moist shoe. His sole made a squashing noise every time he put his weight back on it.

"Oh?" Dende looked down at the flowers in his arms, and then at the room. "I see. It is rather lovely, isn't it?" He scattered what he had collected back onto the floor. "Shall we take a bath, then?" It might be fun to play in the water. Dende had not been swimming since he and Gohan both were very small.

"Together?" Gohan asked. "That's, um..."

Dende watched him carefully and monitored his mood. It was not uncommon or lascivious for families to take baths together, nor for friends of the same gender and young children. While Dende did not necessarily fit into any of those categories, he was usually designated male by default, and was definitely Gohan's friend. Why Gohan had any reservations about bathing with him was a mystery.

Maybe it had something to do with the petals? Romantic couples and spas sometimes scattered a few in and around the water of their baths, Dende knew, but not to the degree Mister Popo had decorated the room. Perhaps that was the genie's true intention. Why?

Did Mister Popo think Dende and Gohan were a romantic couple? Was he correct? Had they already become a romantic couple when they began kissing? Or was Gohan's hesitation because they were, in fact, not yet a romantic couple and he did not want to blur the line and become one?

The books Dende had read were illuminating, but thus far were frustratingly unclear about when a romantic relationship officially began.

It was all confusing.

"Gohan, I wanted to ask you about why you have been away for so long and apologize for whatever it is that I did to make you feel the need to leave." Dende decided that this was the best first step to unraveling the whole mess.

"Um, Dende, about that." Gohan clenched his hands at his sides and stared hard at the decorated floor. "Would you be able to come over for dinner at my house next week?" He suddenly blurted. "I need to formally introduce you to my mom. And my dad, I guess, but he is just as well with everything either way, so mostly just my mom."

That was an unexpected direction for the conversation to go. Dende's ears pinned in confusion. "I do not understand. I have met your mother before, several times." He shook his head. "And, forgive me, but what does this have to do with everything else?"

Gohan knelt on the ground to make himself shorter than Dende. Their foot-and-a-half height difference was quite frustrating sometimes. "Alright, let me back up. I forget that you know even less
about this kind of thing than I do. So, um, do you," Gohan swallowed. "Dende, how do you feel about... About me?"

What a silly question. Gohan already knew the answer quite well. But Dende put his arms around his sopping friend and pressed his forehead into Gohan's to refresh his memory anyway.

Dende liked being able to tap into Gohan's mind- it was a nice place, and as bright and warm as a greenhouse in the afternoon sun, and contrasted greatly from the iciness of his wet clothes.

Dende first thought about two swans again- it was the clearest and most direct visual, but it quickly devolved into a happy sensation and no concrete images beyond vague shapes and colors- Dende breathed in Gohan's scent and focused on the sounds his body made just from being alive and nearby.

Gohan answered back, shyly, but in kind. He showed Dende a memory of Eighteen and Krillin, actually, holding each other. Eighteen was giving a very rare smile. Then, Gohan thought about scent and touch, and Dende saw the soft, new leaves of spring sprouting forth on a balmy morning reflected in Gohan's mind's eye.

It made Dende exceptionally giddy to know. He broke the connection to kiss Gohan, and then chuckled. "I remind you of the new greens of--?"

Gohan cut him off with another kiss, but this one was much longer and went past Dende's lips.

Eventually, Gohan broke the kiss to put their foreheads back together. He moved both of his hands to Dende's waist.

The boy was definitely still focused on the sweetness behind the moment, but there was something else there that Dende could not understand- It was faint, and came through only for a second before it was replaced by a new wave of more decipherable affection.

Dende decided to ask about it another time. He closed his eyes and returned the feelings he did share. The two held each other that way for a long time.

Finally, though, Dende pulled away. "What does this have to do with your mother?" He asked, brushing his fingers through Gohan's wet hair.

Gohan opened his eyes. "Hunh?" He blinked. "Oh. Oh! Well, y' see, when, um, when two individuals decide that, um, that they really like each other, they start dating."

"Dating? We have been in a romantic relationship?" Dende asked.

"Uh," Gohan blanked. "We... Have been. Haven't we?"

"I do not know."

"Oh. Um."

"Do you want to be in a romantic relationship?"

"Yes? I mean, um, I thought we already were," Gohan furrowed his eyebrows. "In fact, I almost thought we were about to get married for a period of five minutes somewhere in the beginning of the past two months." He smiled sheepishly. "I'm pretty much an idiot, huh?"

Dende pressed their foreheads together, but did not focus on anything specific besides a generally
Gohan smiled and hugged Dende closer. But then he pulled away with a start. "Oh! But dinner. My mom. Right!" He nodded to himself. "Okay, so, um, see, my mom wants to meet who I... I date before... Before things get, um," Gohan looked like he was struggling internally for a moment, "serious. She's, uh, been pester- ing me about it since I told her I was not dating Videl like she thought I was. Or like Videl had assumed I eventually would." Gohan furrowed his eyebrows. "Or like I assumed I eventually would, actually."

He said it all so plainly that Dende thought nothing of the fact that Gohan had almost started paying romantic attentions to someone else. "Videl Satan? She was a very nice girl, if I remember correctly. Her father was..." The Guardian thought of the wrestler's bugged-out blue eyes beneath his ridiculous hair. "Actually, I became rather fond of Mister Satan." Dende touched noses with Gohan. "But I do not think he is any kind of world champion. You were saying?" He laughed. "Ah, yes, meeting Chi Chi as not your friend, but your lover."

"My--!" Gohan spiked his ki and his cheeks changed color so quickly that Dende thought his flushed face might be another form of Super Saiyan. "Y-you are extremely forward, did you know that?" He said.

"I am not the one who decided we were in a romantic relationship, you know." Gohan's neck heated up, too, and the water in his hair began to turn to steam. "I-!"

"Nor am I the one who initiated the physical kissing."

Gohan had no defense, and he knew it. He stayed where he was and radiated mortification. Dende laughed again and tugged at Gohan's wet shirt. "If it bothers you so much, I shall use a different word. But go ahead and get into the bathtub- you will make yourself sick if you stay in these clothes."

"I doubt that, Dende," Gohan said, jumping at the chance to change the topic. "I almost never get sick."

"Almost never is not the same as never. Please take them off so I can go launder them." Dende bid Gohan stand.

"But you don't need to go to the trouble of-"

This was ridiculous, the way they always tried to be so accommodating towards one another. "I cannot allow Chi Chi to discover you dripping wet from rain when I had the power to make you not so. It would be an exceptionally poor first impression of her son's first lover."

Gohan's ki erupted again at the buzzword. Dende and the flower petals were knocked into the bath from the force.

By the time the boy stopped his outburst, his clothes were quite dry from the volume of energy that had just exploded out of him. "S-see? I'm dry on my own!"

Dende, on the other hand, was holding his head above about five feet of water. The bath was quite deep at the center. "And now you have also baked the dirt and sweat of the day into your clothing." The Guardian spat an arc of warm water from his mouth. "Please allow me to wash it back out when I go to dry my own clothes."
"I'm so sorry!" Gohan leapt into the tub, shoes and all, to lift Dende out of the water. "I forgot that you don't have the energy to hold your ground against that much at once!"

Actually, Dende probably did have the power deep within him, but had not felt the need to keep his guard up against the gentlest and shyest being in the cosmos. He splashed Gohan and escaped his grasp. "And now your clothes are not only dirty, but wet again. What will your mother say about this, I wonder?"

Gohan looked down. "Oh. They are, aren't they? Well." He sat down on the sloped sides of the bath and removed his shoes and belt. "She will say that I am exceptionally clean and relaxed," he decided, and put the rest of his wet clothes in a pile beside the lip of the tub, except for his underwear. He laughed to himself. "Don't worry about my clothes- stay here with me. The bath does feel very nice!"

Dende tread more water and watched Gohan and his mood. He was not uncomfortable in the slightest now. The Guardian wondered what had caused this abrupt change in attitude.

Gohan used his hands to make a stream of water shoot across the tub in a constant stream like a fountain.

Honestly, Dende wanted to let the topic go and for Gohan to enjoy the moment, but it was important that he understand what it was that made Gohan uneasy in the first place- both from a few minutes ago and at the end of his prior visit- so that Dende did not do it again.

Or, as was most likely the case, Dende needed to know if Gohan's sudden shyness stemmed from the fact that he had enjoyed the contact and attention, but did not think that he should.

Saiyans and humans both were mammals, after all, and Nameks were not. There was only so much that Dende could read about and intuit without asking straight out.

Communication was so very, very important, especially now.

"Gohan," Dende began.

"Bbyeahbbbb?" Gohan answered with half his face beneath the water.

"Last week, when you left, you were," Dende searched for the right words, "you were very eager to leave. I had wanted to apologize for," to say that Gohan had been upset was not entirely correct, and Dende knew it, but it was the best he could come up with, "upsetting you, and ask what it was that caused the problem and why."

Gohan sat up. "I know what you are trying to ask." He pulled his knees up to his chest. "But you didn't actually do anything wrong. I'm the one who ought to apologize. You see," he rested his head on his legs. "I hate to ask this, but, um, can we... Can we talk about this another time? I will, I promise. But please don't ask me to do this now, when I am sitting almost naked in a heated bathtub with you and surrounded by rose petals."

Dende swam over and sat next to Gohan. "That is perfectly fine so long as you eventually tell me," The Guardian said, prying Gohan's hand away from his bent legs and wrapping his own fingers around it. "But, you know, you can tell me anything. I am your lover, after all."

Gohan's embarrassment did not ring out so loudly this time, or as comically. "Dende, I don't think you understand all of the connotations of that word," he said.

"Oh? What word should I use?" Dende asked.
"I don't know," Gohan said. "I don't know a lot of things."

Dende smiled and leaned up against him. "Neither do I."

Chapter End Notes

...be honest. How many of you thought this would have devolved into rampant sex by now?

...I hope none of you are mad that it has not. Thanks for reading!!!
Chapter Summary

Dende learns that he loves steamed rice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gohan arrived at the Lookout with a sack of Tupperware and bento boxes both, and spread out a blanket smack in the center of the Lookout before Dende could say anything about it.

"I'm going to teach you about food today," Gohan announced.

Dende cocked his head. "I know what food is," he said. "I only have no need to eat it."

Gohan nodded. "I am very aware. But I am also very aware that my mom is not about to take kindly to someone refusing her cooking for any reason, and she won't be satisfied until you clean your plate at least once."

"But," Dende puzzled again, "I do not eat."

Gohan laid out the Tupperware and bento. "That's all the more reason we need to do this."

"But I do not eat!"

"I'm going to try and teach you how to pretend to eat."

"But how can I pretend to eat when I do not know how to eat?" Panicked Dende. "I do not eat!"

Gohan sat down cross-legged on the picnic blanket, his back to the pavilion, and motioned for Dende. "That is why I am going to teach you."

Dende had seen a Son eat before- he thought of the time he witnessed the before and after of Goten and Trunks at a table of Popo's creation.

It had been educational, to say the least.

As a Namek, Dende need only water to sustain himself, and the consumption of organic material was a function reserved only in emergency and the only water to be found was trapped within something else. As it were, his abstainment from the food of the Earth also acted as a sign of his elevated status as Guardian of the Earth. Or so Piccolo had said.

But for Dende to try and use his reverence for his mantle of divinity as an excuse to wriggle out of Gohan’s lessons would be a lie, and Nameks- children of Guru, anyway- did not lie. Especially not to Gohan's smiling face.

"I have seen the portions your family eats in one sitting!" Dende said. "You and your mother will make me explode!"

Gohan balked, and then laughed. "What? No, she won't give you as much as me and my dad and
Goten," he said. "That would be cruel. Besides, I am only asking you to learn how to fake eat, not eat in earnest."

Dende fiddled with his staff. "Well," he said, "if you feel this is necessary, then I shall do as you ask." He sat down on the blanket across from Gohan and put his staff behind him.

"Does this really make you that nervous?" Gohan asked him.

"I am not sure nervous is the word. But," Dende nodded. "This is probably a good thing for me to do, in the grand scheme of things."

Gohan stopped fiddling with the lids of the dishes he had brought and leaned forward to listen to Dende.

"The way of a Namek- we are caretakers. Our purpose is to give to our home and maintain it, and in return, it supplies us with sunlight and water to live. That charity is all we are- my people are a living manifestation of the goodwill of our planet. Thus," Dende said, shaking his head, "we do not take life of any kind in order to facilitate our nourishment- neither plant nor animal. We do not eat."

Gohan frowned and started to stack the food back into his bag. "Dende, I'm sorry. I have seen Piccolo eat many times like it was no big deal, and so I assumed-"

Dende stopped Gohan's busy hands with his own. "And Piccolo, he is not Namekian. He is a Namek, yes, but he is not of the place. He is of piccolo, of another world. Of this one. He, and Kami before and within him, are something I have chosen to be. To eat is to be of the Earth. Thus, to truly be of the Earth, I must eat."

Gohan shook his head and lowered his voice. "It's not my place to tell you what to do, but believe me, you are not like Piccolo. I don't think you have it in you to be, but more importantly-" he furrowed his eyebrows and searched around the Lookout with his ki to make sure his mentor was not within earshot. "Listen, Dende, I love Piccolo with my whole heart. Don't mistake me on this. But from what I understand, the reason he is the way he is about a lot of things is not something you should strive to mimic. There was a Piccolo before Nail, and another Piccolo before the one who loves me, and when people talk about him, words like hatred and evil follow like a shadow that will never fade away. And that Piccolo will never really fade away, either." He rubbed Dende's hands. "I won't stop you if this is what you think is right, but my point is that you should be warned that what you use as your inspiration may not be something that you really want you yourself to be."

Dende smiled and brought the backs of Gohan's hands to his face for a kiss to each. "How wise you are."

"I'm not so wise. I have been learning that lesson my whole life. That's all."

Gohan was the only member of his family to understand true humility. He contrasted sharply with the fantastic arrogance that coursed throughout his life and his veins.

Gohan embodied the weakness of the mortal Earth, but was worthy of something much, much greater. He represented both sides of the coin. Thus, Dende loved him.

The Guardian persisted in his mission to explain what it meant to consume. "Those of Earth eat to survive. They take, and as a whole they balance their selfishness with the selflessness of their own death to feed another, including the soil itself. Life is a promise of death, and death a promise of life. To eat is to be a part of that cycle." Dende reached out for Gohan's face. "I must at least try this thing in order to understand what it is I love."
Gohan brought Dende closer and put their foreheads together. "What is it that you believe you love, then, Dende?"

Dende cannot help but to think of the boy in front of him. "Selflessness born of selfishness," he said, "the good born from a legacy of evil. The courage found because of fear. Faith born from doubt. And even the potential that could drive these things to be their opposite."

Gohan kissed him. Dende returned it and examined the boy's teeth with his tongue—these teeth were tools used to destroy so that Gohan's body could keep existing.

Gohan eventually moved away and looked at Dende. "Piccolo influenced in me a similar belief system I adhere to that centers around what I eat and what it means to eat, it's true, but I don't ever actively think about it when I sit down for a meal. I'll be honest." He shrugged and smiled brightly. "When I eat something, I think to myself, "I'm hungry! I like this! It tastes good!" And that's about it. I'm satisfying a need in a pleasurable way."

There is beauty in that kind of straightforward simplicity, too. Dende kissed Gohan again and replaced their foreheads. "Will you show me?" Dende asked.

Gohan laughed. "Show you what it means to be hungry?" He shook his head. "You asked for it! But keep in mind that I have a practically boundless appetite!" He conjured up images and a small voice in Gohan's head told Dende what they were—pastries and pork, beans and bouillabaisse, rice and lo mein, soufflé and scones, tacos, cheese, fish, burgers—oh, and fries, and an overflowing plate of meatballs and spaghetti...

Some sensation entered Gohan's head and Dende could not understand it. It felt almost like the one Dende had pondered about the day the two of them took a bath, but not as directed at Dende himself and not as raw. Donuts filled the Guardian's mind's eye, and apples, and steamed king crab, and roast duck, and katsu, and mochi, and hummus, and broccoli with beef, and an entire dinosaur roasting over a fire...

Gohan's stomach growled.

Dende scooted away from Gohan's face and looked at his stomach.

"...That's what it means to be hungry," the boy said, practically drooling. "But believe me when I tell you that I would much rather be able to show you what it feels like to be full!"

Dende gestured to the food Gohan had brought.

"But I had brought these for you! These are some of mom's favorite things to make and the best practice you can get since they're probably what she's gonna serve when you come." Gohan shook his head. "And you have no idea how difficult it was for me to hide this many leftovers from my dad and brother for a period of five seconds, let alone four whole days." He pulled out a set of chopsticks from his bag and handed them to Dende. "So, chopsticks. My mom'll probably offer you only these as a utensil and will probably judge you harshly if you ask for a fork." Gohan arranged them in Dende's hands and showed him how to open and close the ends to grip things.

Dende practiced a few times, and after a few minutes and slip-ups, felt comfortable enough to try to grab something. He chose Gohan's nose.

"Good," the boy said behind squeezed nostrils, and grabbed the opened Tupperware closest to him. "So this is steamed rice," he informed Dende. "We have it with every meal, almost. All of my mom's sauces go on top of it, and it is also really mild by itself so it's a good thing to start you off with.
Dende looked down at it. "Han. Gohan." He thought about the way the word was written. "This is what you are named for," he said, pointing his chopsticks at the rice, and then the boy.

"My dad has simple tastes. Pun intended." Gohan grinned. "Oh, but that's another thing- don't point the ends of your chopsticks at others or yourself. That's rude."

"Oh!" Dende turned purple and pointed his chopsticks back down at the rice. "Forgive me."

"Don't worry. You'll get it," Gohan said, eyeing the food around him.

Dende clumsily picked up a clump of rice- it stuck together, he found, and slowly navigated it to his mouth.

Dende had tasted very little beyond the inside of Gohan's mouth and the minerals in the water he drank, so the sensation of it on his tongue alone was very bizarre to Dende. He wondered if he and Gohan processed flavor the same way, since Gohan had said that the rice was mild but Dende found it to be exotic by nature of even having a taste at all.

Chewing was difficult- Dende's teeth were sharp to be able to bite into succulents and other plants to drain water from them, or for defense. He did not have the variety of teeth that Gohan possessed, and could not mash his food into smaller pieces very well or very quickly.

Gohan stared at him and leaned forward, his mouth parted to form the beginning of an unasked question. Dende wordlessly took the container from him and picked up another wad of rice.

And then he shoved it into Gohan's mouth.

Gohan started in surprise, and then snatched it off the chopsticks greedily. "Thanks. So how was it?" He asked as he chewed. "By the way, I know I'm doing it but don't talk with your mouth full." He swallowed. "That's rude too."

Dende picked up more rice and gave it to Gohan, who took it instead of an answer, though Dende also gave him one of those while he loaded up even more rice between his chopsticks. "It was fine," Dende said. "Different than what I am used to."

Gohan nodded and hungrily accepted the next offering of rice. "If you don't stop giving it all to me there won't be any left for you," the boy warned.

Dende smiled. "I have already tried some, and I can now say that I am enlightened about what it feels like to eat, thus, my curiosity is sated. You are the one who still hungers." He fed Gohan more rice.

The boy crawled forward so he was closer to the food. "Do you really not want any more?"

Gohan munched on his newest mouthful and shook his head. "What do you mean?"

Mister Popo appeared with two glasses of water and set them down beside the pair. "Dende says you are tasty, Gohan. Quite a dish." The genie chuckled. "You, the boy named rice."

"Oh!" Gohan said, turning a little pink. "I can't believe I didn't catch that," he mused. "I guess I never expected you of all people to make food jokes."
Dende nodded and fed the boy another bite. "I like you so much, I sometimes even want to lap you up when I eat you!" The Guardian added, thinking about when the two of them would kiss with their tongues.

Gohan stopped chewing, his eyes like saucers, and deliberately swallowed.

Mister Popo patted both the boy and the Guardian on the back, and took his leave with a wide and silent smile.

"Thank you for the water, Mister Popo!" Dende called after the genie. Gohan was still frozen and staring, and reminding Dende more and more of the red petals on Mister Popo's roses. The Guardian presented the boy with more rice.

Gohan did not go for it. "Dende," he said instead, "you know how words have two meanings sometimes?"

"Yes," Dende said. It had been infuriating at first, learning the common euphemisms of this language when Dende's own had almost none to speak of. His people were highly literal, and prized clarity. This was why Porunga was so incredibly specific when granting wishes- it was another safeguard against his power falling into the wrong hands. To wish upon Porunga was to feel the consequences. "Did what I say have two meanings?"

Gohan nodded.

"Was the other meaning something you would not want me to do?"

Dende had the distinct feeling of déjà vu from the time when Gohan had fled the Lookout after reading the manga about the cats. Gohan's eyes bugged out more and his neck took on the same tint as his face while that silent screech resounded from his thoughts.

"Please do not leave once more without explaining why to me," Dende asked, putting down the chopsticks and rice and placing his hands on Gohan's shoulders.

"I won't." Gohan shrank into himself and twiddled his thumbs in his lap. He also did his best to look anywhere but at Dende. "See, uh, um. To, uh, eat someone in that context is a euphemism for, um... for... a certain type of... of... intercourse," Gohan whispered.

"Ah, you mean sexual intercourse, yes?" Dende knew that sexual activity had been somehow related to Gohan's nervousness the whole time! "Do you enjoy sexual intercourse, Gohan? Because I have been researching the topic and if you did enjoy it, then it would be no trouble at all for me to try and engage with you in--"

"Dende, stop," Gohan's fingers pressed themselves against Dende's mouth so quickly that his eyes could not keep up with the movement.

Dende obliged with a kiss to the boy's fingertips and moved Gohan's hand to cradle the Guardian's cheek.

"Dende, when I showed you what hunger felt like, could you really understand it?"

The Guardian shook his head against Gohan's palm. "Unfortunately, no."

Gohan nodded. "See, something like... like... that, it's like hunger- it's something you won't get. I'm showing you how to eat for your knowledge and so you can impress my mother, but what I am really doing is teaching you to fake being able to enjoy something that, to you, is not intrinsically
enjoyable." He furrowed his eyebrows. "Now that I think about it, basically, I came here with the intention of teaching you how to lie and be something you aren't." He shook his head. "That was wrong. Dende, I am really sorry. I did not come here with everything completely thought through. I've inadvertently done something bad."

Dende smiled against Gohan's hand. "I can sense your intent," he said. "There was no ill will in you, and no harm was done. All is forgiven. And eating was fascinating! I will be happy to try more things just for the sake of knowing what they are." The Guardian grinned. "And in that sense, for the simple purpose of learning, I do think I enjoy food."

"That makes me feel a little better about it," Gohan admitted.

Dende decided to drop the intercourse topic for now. He released Gohan and grabbed another open container. "What's this one? The sauce is red. Is it made from a fruit?"

Gohan nodded. "Technically, yes. A pepper is a fruit. Um, it's chicken in a sriracha sauce. You might want to wait before we get to that one because it's-.

Dende picked up his chopsticks and happily took a bite.

"-spicy," Gohan finished a moment too late.

Whatever "spicy" was, It was not like the rice at all.

Dende's eyes began to water and he could only visualize hot coals in his mouth. He thought about crying out for help but remembered that Gohan had told him talking with his mouth full was rude and so sat in silence.

Dende was afraid to try and chew the food in case that made it worse. He was afraid to even do so much as move.

"Dende, are you doing okay?" Gohan asked, pulling a napkin from his bag. "Here, why don't you spit it out?"

Since Dende would neither speak nor gesture, he reached out for Piccolo with his mind.

Suffer in silence or face the challenge, Piccolo responded. You're the one who chose this. Do not come crying to me.

He sounded like he was close. Dende peered upwards and realized that Piccolo had been watching them from the roof of the Lookout pavilion, only with his energy suppressed so that neither Dende nor Gohan would notice him.

Gohan, meanwhile, took charge. He put the napkin over Dende's mouth and slapped the Guardian on the back to make him spit out the chicken.

Dende, free at last, gasped and downed the glass of water Mister Popo had brought to him. Gohan offered his to the Guardian as well, and Dende accepted.

"Why would you put that in your mouth?!" The Guardian cried once he was certain he was not about to die. His tongue was still on fire, though.

Gohan picked up the rice and the chopsticks. "Eat this next," he said, and stuffed some of it into Dende's mouth.
The rice helped to absorb some of the heat. Dende took the next few bites Gohan insisted upon him.

"You don't usually eat just the sauce and the meat by itself. Rice absorbs most of the flavor of these kinds of dishes and can kind of dilute 'em," Gohan informed Dende. "That, and the fact that it is incredibly filling and relatively cheap, is why we eat it with everything."

"Miss Chi Chi, she will not really make me have that awful sriracha, will she?!" Dende said between bites.

Gohan shook his head. "Don't worry. I'll make sure she doesn't." He grinned. "I planned ahead for this possibility."

Dende looked at Gohan doubtfully and took more rice from him. "How so?"

Gohan took the next bite of rice for himself. "If mom doesn't have any sriracha in the pantry, she can't cook with it. And if I put the sriracha in a cave on top of Mount Paozu, it's not in the pantry."

"You would steal from your own mother?" Dende balked.

"It's not stealing," Gohan defended, and winked. "Merely misplacing."

Chapter End Notes

Oh, what, you thought I would thrust our little morons into the Son Family Dinner totally unawares and Gohan wouldn't prepare his special friend?

Give Gohan a little credit, man! ;)

Thank you to all of you who read and leave feedback! I hope this story is as fun for you as it is for me!
Dende observes the lovingly tasteless Son family in full, unbridled force.

The tiny Son house looked rather unassuming and peaceful from where Dende sat suspended in the sky by Gohan’s arms, what with its cute little cream dome and the single plume of white smoke puffing out of the chimney, but the mere sight of it made Gohan’s nerves go haywire. In fact, Gohan had gotten so wound up that Dende wondered if he even planned to go into the house at all, or if he was going to keep the two of them suspended in the air for the whole night.

“Gohan?” Dende asked, tapping the boy’s shoulder and patting his cheek.

Gohan looked down. “Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking.”

Thinking was certainly one word for it. “Would you care to share?” Dende straightened Gohan’s collar over his sweater vest. It had folded itself under during the flight from the Lookout to Mount Paozu.

Gohan’s eyes flicked from Dende to his house. “The thing is, I never actually told my family that it was you that I was going to bring over for dinner tonight.”

Dende nodded, uncomprehending.

“What I’m trying to get at, Dende, is that my mom just plain would not shut up about the whole ordeal long enough for me to get a word in edgewise- and I’m including the instances where she asked me questions about you and I tried to answer her. She just talked over me the whole time. I don’t even think she really even knew I was there after a while.”

Dende set the bottle of wine he had brought for Chi Chi down into his lap and smoothed out Gohan’s hair. “I see.”

“What I’m trying to get at, Dende, is that my mom might actually take a page from my imagination and go Super Saiyan on us here. I have no idea how she’ll react to all of this.”

“Well,” Dende said, hopping out of Gohan’s arms and transforming his own clothing into a clean burgundy ao dai and purple scarf that Mister Popo had shown him a picture of beforehand, “Let us go and find out.” The Guardian adjusted his grip on his hostess gift and led Gohan to the ground by the hand.

“Should we ask Piccolo if he would like to follow us inside?” Gohan asked.

Dende paused. Both Guardian and boy knew that Piccolo had been following them since they had left the Lookout, but neither of them had bothered to actively let their third wheel know they were onto him.

Dende also knew that if Piccolo were not so intent on picking up every word they said and every thought the Guardian might have, their mentor would never have been caught. Alas, his curiosity was getting the better of him.
Dende was getting used to Piccolo’s constant, quiet chaperoning, anyway.

“Has your mother extended an invitation for dinner to Piccolo as well?” Dende asked.

“No,” Gohan said.

“Would she enjoy having Piccolo at the table tonight?”

“That… would be a negative,” Gohan admitted. “So no. Not at all.”

Dende nodded. “Well, then, unfortunately, he must occupy himself in the wilderness tonight, I believe,” Dende lamented, and continued his descent.

“I’m sorry, Piccolo!” Gohan called. “Do you want me to bring you any leftovers? You know, if we have any?”

Dende turned to face the cover of trees Gohan was addressing and gave it a knowing smile and friendly, telepathic reminder that stalking was frowned upon in most circles, even if those being followed did not mind it.

And the Guardian told Piccolo that if he did not answer Gohan’s question, Dende would assign him twice as many pages a day in his newest literacy workbook.

“No, I do not want your food!” Piccolo’s resigned frustration roared with the wind as it passed through the tree branches.

Dende smiled at Gohan. “I believe we should go to your family now,” the Guardian said, and softly landed in front of the Son’s front door.

Goten blasted out of it before either Dende or Gohan could even catch their breath. “Hi, Gohan! Hi, Dende! Ooh! Dende- mom says Gohan’s bringing over somebody who’s gonna be my new sister to dinner tonight. I thought that was gonna be Videl, but Gohan said it wasn’t. Didja come to meet her, too? Huh? Huh?” The little boy wrapped himself around his big brother’s waist and then floated in circles around both he and Dende. “So, so? Where is she? Where’s the person you’re gonna marry?”

“Marry?” Dende asked, cheerfully incredulous from Goten’s enthusiasm.

“I never said we were getting married!” Gohan defended. “All I said was that I was bringing someone over for dinner, and if that was okay with-”

Chi Chi herself stepped out of the doorway, in full makeup and pearls. Her apron was pristine, flowing, and white, and her manicured fingernails inexplicably reminded Dende of Piccolo’s fangs. Her smile, however, smacked of Mister Popo’s influence.


Chi Chi hugged her oldest son. “Oh, hi, sweetheart! I’s afraid y’all might be late for dinner!” She then immediately thrust Gohan to the side and peered behind him. “Now, where’s yer special friend?” She craned her head to the left and right with a gleam in her eye.

“Hello, miss Son,” Dende took the initiative and held out his hand for her to shake.

“Oh, hi, Dende.” Chi Chi waved him off and continued searching. “Gohan, don’tcha tease me like this. Where’s your girlfriend?”

Gohan raised his eyebrows and looked at Dende. “Girlfriend’s not exactly the word,” he said.
“Not the word?” Chi Chi paused. “Not the word?! Young man, ya had better not’ve brought home a one-night stand that you done got knocked up!” The woman was set afire- at least, her sudden explosion of ki made it seem so. “I raised ya ta be a gentleman, not a dern playboy!” She screeched, and cuffed him on the ear.

Goten hid behind Dende.

“Ow!” Gohan cried, more in surprise than real pain, and turned the color of Dende’s ao dai. “No, mom, it’s nothing like that! Nobody’s pregnant!”

“So ya brought home a gal ya slept with, and I ain’t even gettin’ no grandbaby outta her yet?!” Chi Chi roiled.

Dende thrust the wine at Gohan’s mother before she could claw her son’s eyeballs out with her beautifully lacquered fingernails. “Thank you so much for having me over for dinner tonight!” The Guardian tried. “I brought this to you to show my appreciation. I hope you enjoy it!”

Chi Chi looked at the wine, and then at Dende.

It took her a few more double-takes before the situation registered in her brain.

“...Y’all ain’t serious,” Chi Chi said. She could not even function well enough to take the wine Dende still offered her.

Son Goku popped out of the house next with a mouthful of food. “Hey! I was wonderin’ where ev’rybody went so I started t’eat before it got cold.” He happily looked from the faces of his children to his wife, and then to Dende. “Oh! A guest!”

“Th-this is our baby boy’s new girlfriend,” Chi Chi stuttered.

Goku peered critically at the Guardian, and then beamed. “Man! I was almost tricked! She looks just like Dende!” He ruffled Goten’s hair. “How’dja meet her, Goten?”

“Uh,” the little boy said, “I think when Trunks and I woke up on the Lookout, but it’s hard to ‘member a lotta what else happened that day, so maybe-”

“This is our other baby boy’s new girlfriend,” Chi Chi clarified through gritted teeth.

Goku blinked. “Oh. Oh! The one you said Gohan’s gonna marry.” Earth’s greatest warrior nodded at his son. “Yanno, marriage ain’t a food,” he said. “So make sure it’s whatcha want before ya say thatcha want it.”

“We’re not even engaged yet, dad,” Gohan argued, and put his hand protectively on Dende’s shoulder.

“Yet?” Chi Chi’s eyes gleamed the way Piccolo’s did when he shot lasers from them.

Dende noticed that Gohan’s hair ruffled like a bird’s feathers when he was upset. “...Th-The point is, this isn’t someone who looks like Dende, this is Dende!”

Goku patted his son on the back and laughed. “Aw, Gohan, if that’s true, then you don’t got a girlfriend!”

Dende smiled and tapped his fingers on the sides of the wine bottle. “With your permission, I would very much like to continue to be your son’s lover,” he said.
“Dende!” Gohan shouted.

“Ooh! Already!” Goku grinned. “I didn't know you’d move so fast, son!”

“Dad!”

Goten gazed up at his brother. “Gohan, does this mean mom was right when she was sayin’ you were “livin’ in sin”?”

Gohan was turning so deep in color that Dende wondered if Gohan might explode. “Goten!”

“A lil’ green bean alien wants ta be my baby’s boyfriend,” Chi Chi’s whisper cut through the brouhaha, her hair slowly springing out of its perfect bun. “I thought we’d done seen ‘nuff aliens bustin’ into our lives.”

Goku grinned. “Naw, ‘Chi, Dende can’t be a boyfriend, neither. He’s a Piccolo!”

Dende’s ears perked up. That may have been the single most perceptive thing he had ever heard Son Goku say, even if it was by total accident.

“Goku, that don’t make no sense,” Chi Chi wept. “Ain’t none of this makes no sense!”

“I’ll show ya! There’s a way ta tell, so don’t cry!” Goku took his wife’s hand. “Bulma said I wasn’t s’posed to do this, but you won’t mind, will ya, Dende?”

Dende could not sense any malicious intent emanating from Goku, so surely whatever he was about to do could not possibly be-

Goku used his wife’s hand to pat the space beneath where Dende’s legs met. Twice.

Chi Chi and Gohan shrieked. Goten curiously tried to mimic his father’s gesture towards Dende with his own hand.

Gohan restrained his little brother. “No! Goten, don’t! Don’t ever follow dad’s example without thinking about it first!” He furrowed his eyebrows. “Um, I mean, sometimes, uh, even the most wonderful people don’t know what the right thing to do is in every situation.”

Meanwhile, Goku was teaching his wife something entirely different. “Ya see, ‘Chi? Dende’s not Gohan’s boyfriend or girlfriend!” He smiled to himself and wrapped an arm around Chi Chi. “Dende’s Gohan’s somethin’ else-friend!” He noticed the bottle in the Guardian’s still-outstretched hands and took it. “Ooh! Look! We can have this with dinner!” He patted his distraught wife on the shoulder and led them all inside. “I’m starving!”

Dende was absolutely mystified by the whole ordeal.

Once everyone was inside, Gohan put his hand on the center of Dende’s back and gently steered him to his seat at the table. Then, as he pulled out Dende’s chair, he looked the Guardian in the eye. “Listen, if my family gets too rowdy, we can leave,” he whispered. “You don’t have to put up with our nonsense.”

Dende thought about it, and then grinned as he sat down. “This is the third time I have ever seen your father,” he admitted. “The first time was when Moori gave me away to be presented to you.” He chuckled at how quickly his life had changed that day. “Son Goku is such a carefree person.”

Gohan smiled in the direction of his parents as they stood in the kitchen, with Goku snatching scraps
off of plates and shoving them into his mouth while Chi Chi whacked his hands away with whatever kitchen utensils she had on hand. The frying pan seemed a favorite. “He has that same effect on others, too,” Gohan said. “But now that I’m older, sometimes, I’m starting to realize that he can be too much. So, um, it’s okay if,” the boy blinked. “Wait, what do you mean “Moori gave you away to present to me”?"

Dende would have answered, but Goten interrupted by shoving himself into the Guardian’s lap. “Hey, hey, whatcha whispering about? Can I whisper, too? I wanna whisper with you.”

Gohan frowned at his little brother. “Goten, we were in the middle of discussing something very important.”

Goten floated above his brother’s head and leered. Dende felt sure the child had learned the expression from Vegeta and his son. “Nuh-uh. I’ll bet that you were gonna try n’ kiss,” the child said.

“We were not!” Gohan exclaimed.

“Yeah you were!”

“No, we weren’t!”

“But if I tell mom you were, she’ll believe me.”

Gohan’s face puffed out. “That would be lying, Goten. Lying isn’t nice.”

“But Trunks does it all the time!” The little boy countered.

“Just because Trunks does something doesn’t mean you should, too! And get down- no flying in the house!”

“I’ll still tell,” Goten retorted, lowering his altitude but still hanging in the air.

Dende was the Guardian; it was within his realm to resolve conflicts when necessary. Goten wanted to tell Chi Chi that his older brother and Dende had been kissing, and Gohan did not want his little brother to lie to their mother. This was a simple enough problem to fix.

Gohan was too busy bickering with his little brother to notice Dende floating out of his chair. “Goten, that isn’t something you should do and you kn-”

Dende put his arms around Gohan and kissed him on the mouth.

Problem solved. Goten could say what he pleased without fear of lying.

And the little boy did. “Mom!” He cried, scooting through the air to get to the kitchen. “Mom! I saw Dende and Gohan kissing!”

“That’s great, Goten!” Goku told his son. “It’s great ‘cuz I guess it means they like each other!”

Chi Chi muttered something too thickly coated in colloquialisms for Dende to understand.

The Guardian looked back to the boy in his arms. Gohan’s complexion was a mess.

“Have I upset you somehow?” Dende asked. He smoothed out Gohan’s hair and put his hands on the boy’s shoulders to gently push himself away.
Gohan put Dende back into his seat. “...I’ll get you some water,” is all he said, and marched to the kitchen.

Son Goku’s happy voice reverberated in Dende’s ears. “Why’re ya all red, son?”

Dende laughed to himself and scanned the room. It had been years since he had been in here. New pictures adorned the walls alongside the old ones, and the nearby living room had a different fabric covering the couch than Dende remembered. This was Gohan’s house, but it was not nearly as familiar to Dende as the boy himself was.

In here was a whole different world than the Lookout. The Earth itself was a different world than the Lookout, too, and Dende had seen so little of it with his own eyes.

He regretted that.

Gohan came back into the kitchen with a stack of dishes and a glass of water. He put the glass down in front of Dende and set the table with the rest of his load.

Dende suddenly felt exceptionally rude. “Is there anything I can do to help?” He asked, rising out of his seat.

Gohan shook his head. “I’d rather you stay where I can keep you away from my parents while I’m not around to watch you,” he admitted. “But, um, hey, earlier, you said something about you being presented to me. What did you mean?”

“Oh, yes.” Dende smiled. “The day your father appeared on New Namek in search of a new Guardian. Moori chose me as a Guardian candidate because he viewed the arrangement as a way to guarantee that I could see you again. His thinking was that we would never have to be apart, and that my coming here would cement the ties of goodwill between the Earth and the people of Namek.” He nodded. “And your father promised that you all would take good care of me, too,” Dende added.

Gohan abandoned setting the table and instead stared at the Guardian, eyes wide.

“Gohan, you have many feelings and I am not sure what to make of them,” Dende said, reaching out to hold Gohan’s hand. “Is something the matter?”

Gohan shook his head. “No, no. I don’t think so. But later, you and I need to have a talk about this.” He looked up to smile warily at his father, who was carrying a whole cooked pig in from the kitchen, and released Dende’s hand after giving it a small squeeze.

It was bizarre for Dende to be able to look straight into the face of the pig’s roasted corpse and know
that both he and the kindest person he knew was about to eat it, but the Guardian supposed that the universe was twisted that way. He had come from a people who brought death upon nothing and fell in love with a people who brought death upon everything.

It had been his choice.

Goten came into the room next with a wooden container of rice almost as big as he was. Chi Chi followed with heaping platters lined up on both of her arms, and tossed them all on the table in one heated, practiced motion. Then, she took her seat. Goku and Goten followed suit, followed by Gohan.

Dende watched his favorite Son and waited for cues on what to do.

“Thank you for the food!” The boys and Dende all said, and the oldest and youngest Sons at the table grabbed whatever they could reach and threw it on their plate before they began shoveling it down.

Gohan, however, did not, even though Dende knew that he wanted to. The boy calmly took the Guardian’s bowl and passed it to Chi Chi.

She wordlessly stuffed it full of rice and handed it back. Gohan gave her his bowl next.

“So, mom,” Gohan said, adding small portions of other foods to Dende’s plate next, “How, um, how was your day today?”

Chi Chi pouted. “Average. Very normal.” She gestured to her youngest son. “Full a’ children. The way a day oughta be.”

Gohan winced.

“Your home is very lovely,” Dende tried. “It is very cozy and inviting, and the food smells wonderful.”

Chi Chi huffed. “Oh, really? Cozy, huh? Compared to th’ ivory tower y’all sit on as y’all contemplate th’ folly of humanity, I’m real sure.”

“Mom,” Gohan pleaded. “Dad’s different, too, and you still decided—”

Chi Chi slammed her hands on the table, which made Goku and Goten stare at her before they resumed eating. “I ain’t mad that ya picked Dende just ‘cause he’s one a’ them green, demonic aliens, Gohan! I’m upset ‘cause,” her lip quivered, “cause,” she started to snuffle and tear up, “‘cause,” she choked on her own breathing, “‘cause if ya pick ‘im, I ain’t gonna get no grandbabies!” she wailed.

“Aw, mom,” Gohan said.

“I don’t care if’n they’re green and look jes’ like the backside of that demon Piccolo hisself! I jes’ want ba-ha-ha-bies!” She buried her face and her tears in her hands.

Dende had picked up his chopsticks and held them the way Gohan had instructed him to do, but Chi Chi’s admonition sent them clattering to the plate in disbelief. ‘...Excuse me, but is that your biggest concern?’

“Ye-he-he-hes!” She wailed.
Goku and Goten stopped eating to pat the crying Chi Chi on the back.

“Aw, ‘Chi, maybe they’ll find another space pod in th’ woods ‘round here with a baby in it that they can call their own. That’s how Grandpa Gohan got me!”

“But what if th’ last a’ _that_ baby’s evil, dead race comes ta Earth and tries ta kill us all, too?!” Chi Chi fanned herself. “An’ then what if it has ta go off ta god-knows-where n’ almost die by th’ hands of another intergl’actic overlord?! Like, I dunno, Lord Frigidaire!” She tried to get her breathing under control but instead ended up gasping between every word. I- jes’- dun- no- if’n- I- kin- take- th’- dra- ma- of- that- happe-n’in’- again!” Chi Chi sank down and buried her face into the table.

“Mom,” Gohan reached for her.

Dende gently held his love back with a touch to the arm. “Ah, but Mrs. Son, you need not worry about all of that. I am capable of producing offspring.”

All eyes turned to Dende, including Chi Chi’s, whose head snapped up from the table at a ninety degree angle. Her face was miraculously dry.

Dende smiled back at them all, a little unsettled. “Why, have you all forgotten? Nameks reproduce by independently creating eggs. Gohan and I need not be genetically compatible for me to produce offspring.”

“Oh, yeah! All we gotta do is bust a hole in his chest like I did with King Piccolo!” Goku threw some more food into his mouth, assured that the crisis was over.

Dende felt his eyes bug out of his head despite his best efforts to take everything in stride. “No, no, that is not necessary, Mr. Son,” Dende said.

Goku furrowed his eyebrows. “Oh. Okay. But who in th’ heck is “Mr. Son”? That could be me or Goten or Gohan. Or you, I guess, if ya marry my boy.”

Dende felt Gohan shift, annoyed, next to him, but the boy swallowed whatever he was about to say. He seemed uncharacteristically bothered about the topic of marriage when his father mentioned it. Dende reached out and held Gohan’s hand from under the table.

“I apologize. What would you like me to call you?” Dende asked Goku.

“’M Goku same as I always is,” he said from the middle of a mouthful of food. “So call me Goku.”

Goten rammed his palms into the top of the table and spilled a little of his dinner plate on the as he blurted out his excitement. “Oh! Oh! Can I be “King Goten, Coolest and Bestest Beetle Lord in th’ Universe?” He shook his head. “No, no, or whaddabout just King-Lord Bug Slug the Excellent?”


Chi Chi was unconcerned with the foolishness of her husband and youngest. She kept her eyes glued on Dende, unblinking, the same way she had since the moment she had lifted her head back up from the table. “Have me a baby,” she said. “Right now. Prove it ta me.”

“Ex-Excuse me?” Dende said.

Chi Chi gestured to the table. “Lay me a young ‘un. Right here.”

“Whoa, mom, easy there,” Gohan came to Dende’s defense. “You’re getting a little ahead of
“Don’t sass me,” Chi Chi hissed at Gohan. “I raised ya better ‘n ta talk back to yer mama.” She pointed at Dende and narrowed her eyes. “Lay me an egg.”

Dende felt the distinct urge to curl up into Gohan’s lap and hide there.

“Mom, you’re scaring him. Please stop.”

“An’ he scared me! He waited ‘til now ta let me know he could give me grandbabies!”

“B-but Mrs. Son, I would hate to ruin this wonderful dinner you have prepared,” Dende babbled. He clumsily grabbed his chopsticks and tossed a piece of something into his mouth. “It really is too good to waste.”

By some miracle, that worked. Chi Chi sat back into her seat, placated, and fixed her own plate. “Fine. We’ll do this yer way,” she said.

Dinner continued peacefully, with Chi Chi making idle conversation with the grazing Dende and her boys wolfing down everything else. The Guardian was relieved, actually- Gohan had been so uptight until then that Dende was concerned that he would not touch any of the food on the table.

Then, Goku suddenly pulled himself from his food. “I jus’ remembered. Where’s that one hot sauce ya use, Chi Chi? The one I burned myself with the first time I had it. It’d be good on the pig.”

Chi Chi pursed her lips. “Oh, th’ sriracha? I dunno. I swore I had some, but I couldn’t find any in th’ pantry.

Gohan and Dende shared a look.

“Oh! I know!” Goten added. “I saw a whole bunch in the cave by the waterfall when I was playing with the bats th’ other day.”

“Too bad it’s not here, huh?” Gohan said brightly. “Guess we just can’t have any.”

Goku put two fingers to his pensive head, and suddenly disappeared.

“I hate it when he does that,” Chi Chi grumbled.

Goku reappeared a moment later with a bottle full of a familiar red sauce, and squirted some on his food.

Dende grabbed Gohan’s hand again and started to sweat.

“Y’ever had this, Dende?” Goku asked, holding the bottle out to him. “It’s good. But use just a little!”

“No thank you, never again, please!” Dende felt the need to down his water in one gulp just from the sight of the stuff alone. “The food is delicious as it is, Mrs. Son!” He focused on getting more rice into his mouth in particular. “I especially love rice. It is wonderful and makes everything better. I would like to have it forever.” He laughed awkwardly and racked his brain for more words to fill the silence with. “Rice is very special.”

“Are ya talking about dinner or my son?” Chi Chi asked.

“Um, whichever!” Dende said. “Both are very fulfilling to have for a meal, I suppose!”
Gohan put his face in his hands.

“I mean,” Dende grasped at the straws of his calm. “Can we, um, is it possible to keep the sriracha on the other side of the table?”

Goten stuck out his tongue. “Yuck! No thanks. I don’t like that spicy stuff. Don’t put it over here!”

Goku considered the bottle. “Well, I want it by me anyway so’s I can get more if I want it,” he said, “And I can’t put it by Goten, and you don’t want it, so…”

Just then, the door burst open and Piccolo enveloped the open space with his looming frame and white cape. He skulked to the table and snatched the bottle of sriracha away.

“I cannot meditate while listening to your idiocy!” Piccolo roared, and left the way he came.

Goku picked up his plate and followed the sriracha. “Wait! Pic! I’muna need that inna minute!”

Dende sent waves of his love and gratitude after his sourpuss mentor.

Piccolo sent back a message for him to shut the hell up.

Chi Chi sighed and went back to the kitchen. “A course he’d show up ta bum a meal offa me,” she grumbled, and returned with another place setting. “Gohan, bring me the other livin’ room chair ‘fore they come back.”

Dende helped the Sons rearrange their table to make another place. “Gohan told me that you had not invited Piccolo,” he mused.

Chi Chi shook her head. “I didn’t. But Gohan says he’s fam’ly, and if my son says he is, then he is.” She shrugged. “And I don’t turn that out even when it happens ta be a giant green ne’er-do-well layabout.” She looked at Dende. “Don’t eat whatcha don’t like, Dende. I won’t throw you out, neither.”

Dende was not sure what to say. “Thank you, Mrs. Son.”

She waved away the formality. “Naw. I’m jes’ Chi Chi.”
Commitment

Chapter Summary

Piccolo and Mister Popo have a little chat.

Chapter Notes

This still has a happy ending and is cute and stuff, but it contains part of the dark side of this story.

Also, I have started a Dende/Gohan Tumblr for this story and related things. It's under construction as we speak but you can find it at ivory-tower-dbz or search for the tag IvoryTowerfic in the thingy.

Dende laughed at the chessboard the moment he took his hand off of his piece. “Oh, Mister Popo, I see my mistake.”

The genie nodded and moved his rook. “Checkmate. Would you like to play another round?”

Occasionally, Mister Popo liked to play board games. His favorite was mahjong, but it was never as much fun with only two players and not four.

Dende’s favorites involved cards, but for some reason Mister Popo could never keep a straight face whenever he played with them. In fact, the only time Dende ever knew exactly what the genie was thinking was when they were sitting on the opposite sides of a hand of cards.

So, today, they had settled on chess like they normally did. Mister Popo almost always won, too, but Dende did not mind. It made the Guardian a better player in the long run.

Piccolo stepped into the garden and cast a shadow over both Guardian and genie as the two rearranged the chess pieces back into their original positions.

“I’ve finished,” he said simply, and thrust out a few sheets of notebook paper at Dende.

Piccolo had long since completed his basic workbooks, and so Dende had started his mentor on the task of writing essays twice a week at Chi Chi’s suggestion. Piccolo, predictably, had decried the assignments as frivolous and folly at first, but once Gohan had proposed that his father do the same and that the quality of each exercise be a form of competition between the huge Namek and Son Goku, Piccolo had been swayed.

“I even used a semicolon,” Piccolo bragged, crossing his arms. “Son cannot possibly hope to best me this time.”

Dende smiled serenely and set the papers down onto his lap. “How wonderful for you, indeed,” he said. “I look forward to seeing the look on Gohan’s face when I tell him.” The Guardian turned back to his chessboard and Mister Popo.
Piccolo did not move, and silently demanded Dende’s immediate attention be given back to him.

Dende obliged. “Yes?”

Piccolo stared at him.

Dende smiled sweetly, but slowly became nervous as Piccolo’s insistent face grew more and more impatient.

“Well?” Piccolo spat.

Dende cocked his head. “Forgive me, but what is it you require of me?”

“Aren’t you going to read it?” Piccolo growled.

“Oh!” Dende picked up the pages. “Now?”

“Yes, now! Why else do you think I gave it to you?!” Piccolo roared.

Dende fell out of his chair from the force of Piccolo’s impatience. Mister Popo held the chessboard steady.

The Guardian looked at the genie. “I am sorry, Mister Popo, but Piccolo simply refuses to wait. Perhaps he shall be your next opponent while I attend to this?” Dende tried.

Piccolo stiffly walked over and squatted down into Dende’s former seat, which was, relative to the hulking warrior, a comically small wrought iron chair. “If this will hurry up your process.” Piccolo grunted.

Dende curled his legs beneath himself and started on the pages. Piccolo’s handwriting was stiff and precise, just like the warrior himself, and he refused to use both sides of the paper for fear one side would bleed through to the other- he was a pen user. With ink, he had told Dende, every move made on the paper had consequence just like every move on the battlefield did. Pencil was for children, and Piccolo was no such thing. He was a warrior, and gave himself no room for mistakes.

Of course, this also meant that Dende was not allowed to give written critique and ask Piccolo to edit his work once it was finished.

Piccolo was also exceptionally sensitive about his work. He shoved Dende with his foot. “Do not read over that here, in front of me! Go somewhere else!”

The Guardian scurried to a more private part of the Lookout and made camp there. Gohan was due to arrive soon, anyhow, and he frequently approached from this side.

Ah, Gohan. Dende smiled to himself. Gohan had brought him a scarf the other day- the boy had said it was actually from his mother, but Dende thought that made little difference. It smelled like Gohan and his house, and so it was special either way. The Guardian pulled it up around his face and inhaled.

Dende looked up when Gohan himself arrived at the top of the Lookout and touched down in front of him.

“Hi, Dende!” Gohan greeted, scooping him up into the air and giving him a kiss.

Dende kissed back, surprised. “Hello,” he said, and wrapped his arms around Gohan’s neck. “You certainly are enthusiastic today.”
Gohan laughed and pulled Dende into a hug. The Guardian felt a little silly with his knees gripping Gohan’s waist like a child.

Gohan pressed their foreheads together. “Yeah, well, today, Videl stopped being mad at me and helped me- uh, I mean, helped the Great Saiyaman- save a bunch of elementary schoolers from the boredom of having to wait on a broken down school bus ‘till it got fixed.”

Dende nodded against Gohan’s head and watched the memory. “I see they very much enjoyed having a flying school bus and celebrity escort for a day,” he said. “I am pleased that Videl is no longer upset with you.” He ran a hand through Gohan’s hair. Videl Satan had apparently been passively upset at the boy since the day after Gohan had first kissed Dende, and it had bothered the Guardian’s sweetheart quite a bit.

Gohan grinned. “So! What are those papers I saw in your hand for? Did Piccolo do his homework?”

Dende nodded. “Would you like to read over them with me? Piccolo would surely be pleased if you did, I think.”

Gohan floated into the air where he stood and crossed his legs so he could sit Dende in them. “Let’s take a look,” he said.

The Guardian turned to put his back against Gohan’s chest and held the pages out in front of himself. Gohan rested his chin on Dende’s head. “You are very bald,” he idly said.

“And you are quite observant,” Dende lightly countered, chuckling.

Piccolo’s essay started off rather droll, which was par for the course- mostly, they were accounts of Piccolo’s week, which involved a lot of focusing his ki and finding a secluded wasteland to train himself in. This one did not appear to be breaking any molds.

Thus, the sound of Piccolo and Popo quietly chatting over their game of chess pulled Dende’s attention away all too easily.

“You have won and Gohan has arrived,” Piccolo said plainly. “I should go watch them.” Dende heard the distinct scraping of chair legs across tile.

“Oh, no, Piccolo. Stay and play so that they may play,” Mister Popo said.

Piccolo seemed both annoyed and perplexed. “Why do you insist on encouraging them?”

“He’s the Guardian of Earth, Mister Popo.” This voice was more reminiscent of Kami rather than only Piccolo by himself. “This is foolishness. Dende deludes himself with his fancy.”

“It is common for Guardians to have peacetime companions and lovers,” Mister Popo said, and Dende could hear the smile in his voice. “It is good, too.”

“I never had one in all my years, in all times of my life.” Piccolo and Kami both had the floor.

Dende knew he should not be eavesdropping, but he also knew that this was probably something he needed to hear. He wrestled with himself over what to do, and then, biting his lip, decided to ignore Piccolo’s essay in favor of keeping an open ear.

The cheer in Mister Popo’s light speech turned darker. “And Kami, he was lonely. Kami, he grew
bitter. Popo was Kami’s only friend. He allowed himself no happiness from the Earth. Instead, Kami watched only the corruption and saw the sadness. It took his heart, and he grew old in his isolation. His heart grew hard and brittle.” The genie must have put his hand somewhere on Piccolo’s clothing because Dende could hear the whisper of rustling fabric. “Kami shot the down the planes of those who might visit him. Kami thought it was the right way to be Guardian.”

“It was the right way.” The Nameless Namek insisted.

“No. Kami was wrong. Piccolo is wrong.”

“In what regard?”

“Kami, he cut himself into two. Popo saw. He cut himself into two, and the bad half was desire, twisted. Piccolo. Piccolo wanted security, he wanted control, he wanted power. But Kami did not see- Piccolo came from cruelty of others; Piccolo was born from abuse, from neglect. Piccolo was born from loneliness.”

Gohan noticed that Dende was preoccupied. He nudged the Guardian. “Is everything okay?”

Dende took one of Gohan’s hands and kissed his palm, but kept his eyes in the direction of Mister Popo and their mentor. Gohan took the hint and quietly leaned down to nuzzle his way to Dende’s neck.

The Nameless Namek grunted from across the Lookout. “That is ridiculous.”

“No. It is the truth. Piccolo reborn as this Piccolo, he too was not simply evil, only lonely. Who saved Piccolo? Not Goku, no. Goku spared Piccolo, for Goku loves the fight. His son saved Piccolo, because Gohan loves Piccolo.”

“This is not the same as that, Mister Popo.”

“No it is not, and yes, it is. Piccolo loves Gohan and Gohan loves Piccolo one way, and Dende loves Gohan and Gohan loves Dende another way. But still, Dende loves Gohan, and Gohan loves Dende. This is the whole story, and the end of it, too.” The genie took a few steps away from Piccolo and Dende could hear his weight fall back into the seat of his chair at the end of his footsteps.

“And when there is a war, or a crisis of some kind- like Buu- how will this not impair Dende’s judgement and responsibilities? He cannot spare sending Gohan to defend the planet; Gohan is the single most powerful mortal we know.” The Nameless Namek snorted. “Kami was not such a fool to allow himself to grow sentimental- that is, until Goku came.”

“Kami did his duty best then. Kami was most active in the affairs of the Earth when Goku came. Goku was promise, Goku was good. His soul reflected everything Kami wanted for humanity. Goku brought hope because Goku came here to Kami first.”

Piccolo sneered. “And how poorly Kami handled me then, all in the hopes of letting Son grow on his own.” Piccolo’s soft laugh was malicious. “Tell me how fine of a Guardian Son Goku became after all of Kami’s attachment and attention. Remind me once again; remind me how he refused to become Guardian at all.”

Mister Popo was growing as close to impatient as Dende had ever heard him be. “Yes, Kami was wrong. But Goku was not why. Kami split himself in two. Kami denied himself and broke his own heart because he could not bear to accept his flaw, he could not understand how to grow past his problem. Kami sabotaged his soul. Kami was pure, yes. But Kami, my dear friend, oh, he was
empty. When Goku came, he came too late and Kami needed to believe in him too much. But Gohan, he is here now. Let Dende love. Let Dende grow, and let Dende learn to let go when the time comes.”

“...You miss my point. Gohan will not be here forever, and not necessarily because he chooses to live his own life independent of Dende, even. He shall die before Dende, guaranteed. To let them be like this now, knowing that, is a joke.”

“Gohan will die before Piccolo. Should Piccolo never have loved Gohan?”

“I am no longer the Guardian!” The Nameless Namek argued. “It is different!”

“It is the same. To be called Kami does not make one Kami. The title is a word only. The title does not a God make. To be called Kami is to be mortal, and fragile, but to carry the Earth even so.” Dende could hear Mister Popo rearranging the chess pieces. “Dende must take care to be stronger than Kami. Dende must not deny his own heart and call it strength. He must not think this place a prison. Dende must not cast his wants to the Earth and call it evil, and he must not hope for death upon himself to erase such things. Dende must not think his life a prison.”

“I never wished for death, I only contemplated it,” half of the Nameless Namek whispered.

Dende turned around, the empty words of Piccolo’s essay forgotten and fluttering to the ground, and buried his face into Gohan’s chest.

“Dende, what’s wrong?” Gohan stroked his back and pulled him closer.

Dende kissed Gohan and held the boy’s face in his hands.

In the garden, Mister Popo clicked his tongue. “The truly Divine do not even feel so broken as to contemplate that. The truly Divine are whole. Popo knows. Popo loved Kami as Gohan loves Piccolo. Popo saw Kami as he truly was.”

The Nameless Namek’s cape rustled as he crossed his arms beneath it. “I still do not like it. It is too different.”

Mister Popo laughed. “Oh, yes, Popo knows. Piccolo and Kami both hate losing. Try again. The board is set once more. Play as many times as you like, and one day, you will learn.”

Gohan kissed Dende a few more times- on his cheek, on his forehead, his nose, his mouth. “What is it? You can tell me.”

Dende was not sure how to clearly express what he was feeling, not by spoken word nor by Namekian kiss. Instead, the Guardian threw his arms back around Gohan and thought about how lucky he was to have the boy there and with him at that very moment.

“Dende,” Gohan said, and rubbed his back. “Please don’t cry.”

Words alone have never been able to stop tears when they need to come, and this was one of those times where they were inevitable.

“What is it that you want,” Dende’s voice cracked, “out of your life?”

Gohan’s hands traced soothing lines and circles down Dende’s back. “I don’t know for sure, Dende. But I do know that, for now, I am so happy to be able to go to school, and that Videl is my friend and Piccolo, too, and that my family is happy and safe, and that I get to be here with you. And I am
so happy that you care so much about me and that I care so much about you. If everything could be 
that simple forever, I think that would always make me happy and be everything I want, now and 
forever, but I know,” he inhaled and pressed his face into Dende’s neck, “that things aren’t always 
that simple.”

“Do you want to leave if your life changes?” Dende asked him, wishing that his next words would 
be something like because I will never let you go, but Nameks do not lie even when they want to, 
because if you ever do, I will let you even though I will miss you,” he said. “Your happiness is 
important to me.”

“What? No, no, I don’t want to leave!” Gohan said. “Why would you say that?”

“Because everyone has to say goodbye when they reach the end of their road, and yours shall be 
sooner than mine,” Dende said. “I do not want to be left alone up here without you for seven years 
again when I know that you do not have that time on this Earth to spend as freely as I do.”

Gohan pushed Dende away and looked into his face. “You should know,” he said, “that I make it a 
point to commit to the things I care about. I make it a point to be the one to hold things together when 
others abandon them, or when they cannot.” Gohan shook his head. “One day, something may 
happen that will take me away. But I promise you this- it won’t happen so easily, and I won’t be so 
casual about it that I’ll both show up and leave out of the blue- not for such long periods of time, 
anyway, and not without using every bit of that time to figure out what I’ve done wrong and do 
whatever it is I have to do in order to come back as quickly as I can.”

This was true, and Dende knew it. When Gohan had left after their first kiss, he had returned 
immediately after sorting out his feelings and how it might involve Videl. The second time, he had 
gone out of his way to try and explain the situation to his parents, and then to Dende. He did not 
always explain himself beforehand, but he had come right back to handle the situation as quickly as 
he could, and when he could not address something, he had told Dende as much as he could in the 
best way that he could manage.

“You just need to trust me,” Gohan said, “and I need to trust you, and together you and I can solve 
the things that aren’t so simple. If we do that, we can be happy even when life gets complicated.” He 
took the scarf from around Dende’s neck and wrapped it around them both. “Commitment. It’s um,” 
he shrugged. “It’s hard, but that doesn’t mean it has to be bad.”

“Commitment?” Dende asked, looking up at Gohan and putting his hands on his chest.

“Yeah. My dad has a, well, a little bit of a problem understanding how big of a deal it is sometimes, 
but even he gets by with it. And if he and my mom can do that, so can we.”

Dende pressed their foreheads together and thought about what he was feeling, but mostly, he just 
thought about how he felt about Gohan.

The boy did the same, but with his feelings towards Dende, until the Guardian calmed down.

“And actually,” Gohan suddenly said, “I was going to wait to bring this up again, but we might have 
been put into an arranged marriage. So, uh, my choice about leaving or staying might have been 
made for me before I made it myself. I’m still fishing for answers with my dad about that, though.”

Dende blinked. “Huh? Arranged marriage?”

Gohan pursed his lips and looked left, and then right, and then back at Dende. “You know, forget I 
said anything about that just yet. Today, right now, smile for me. Please?” Gohan kissed him.
“Please smile for me, before things get too complicated again. Let’s be happy in this moment, right now, because that’s something you should never lose sight of, especially when everything you want is in front of you and times are good.”

And Dende did as Gohan asked, because the boy he held memories of in his heart and the person in front of him were one and the same, and that same boy had his arms around Dende and wanted to do nothing else besides give some of his time to Dende, and because Dende wanted to do the same for him.

Gohan leaned in close. “You know what?” He asked.

“What is it?” Dende asked, kissing his nose.

“Piccolo is going to kill us both for losing his essay. I saw it fly off the Lookout but didn’t go after it because you were so upset at the time.”

Dende thought about it. “I will make him write another one about something else. That one did not seem to be any good.”

Gohan snickered. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll love that.”

“He swore he would write a better essay than your father this week, and I shall hold him to that,” Dende decided. “It is not my fault that commitment is hard.”

Gohan only laughed.
Dende meditated in the center of the Lookout and mulled over all of the happenings on Earth that he had observed that day. Most of it had been relatively mundane, but there was unrest between the tribes who lived in the Land of Korin at the foot of the tower and the men who owned the property bordering those sacred grounds. Usually, intervening in such minor and common happenstances as political disputes was not what Guardians need concern themselves with, but both Dende’s soft heart and the fact that the foundation of the Lookout began in the Land of Korin prompted Dende to reflect on the matter more deeply.

Currently, the two sides were in a stalemate. The landowners were deliberating between intimidation tactics or taking the tribe to court over the matter while the natives held a stiff upper lip about it all. Nothing else had really happened, though, and stepping in prematurely would probably make the problem worse rather than solve it. A Guardian intervening in what was currently nothing more than a glorified neighborly dispute would not reflect well upon the station, either.

Still, Dende did not like it. These people he observed below were of mixed intentions and had a poor history dealing with each other. They were not at all like his Gohan.

Dende allowed himself a smile. His sweetheart was supposed to visit soon, after his schooling finished. Maybe they would go flying over the ocean together again today.

“Stop smiling,” Piccolo grunted from where he meditated next to his successor. He was not even looking at Dende, but somehow, he knew what the Guardian was doing.

Dende did as he was told, more out of surprise than obedience, and then started smiling wider than before when he simply could not help himself. Perhaps Gohan would like to read another book together, or hold his arms around Dende and guide him through another fighting technique, or maybe they could take another bath and Dende could play with his silly hair and make him laugh until his cheeks turned pink...

“I said for you to stop.”

Dende tried, and failed.

“Dende,” Piccolo warned. “I will staple the corners of your mouth in place if I must.”

The Guardian put his hands over his face to cover his grin.

Piccolo looked over at him, exasperated.

“I cannot make myself stop,” Dende admitted.
Piccolo glared. “Do those people at the base of Korin’s Tower concern you so little that you could so easily move your focus away from their plight?”

Dende was taken aback. “To think instead of something cheerful rather than worry over a tragedy that may not even happen does not constitute flippancy. I care very much about the situation, I only do not think any action is prudent at this point in time. Fretting over it without cause is hardly a good use of anyone’s time or effort.”

Dende’s mentor huffed. It was clear to the Guardian that Piccolo had made the same assessment and was antagonizing Dende for the sake of it. “So is your obnoxious cheer,” the warrior said.

“Piccolo,” Dende addressed him softly, “I realize my affection for Gohan upsets you. I am not sure what to tell you to assuage your fears or to convince both you or myself that they are unfounded, but-”

Piccolo’s eyes struck out at Dende like twin daggers. “You were eavesdropping on Mister Popo and I the other day.”

“Yes,” Dende admitted. “But only because I thought it imperative that I understand-”

“If you feel within you that the nature of what you are attempting to do is wrong, then that is your proof. It is wrong. Stop this.”

“You misunderstand.” Dende shook his head. “I think it is strange and new and wonderful, but not wrong. I only mean to say that,” he considered his next words carefully, “I fear the possibility that things may go awry, somehow, some way. Or, that perhaps there is truth to what you said to Mister Popo- Gohan may impede my ability to act as Guardian in some unforeseen way.” Dende twiddled his thumbs. “Unpreparedness. That is more my fear- to be unprepared for whatever may lie ahead. But this speaks more to a general fear of the unknown rather than a fear stemming from the relationship itself.”

Piccolo grunted.

“And,” Dende wondered if reaching for his mentor’s arm would annoy him or engage him, “I have been trying very hard to consult you about this matter in the hopes that you could illuminate something to me that I did not know. Unfortunately, you have been,” the Guardian hesitated, “very un receptive about the topic. At first, I thought you were embarrassed, but now I see that you have no point of reference for how I feel.” Dende looked hard at the ground. “You are incapable of understanding me.”

Piccolo sneered. “Oh, you find me to be an empty, withered old husk like Mister Popo does? My
words ring hollow to you?”

Dende took Piccolo’s hands. “No. Not at all. I only mean to tell you that I believe, in this instance, you can advise me on this no more than you can claim knowledge of that which makes me happy.”

“Because your happiness is imperative to the station of Guardian.” Piccolo’s tone grew ugly.

“To be of a mind to maintain balance in the planet, one must achieve balance in themselves. Needless suffering would only do a disservice to the planet I watch over.”

Piccolo snatched away his hands. “You imply that the separation of the good and the evil within myself was needless?”

Dende had not meant anything of the sort. Piccolo’s soul was struggling with an old Namek’s words and regrets combined with a young one’s insecurities and temper, and it made him defensive. The Guardian’s heart went out to his mentor.

However, as Dende sat in the sky and gazed upon the face of the Nameless Namek, who, after years of strife and pain was finally whole again despite all of his efforts to eradicate half of himself, he could not help but wonder if both the bloodshed of Piccolo and the despondence of Kami were indeed needless.

“Nameless One, I…” Dende tried.

Piccolo suddenly looked away. “Do as you like,” he said. “The authority is yours, not mine. But do not come crying to me if you fall to pieces when all has run its course. I will have no sympathy for you, only vituperations.” He unfolded himself from his lotus position and followed the wind elsewhere.

Dende watched him go, and then turned to look down at the tiles of the Lookout

Instead, he found a bottle of wine. The Guardian blinked down at it, bewildered.

Mister Popo was attached to it. “Ignore Piccolo. He wishes for your happiness and worries for you and his Gohan. That is all. Take this.”

Dende gingerly pushed the wine away. “Thank you for this, Mister Popo, but-”

The genie held out a hand to silence Dende and pointed to the open sky. “Not for now. For when Gohan comes.” The Guardian could feel him approaching already.

Some time ago, Gohan had the bright idea to start scheduling when he would come visit the Lookout. Mister Popo kept an updated calendar in the kitchen, and somehow, the genie frequently knew what days Gohan would be available before the boy himself did.

Dende looked over the bottle once again. It was very old. “Oh. I see. Well. Thank you, Mister Popo. This is, um, very kind of you.”

“Dinner, too,” Mister Popo whispered. “Dinner is in the room below.” He pointed to the tiles beneath his feet, and winked. “Popo did not let Piccolo know, no I did not!”

“Mister Popo, I appreciate all of this, but you do not have to go to such great lengths for when Gohan comes to see me. He is my guest, and you needn’t trouble yourself over his visits.”

Mister Popo shook his head. “Gohan eased Kami’s mind about Piccolo and soothed his soul, and
then saved us from Cell. Much is owed to Gohan.” The genie nodded. “He is also Son Goku’s child, and Popo trained Son Goku! Son Gohan is precious, indeed!”

Dende nodded. Sometimes, he felt so naïve about how much Son Goku affected his and Gohan’s everyday life. The man was simply everywhere, it seemed, and the Guardian barely knew why.

“Dende loves Son Gohan, yes?” Mister Popo asked.

Dende found himself smiling again, despite everything Piccolo had said to put a damper on his mood. “Yes!”

Mister Popo nodded. “Yes, yes. You tell him. Tell Gohan.” He patted Dende on the back and walked away as Gohan summited the Lookout. “Don’t forget, dinner is in the room below!”

Dende floated over to Gohan and the boy pulled him from the air and into a hug.

The Guardian kissed him quickly and then rested his forehead on Gohan’s.

“I’m sorry I’m a little late. Today was some kind of parade in town,” Gohan said in place of a greeting. “School was not cancelled, but the whole place was decorated in ribbons of every color. It was really cool, but kind of rowdy.” He showed Dende the fresh memory of a thick stream of people running through Satan City’s main boulevard, complete with parade floats and brightly colored clothing. Confetti rained down on it all from Gohan’s vantage point in the sky. “Lots of kids skipped class.”

“That is amazing,” Dende said. “We had so few festivals on Namek, and none were this extravagant.”

Gohan pulled his face away from Dende’s. “Would you want to go to one? I think that particular one is over after today, but I am sure I could find something, somewhere.”

Dende had only ever seen and explored the areas surrounding the Briefs’ Complex and Gohan’s home up close before. “Anything would be wonderful, festival or not,” Dende said.

Gohan glanced around and kissed him shyly. “Then, we’ll go somewhere some days. I’ll find us something to do.”

Dende smiled back at Gohan and stroked his cheek.

Gohan grinned, too, and turned a little sweeter in color as time went on.

Dende smiled even wider, to the point he wondered if his face might split, and played with Gohan’s hair.

“Um, Dende,” the boy said, “you’re staring and not saying anything.”

The Guardian twitched his ears to show he was listening, but otherwise did nothing except continue to gaze at the face of the person he loved.

Gohan’s eyes darted to and from Dende’s. “I never know what to do when you start doing that,” he clarified.

“Oh,” said Dende. “You don’t need to do anything, really. I only wish to watch you.”

Gohan turned red. “That’s, well. Um. I feel a little silly standing here in the middle of the Lookout, is all, with you staring at me and not saying anything. What, uh, what exactly are you thinking about
when you start to do that?”

It was not obvious? “That I love you,” the Guardian said, taking Mister Popo’s advice.

“Oh,” Gohan replied. “Wow. Well, gosh, Dende, I love, uh,” he grew more flustered as the Guardian drew closer and kissed him again, longer this time.

Gohan liked the lengthier kisses, Dende knew, the ones where their tongues went into one another’s mouths. They were unusual to Dende, but that did not make them unenjoyable.

“Mister Popo said he made us dinner,” Dende said, pulling away. “Would you like to eat?”

Gohan looked a little dazed as he nodded. “O-okay,” he said.

Dende set his feet firmly on the ground, tucked the wine bottle beneath one arm, and took Gohan by the hand. “I do not know what Mister Popo has left for us down below. It will be a surprise!” He led Gohan into the pavilion and down the stairs to the lower level of the Lookout. “You have invited me to dinner at your home once before, and now you shall eat at mine!”

Mister Popo had not specified to Dende exactly which room he had left the meal in, either, so Dende brought Gohan to a few wrong destinations before they finally found it set up in the master bedroom.

With how large the table was and how much food was crammed thereupon, Dende felt sure that this room was the only one large enough to hold everything without feeling cramped. The fading daylight peeked in through the windows along the top of the wall and a row of candles in the center of the table cast more light around the lower part of the room.

Two places were set at the end of the table closest to the bed, but one glass was full of ice water and the other was empty.

“I see!” Dende said, looking from the wine bottle still in his hands to the empty glass. He filled it and gestured for Gohan to sit in front of it without a second thought.

The boy blinked. “Um,” he cocked his head, and then shrugged.

“Is something the matter?” Dende asked. “Do you not like the wine?” When the two had eaten with Gohan’s parents, Dende recalled his sweetheart having a glass of the bottle he had brought as a gift. Perhaps the water had been for Gohan and the wine for Dende? Dende had never tried wine before. It mattered very little, though— the Guardian could always go to the kitchen and get another glass of water for both of them.

Gohan shook his head. “No, this is fine. It’s nothing. I just had not originally planned on having any alcohol, is all.” He took his seat and grabbed the stem of his glass to take a drink. “But, you know, maybe it’s, uh, better this way. I need to talk to you about something.”

Dende sat as well, and chuckled as Gohan fiddled with his hands and hesitated to reach for the food around him.

“Please eat and do not be nervous about it,” Dende coaxed, resting his own hands in his lap. “It is nothing I have never seen before.”

Gohan finished his first glass of wine and nervously fixed his plate while Dende poured him more. “So,” the boy cleared his throat. “I mentioned this the other day, but, um,” he put down the pasta and set a few pieces of chicken on top of it, “apparently, my dad used me as a bargaining chip to bring you to earth to make the Dragon Balls. I think.” Dende was not entirely sure what else his sweetheart
added to his plate, but he took a lot of whatever it was. “It’s hard to tell, because he kind of shrugs at whatever I ask him, but I think that’s what happened.” He finished fixing his plate and used his fork and knife to start eating.

Comparatively speaking, Gohan eating with silverware and correct posture rather than shoveling his meal into his mouth with chopsticks was comically bizarre.

Dende nodded. “Oh?”

Gohan eyed the Guardian and took another gulp of fresh wine before he continued. “Well, Dende, do you, uh, I, uh…” he cleared his throat. “Do, uh, you know what an arranged marriage is?”

Marriage was once a type of business agreement on Earth, or so Dende understood. Frequently, arranged meant predetermined, and implied the older customs of the world below. In most areas of the modern world, though, marriage seemed highly romanticized and partners were chosen by each individual. In fact, the idea behind what Dende understood of marriage’s contemporary counterpart reminded the Guardian of the principle behind certain motives for permanent Namek fusion. “In theory, yes,” Dende said. “Two families choose to unify by determining that one child shall go live as the partner to another child in the other family, and live with that family for the rest of their days. Often, it is for monetary or social gain that this occurs. Yes?” He took a drink of his water.

Gohan nodded and had a few more bites of food followed by another sip of wine. “And you said that Moori, uh, gave you to my dad to give to me?” He finished his plate and heaped a second helping onto it.

Dende nodded. “In return for my filling the office of Earth’s Guardian and creating the Dragon Balls, I was to be able to be with you. Son Goku agreed to those terms, and he said that you all would take good care of me.”

Gohan halted his eating. “And you’re sure that’s what happened?”

“Why, I believe so,” Dende said innocently. “It was not so succinct and eloquent as all of that, but that was what it boiled down to, yes.”

Gohan downed his second glass of wine. Dende poured him another one. “Um, thanks,” he said, and fidgeted before continuing to work on his plate.

“Why are you so nervous, my lover?” Dende asked.

Gohan’s food almost escaped his mouth. Instead, he swallowed abruptly, and then moved to finish yet another glass of wine. “Dende, what, uh, what exactly does that word mean to you?”

Dende laughed at the question. “Why, it means you are someone who loves me, and I am someone who loves you.” Come to think of it, this was not the first time Gohan had implied to Dende that they were not lovers. He blinked. “Rather, am I wrong in my declaration? Do you not love me?”

“What?! No! I mean, yes! Yes, I do!” Gohan floundered and almost flipped the table over when he grabbed at the top. “I do love you! I love you very much!”

Dende beamed. He could not have held it back even if he had tried.

Gohan watched the Guardian’s face and swallowed again. “I do,” he reiterated, “it’s just that, see, a lover is, um,” he reached for his glass. “A lover implies someone you regularly engage in intercourse with.” He spat the words out quietly and like rapid fire, and then took a drink. A light flush had entered his face.
Dende decided to encourage the color. “Intercourse? That is many things, Gohan. What we are doing right now constitutes intercourse.” Dende had some more water.

“*Sexual intercourse*, Dende!” Gohan begrudgingly specified.

Dende smiled, both at Gohan’s expression and in comprehension. “Oh, I see.” He cocked his head. “Then, would you like to become lovers?”

Gohan opted to finish another serving of wine followed by his plate of food rather than answer. He busied himself fixing and consuming more of both, next.

“You know, any time you desire is fine if you would like to try,” the Guardian added.

Gohan's reply was to shovel more food into his mouth and take yet another drink, but his neck was changing color along with his face, now. “Why don’t you have some of this, too, Dende?” Gohan tried to dodge the topic.

The Guardian took the opening as best as he was able. “Oh, no thank you. I might, if rice were, um, if rice were on the table and, um, begging me to eat it?” It came out clumsily, but Dende was proud of himself for stringing it together at all.

Gohan lifted his plate up to his face as if he were trying to hide his voracious appetite.

It was working. Dende could sense how flustered his sweetheart was even without the obvious tells. “Perhaps there might be some for dessert?” The Guardian asked, leaning forward.

Gohan finished his dinner and had more wine. He was through three-fourths of the bottle, now.

“Say, does rice enjoys being inside someone’s mou-”

Somehow, Gohan found it within himself to glare even though his face looked like it might overheat. Dende was surprised at how forward and forceful his aura suddenly was. “If you don’t stop teasing me, we’re both gonna find out before we should be tryin’ to find that out,” Gohan warned.


The boy’s neck returned to its normal color, but Dende noticed that his cheeks did not completely wash out their scarlet stain. Something was different.

“So, as I was saying,” Gohan was a little more animated than usual, “I think my dad set us up. What you just described is more or less an arranged marriage.”

“Oh,” said Dende.

Gohan nodded. “Yep. But, you know, maybe it was an accident. Maybe dad didn’t think of it that way. Or, if he did, maybe he didn’t realize he had done it until after the fact.” The boy did not seem so nervous anymore, and took another drink from his cup. “My dad is not exactly the sharpest knife in the shed when it comes to certain things.” Gohan blinked. “In the drawer. My dad is not the sharpest tool in the drawer.”

Dende found it wise to not mention that Gohan failed to successfully correct himself.

His sweetheart figured it out on his own. “That didn’t come out right, did it?” He eyed his wine glass. “Oh, well,” he said, grinning, and gulped down the rest. “Anyway,” he moved his plate over and leaned on the table while he poured himself more to drink, “the other possibility is that my dad
totally knew what he was doing and took advantage of the fact that y'all don’t do things the way we do here and thought he’d just hold out on his end of the deal, or maybe he made a loophole for himself.” Gohan had a hint of his mother’s accent creeping in. “Y’all didn’t sign anything, did you?”

Dende shook his head and watched Gohan carefully. He was so relaxed. “No, we did not.”

“So it was entirely on good faith that what Moori said you’d do and what my daddy said would come to fruition?”

“Of course,” Dende said. “Your father stopped Frieza, and he held no bad intentions within himself. It was natural we trust his word.”

“Yeah,” Gohan said, laughing, “don’t make a habit of doing that. Don’t make a habit of makin’ deals with him, either.”

“I am sorry?”

Gohan sighed and stuck out a finger for each of his examples, “So he promised King Kai he’d stay dead, and that didn’t happen. He promised my mama he’d marry her, and that almost didn’t happen ‘cause he didn’t know what he agreed to. He promised that Old guy Kai that he’d get a kiss,” Gohan made a face, “from people who were not his to use to make deals with, and then didn’t deliver that, neither. He promised to visit Bulma a lot, but he ain’t done it once since we got back, and I don’t think he ever will of his own accord, frankly.” Gohan blinked. “He promises lots of things, but he’s careless about following through. Usually it’s because he plumb forgot or didn’t understand, but, well, not always. Either way, he puts little importance on that kind of stuff. He does what he likes, and that’s a fact.”

Dende cocked his head. “I don’t understand what you are getting at.”

Gohan rubbed the back of his neck and then sauntered out of his chair and over to Dende’s, glass in hand. “What I mean to tell you is, Dende, I think- an’ I don’t know for sure, but I think- that my daddy tried to swindle you, one way or the other. How well he succeeded, I can’t say right now.”

Dende felt very short as he looked up from his perch and into Gohan’s face. “How so?”

Gohan exhaled. He took another sip of wine, eyed the glass, and then set it down on the table. His cheerful, casual demeanor subdued itself. “It sounds like my daddy set it up to sound to y’all like I would marry you, and you’d live with us. He’d never told you that the Guardian lived exclusively on the Lookout, did he? Did he even tell you anything about being a Guardian, other than the Dragon Balls bit?”

“No.” Piccolo's earlier words to Dende contrasted sharply with what the Guardian had expected the demands of the job to be based on Son Goku’s vague description, though. “We assumed, or, I assumed, rather, that the role would not be unlike that of Guru or Moori, since they are the closest equivalents we have. Both lived among others and walked the Earth until they were unable, but even then, they were closely connected to their kin in some form or another.” Dende shook his head. “Their roles were nothing like the reality of the isolation of dwelling here on the Lookout.”

Gohan leaned over to give Dende a kiss to the top of the head. “I thought so.”

The Guardian wrapped his arms around Gohan’s neck to keep him from leaving.

The boy moved in for a deeper kiss from Dende’s lips. He tasted like the fragrance of the wine in the bottle. “You know who was gonna be Guardian if you didn’t appear? You know who was trained for it and the logical successor unless someone more qualified came along? The only person with the
authority to appoint a new Guardian?” Gohan shook his head and laughed. “‘Cause once Kami fused with Piccolo, it wasn’t him anymore.”

“I do not,” the Guardian said. He had assumed Piccolo would have had the final say should he find Dende unsuitable, and had no second guess.

“The person you spared from becoming Guardian was none other than Son Goku himself, the guy who tried to find your private parts three weeks ago.” Gohan kissed Dende again. “So on his behalf, I thank you, and also on his behalf, I apologize that you were signed up for something you did not totally understand, and without being guaranteed what you came for.”

Dende was quite unsure what to say. He held Gohan tighter. “Why are you telling me all of this?” The Guardian’s eyes grew wide. “Are you leaving?”

“No, no, nothin’ like that.” Gohan gave Dende a few more kisses. “You can sense intent, so don’t get so jumpy when you don’t have to,” the boy gently chastised with a smile. He put his forehead against Dende’s and closed his eyes.

Gohan’s mind felt sluggish- it seemed to Dende like he was receiving his sweetheart’s thoughts through a filter that distorted them like a fish-eye lens did to an image. Still, the clumsy feeling was soothing and friendly. “I just thought I ought to work out the mystery and tell you,” Gohan said. “You need to know these kinds of things before you make the decision if you really want me or not.”

Dende pressed himself to Gohan’s chest. He had much to think about. “But, since I came here for you,” the Guardian started slowly, “and you know about all of this, are you mine now? Does this not mean that your father’s promise came true, and the misunderstandings are irrelevant?”

“Maybe, and maybe not.” Gohan tugged on Dende’s arms as he stood up. “Come sit with me over here,” he said, leading Dende to the bed. “It’s getting tiring kneeling and leaning all the time.”

Dende obliged and felt admittedly reassured when Gohan enveloped him in his arms once again and collapsed to bring both of them down onto the embroidered comforter.

Gohan whispered into Dende’s ear. “All of that depends on how you think ‘bout it. My mama tells the story of she and dad’s marriage all of the time, yanno, and even though she thinks it’s the most romantic thing in the world, lots of people don’t see it that way.” Dende’s sweetheart cuddled the Guardian and pulled him closer. “I just want you to be aware. I don’t wanna surprise you about the way some things work, especially when it comes to me and my family. I don’t wanna keep secrets.” He kissed Dende with a smile on his face, and then buried his nose in search of the scent of the skin on top of the Guardian’s head. “I love you.”

Dende traced the seams and buckles on Gohan’s black vest. The boy had come straight from school and had not changed out of it. The Guardian opened it. “I love you, too. Very much.”

Gohan stroked Dende’s back and reached down for more kisses. “That makes me happy,” he said. Dende carefully pulled Gohan’s shirt out from his belt and moved his hands to stroke Gohan’s bare abdomen.

“Mmm,” Dende’s sweetheart answered, and his fingers pulled up the hem of his robe and gently wrapped themselves above Dende’s knee. Gohan stroked Dende’s outer thigh with his thumb.

The Guardian took the encouragement and nodded to himself. He pushed both Gohan’s shirt and undershirt up to his chest and to his arms. The boy took the hint and helped Dende pull them off of his torso the rest of the way.
Dende knew that he was supposed to stimulate Gohan to make him receptive to sexual intercourse… somehow, according to the books he had read, and that less clothing would make his attempts more successful. The Guardian began to gently pet Gohan’s upper body and explore it with his fingers.

Dende had seen Gohan naked as a child, and he had bathed with him as he was now, too, but he had never taken the time to trace over the boy’s anatomy or pay any special attention to it at all before today. It was fascinating, though, for Dende to understand more completely how different- or similar- Gohan’s body’s structure was to a warrior Namek’s.

Gohan’s hands travelled to Dende’s hips and brought them close to the boy’s own. “That feels nice,” he said lightly.

Dende happily continued making trails across Gohan’s muscles and started to kiss the ones on his shoulders and chest- first his arms, then his collarbone, and then the hollow between both of his pectorals.

Gohan sighed and squeezed Dende’s hips while the Guardian tickled the boy’s neck with kisses next. “I like this, but I think I might’ve had too much to drink to let it keep goin’ on,” he said. “I might do something I shouldn’t.

Dende frowned and kissed Gohan’s face instead while he searched his sweetheart’s chest with his hands. Dende drifted over one of Gohan’s sensitive nipples. When the boy gasped, the Guardian reached down and kissed it. He did the same to the other one. The Guardian used his tongue for those, too.

Gohan gently pried Dende off of him. The Guardian noticed that his face had more color than the alcohol alone had given it. “Oh, I think that’s enough,” Gohan whispered. Dende could tell that he did not want it to be over. “I love you,” Gohan added, giving Dende’s hips and thighs another squeeze and stroke before smoothing down the fabric of his robe over them. Then, he put his strong hands on the base of Dende’s back.

“If you enjoy this, why are you stopping me?” Dende asked, dragging two fingers down Gohan’s ribs and then letting them find the skin just under his belt.

“It’s not the right time,” Gohan said simply, and moved Dende’s hand away from his waist. He intertwined their fingers so the Guardian could not escape.

Dende kissed Gohan’s neck a few more times. The boy craned his head down and stopped Dende’s mouth with his own. “No, no,” Gohan singsonged with a chuckle. “No, no, no.” He kissed Dende harder after every word.

The Guardian gently freed his hand from Gohan’s grip and rolled the boy over. Then, Dende moved onto his chest to corner him against the headboard of the bed. ”Be honest with me, please. Are you acting this way because you do not want this kind of intimacy from me, or is it because you are afraid of how I might feel about it?”


That answer was not useful in the slightest.

“Please do not dodge the question, Gohan,” Dende said.

“You’re so cute,” Gohan said, and played with Dende’s ears. “And I love you. So don’t worry!
Don’t worry.” He pressed Dende against himself and gave him more affection. “Trust me, okay?”

“Are you too drunk to answer me or are you deliberately being difficult?”

Gohan smile slowly dropped off of his face. “Don’t say that,” he said as he fiddled with the fabric of Dende's robe. “It’s already difficult. And I don’t wanna make it more difficult.”

“I do not understand.” It was not for a lack of trying on Dende’s part.

"You don't... You get nothin’ out of this," Gohan said, slowly, meeting the Guardian's eyes. "That's not fair. I can't ask you to do that." He looked down at the mattress. "...And I have no experience with any of this stuff, Dende. None."

Dende smiled. "Neither do I. But you can teach me, if this is something that will make you happy." He sat up and put his hands back on Gohan’s chest. "Would it make you happy?"

Gohan fingered Dende’s vest. “I love you,” he said.

Dende moved his sweetheart’s hands beneath the hem of his robe and bid them travel higher. “Is this or is this not something you want?” The Guardian asked again.

Gohan gripped the Guardian's hands instead, and leaned forward into Dende's space. "I... I don't know!" Gohan said, his voice a complicated combination of a shout and a whisper while his emotions screamed something the Guardian could only classify as some kind of hunger and frustration. ‘I'm always takin’ from you- you... You give me food, and clothes, an’, an’- you bend over backwards for me when I’m here, and ya always put up with me when I’m too much of an idiot to face you and say what I mean the first time. How can you ask me to take something like this from you, too?! How’m I s'posed to do that in good conscience?"

Dende smiled and pressed Gohan's hands to either side of his jaw and neck. "You are being very silly- I cannot understand why you seem to think you would even be taking anything. I am offering to do something for you for your pleasure. That is all."

"See?! You don' even understand what it is you are giving away!" Gohan stroked Dende's cheek with his thumbs and then pulled back.

Dende reclaimed Gohan's hands. "And do you see? You would not be taking anything, regardless. I am giving it to you!"

"S'mantics, Dende!"

The Guardian leaned forward and rested his forehead against Gohan's. It was a mess inside the boy's head- guilt mashed against smears of color and heightened sensory awareness fought with the dulled critical thinking of alcohol. There was also that one sensation Dende could only understand as static like hunger.

Dende countered by making his own mind focus only on the route his fingers travelled over Gohan's hands. Eventually, Gohan did the same and played with Dende's palms in answer.

Slowly, Gohan's heart rate returned to normal and his mind resembled itself a little more.

Dende chose his moment carefully. "You have lived most of your life giving pieces of yourself away because you felt like you had to," his soft voice cut through the room. "Not only did you do so because you were forced to protect your world and mine against certain death, but because you thought that it was the only way you deserved Piccolo's love, or to be worth anything at all to your
father and your friends. That was, unfortunately, one of the first things you learned as a child, and you acted accordingly even though you had no idea how dear of a price you were really being asked to pay." The Guardian smiled. "And you, you would do it again no matter how much anyone tried to tell you that you did not have to break yourself in order to be more than worthy to so much as breathe the air around you."

Dende knew these things. He knew Gohan's heart. As Guardian, it was his duty. As Dende, was is his greatest privilege.

"I have asked nothing from you except your time, and so I also give you mine. But I also want to give you my love. I asked you also to allow me to give you happiness- and the whole Earth I watch over if you decided you wanted it- in return for nothing, and you cannot accept it. You cannot even understand it. It goes against everything you have ever believed about your place in this world."

Gohan's expression was a mystery, but his thoughts were of Krillin's panicked face and Chi Chi's tear stained one, and then of Piccolo's insights twisted in Majin Buu's mouth. Tien Shinhan and Yamcha lay broken on the ground next. Vegeta sneered at Gohan from above and then scolded him from below, and Son Goku's impassive face watched over it all while wreathed in gold and against the backdrop of a white void. Echoes of fear, pain, and loathing slowly dyed it all red. "An’ you," Gohan said, "You wanna give me things you don't understand anything about. I don't know what that’ll do to you, and I am not gonna put you in that position." He sighed and cleanly kissed Dende. "Don't carelessly ask to give something away just 'cause you are too naïve to know what it's really worth." He kissed Dende again. "'M not so far gone that I don’t know what I’m talking about on this. Trust me, trust me."

Dende smiled and remembered Gohan in a pair of overalls and a bowl cut grown unruly- the child showed Dende some frogs as they finally emerged from the water for the very first time. "Your decision, you made when you were four years old- before I had even met you." He wrapped his arms around Gohan's neck and pulled their heads back together to show him the memory. "And, you know, I am not four years old." The boy’s breath was warm and sweet.

Gohan did not want to watch himself as a child. He pushed down Dende's collar and buried his face into his neck instead.

"I never even told you I loved you before today," Gohan whispered, putting his arms around Dende. "I hadn't even done that much for you."

Dende brushed Gohan's hair and stroked his back. "I had not, either," he said, and turned his face to smell Gohan's hair.

"Yes, you did," Gohan murmured, frustrated, and drawing out his words.

"Oh?"

"Not in… in… words," Gohan struggled with what vocabulary to use. “But the best that you could. You told me ‘fore you even knew. You put your heart in your hands and held it out to me b’fore," Gohan squeezed Dende tighter, "b'fore you even knew what it was you were tryin’ to give me." His fingers bit into Dende's white robe. "An’ I took it! I kissed you right then n’ there!"

"Gohan," Dende soothed. The boy's ki was rising, and his grip was potentially lethal.

"I stumbled in blind, like I always do, just like my father, and I took it without even thinkin’ about it!"
"And how wonderful for me that you did," Dende tried. "Gohan, it makes me so happy that you let me bestow any kind of affection on you, and that you did to me, too, and I--"

Unintended pieces were clicking together in Gohan's head. "Mom, she always told me that I shouldn't do anything to put the person I love in that same kinda position as dad did to her!" He pressed himself more completely into Dende's neck. "But I did it anyway, an' after he tricked you!"

Dende successfully coaxed Gohan into prying his hands away from the Guardian's sides. "I do not think Son Goku meant to trick me. And both situations have worked out for the best. It is done now, and all is well." Dende lifted the boy's face from his neck and cradled his head in his hands. "Right? You came back, and I did not even need to chase you for three years." Dende knew very well the stories of Gohan's parents and of Bulma Briefs and Vegeta.

"Yeah, 'cause you waited here for seven," Gohan answered.

"Please do not look so sad. That was my choice and my trial, not yours, and it has passed." Dende kissed Gohan. "You are here with me now. Will you not smile for me about that?"

Dende distinctly remembered how Gohan's sincere optimism and welcoming smile would bloom amidst bouts of his frowns and tension as they discussed genocide within the walls of Bulma's odd capsule house on Namek, and how Gohan had managed to dredge up cheer even on the day his father had died. Those were two of Dende's most vivid memories- Gohan's dichotomy of sorrow and sunshine.

Now, the boy showed both on his face at once. The drink made everything in Gohan the greater version of itself.

"Oh, no," Dende panicked and hugged Gohan's head to his chest. "I am sorry," he said. "I had been trying to make you happy, but all I have done is make you cry." Dende felt Gohan's arms wrap around him again and pull him close, but his grip was not so suffocating this time.

Dende stroked his hair and neck.

Gohan pushed his face in deeper.

"This is my fault for bringing such a thing up," the Guardian said. "Please forgive me."

After a moment, Gohan shook his head against Dende's chest. "No. 'Snot your fault."

Dende looked down at him.

Gohan's voice was muffled from the fabric of the robe. "You can't blame yourself over somethin' like this when ya choose ta love a huge crybaby."

Dende blinked.

"I'm the crybaby prince," Gohan reiterated, his mood lightening.

"But," Dende had heard Piccolo use similar nicknames before, under his breath. It had always struck the Guardian as a misnomer. "This is... I have only seen you cry a handful of times, and you are not yourself."

Gohan had the grace to laugh and popped up from Dende's torso, all smiles. "I like ta let Piccolo think he beat it outta me when he first trained me, but b'lieve me when I tell ya that's actually an im-poss-i-ble task." He grinned wryly and sniffled terrifically. "I'll cry whenever it suits me. You won't
Dende started. "Oh! I should get you a tissue. Um," he looked around. There was nothing in the room besides the bed. "Use, uh... use... use my robe."

Gohan looked up. "What?"

"I am not about to leave you at the tail end of emotional turmoil just to go get you a piece of tissue paper. Use my robe. It is the least I can offer you."

Gohan rubbed the fabric between his fingers. "You sure?"

Dende nodded and presented his sleeve.

Gohan did not notice it. He grabbed Dende's thick collar and blew into it instead before either of them could think twice about it.

Dende could feel the wet snot rub against him through the fabric.

"...I had meant for you to use my sleeve," the Guardian managed, his arm still frozen in midair.

Gohan stared between Dende's arm and neck. "Oh," he said. "'M sorry!"

Dende stiffly pushed Gohan away, undid his belt, and peeled his whole robe, vest and all, off of himself. He then tossed it on the floor away from the bed. "You are going to single-handedly dirty all of my clothes," Dende said, rubbing the latent feeling of unwelcome moisture off of his neck.

"'M so sorry!" Gohan said. "I just thought-- I wann’t thinkin’!" He slapped his hands together over his head in apology and tried to bow, which only resulted in his face falling back into Dende’s neck. “Please forgive me!”

The Guardian laughed and pulled Gohan closer. "All is well."

Gohan babbled the crassest words he knew into the base of Dende's neck. They were impressively inappropriate by Son standards.

Dende laughed again and made circles on Gohan's back while Gohan reached to do the same.

Eventually, the boy stopped what he was doing and patted Dende's exposed shoulders a few times like he could not believe what was under his hands. "You're naked," Gohan realized.

"Yes," Dende said, unsure where Gohan was going with this. Nameks wore clothing to help regulate how much sun they would absorb. Otherwise, such a thing was entirely unnecessary- their skin was much thicker and stronger than that of a human and could easily weather the other elements.

"I've never seen you naked before, and I've never seen Picc’lo totally naked before," Gohan said, moving to look at Dende more completely. "You look like ya still have clothes on."

"To you, I suppose it would," Dende said. "I might as well. I am hairless, green and pink, and have no external sexual organs of any kind."

"Huh," Gohan said, and grinned. "Neat!" He moved his hands over the softer, pink part of Dende's stomach and traced the striations on his exposed arms.

Nameks did not have any reason to explore each others' bodies. This was all very new. Dende wondered if that was why he suddenly felt so embarrassed- it was not an unpleasant feeling, but it
perplexed him all the same.

Gohan continued to innocently pet and prod with a fascinated smile on his face. Slowly, though, it fell away and his face heated up.

The boy moved away and thrust the sheets of the bed over Dende. "I-I'm sorry," he said. "That wasn't nice."

Dende wrapped the sheets around himself. "It was not?" He asked.

"I shoula not'v started touching you so, uh, s-so, uh, intimately without your, um, your permission."

Dende looked down at himself. "I am the one who took off my clothing and brought you in close. And I hardly see how what you were doing was in any way unsavory." He looked back to Gohan. "It was odd, but I did not feel I was being compromised in any way."

"It was odd," Gohan repeated the Guardian's words to himself. "It was odd and I didn't understand what you're gettin' at," he simplified.

Dende frowned. "That is not what I said, and not what I meant."

Gohan raised his eyebrows.

"I can sense people's intentions, Gohan. You know that. You were curious, and you meant absolutely no ill will. That is all there was to it."

"But usually people don't touch each other like that unless..." Gohan turned red. "And earlier, I was..."

Dende shook his head. "Just now, that was not even your intention. I cannot tell what lust is, but I can tell what it is not. And even so, I have been trying to engage you in such a way to make you happy. So, had it been the other, I still see no problem."

"You said it's odd."

"Odd is not bad."

Gohan scratched the back of his head.

Dende scooted over to him and wrapped the sheet around them both. "You were smiling. And you were open. Now, you are frowning and guarded. I do not like that. Please try again." The Guardian pulled Gohan's hands to his face and kissed the boy's palms.

Gohan turned pink again.

"Does my touch make you uncomfortable?" Dende challenged. "Or do you not want to touch someone like me?"

"Don't start that again!" Gohan said. "An' you can read my mind, Dende. There shouldn't be no reason for you to not understand what I am tryin' ta get at."

"I try and make it a point to not pry into too deep into minds without permission," Dende said, sending a gentle reminder to Piccolo to follow Dende's example and stop peeking at his and Gohan's business from the other side of the door. Piccolo's energy was suppressed, but his unsettled psychic waves gave him away. He had found them out. "Besides, sometimes the best way to solve a problem
is to admit it yourself, first. You cannot do that if I am always interpreting your mind."

Gohan exhaled and thought about how to start. "Alright, well, anyway, I shoulda asked b'fore I did that," he asserted.

"You are allowed anytime," Dende clarified.

Gohan winced. "An’ that's the other thing, though. See, I’ve never really thought about what I find... attractive or un’ttractive... in anyone… or anythin’ else," he said. "Videl, this one time, asked me ‘bout short or long hair, and that's what really made me realize that I don' really notice, um, stuff like, uh, like that. So," he sucked in another breath. "Well, see, and also, yanno, the thing is, all I have ta go on about what I oughta do in this kind of situation is from my parents. Mama said not to touch others before marriage. But um, we ain’t technic’llly, officially…” he cleared his throat. “I thought I was gonna marry the first girl that came along an’ even liked me at all even though I can,” he transformed to gold in front of Dende’s very eyes.

Dende’s relief was visible when Gohan immediately returned to his normal self. A drunken, glowing juggernaut sounded decidedly like a horrible idea.

Gohan moved Dende higher on his lap. “Anyway, I kinda assumed I’d just marry a girl and it’d be a done deal, but then I decided I didn’t wanna.” He smiled and kissed Dende. “Hey, hey, thank you,” Gohan said.

“Thank… me? For what?” Dende asked.

“I love you, an’ I didn’t know it, but you waited, and you know about me, and you love me, an’ you told me, and now I can love you!” Gohan was making less and less sense as time went on, but Dende could still get the picture.

“Falling in love with you is not something you need thank me for, Gohan. It was more my pleasure than-”

Gohan cut him off with a kiss, and then lingered in Dende’s face. “But, well, I dunno if we'll even get married, you know? Inna way more legitimate than what my daddy did. I dunno if we even can. And I dunno if, um, if... if that's bad or good? Do... do you even, uh, wanna get married?"

"Hm." Dende dodged the question, but he knew the answer was yes, if it was to Gohan. Dende had tried to do as much once before, apparently. "Well, did Son Goku have anything to say about it all?"

"Daddy said, "I don't got a clue whatcha oughta do! Follow your heart n' be yourself and it'll all be great!" An’ that was it."

"Uh," said Dende, "I see. So, then, I believe..." He fiddled with Gohan’s hands. "What do you think, Gohan?"

Gohan turned the color of Dende’s discarded vest. "I think my mama's upset that I h’ain’t gotten her like mebbe twelve grandchildren by now."

The boy had been joking, but Dende had been around Son Chi Chi long enough to know that he was not exactly wrong. "Besides that."

"I think," Gohan said, "that I," he stalled, "dunno what's right or wrong here."

"Ah," said Dende, who was only of the opinion that he wanted to stay close to Gohan and make him happy.
"It's kinda like martial arts versus studyin’. Neither are bad, per se, but just suit very different kindsa people. Neither one is intrinsically good, though, either. It's all in what you do surroundin' the circumstances of your choice that... that determines that kinda stuff." Gohan blinked. "D’you want any wine? I think I want more."

Dende held him down. “I think you have had quite enough.”

Gohan held Dende’s hands from where they lay on his chest. “Okay,” he said amicably.

Dende had to crack a smile at how easy that was. "So, then, my scholar, is that the other source of your hesitation? Does this mean you have chosen to adhere to your mother's wisdom about intimacy?"

Gohan considered Dende, and then he smiled. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" The Guardian mused as Gohan put his arms around Dende and brought him closer.

"Yeah. Maybe." Gohan's expression came as close to wicked as it could. "After I do what my father says first."

Chapter End Notes

Drunken Gohan- and his attitude towards wine- is based on his personality and attitude towards it all as portrayed in Battle of Gods and the fact that using the drunk cliche is no fun without messing with someone's speech gradually.

I have started a Dende/Gohan tumblr, also. It's named for this story but has other related stuff in its queue. Feel free to submit stuff/content or ask questions or give crack prompts/role play with me there. (But be patient with me because I am still learning to use le Tumblr, especially the mobile version.)

It's ivory-tower-dbz and the tag for the story is "IvoryTowerfic". :)}
The morning sun had long since begun to peek into the bedroom in the base of the Lookout and shine onto Gohan’s sleeping face.

The wine had made the boy drowsy and he had fallen asleep while trying to drunkenly explain to Dende the difference between a Saiyan and a vegetable. Dende had not thought that the two things needed their dissimilarities elaborated upon, but apparently, the Guardian had been falsely informed. His sweetheart’s explanation revealed unto him the grounds for confusion between the two more so that explaining their individualities, even.

Dende drew his hand across Gohan’s forehead and moved his hair away from it. Despite his muscles, the boy looked innocent and soft with his eyes closed and his slow, even breaths occasionally carrying a little noise or a few stray words from his dreams.

Dende had been trapped in Gohan’s arms for the entire night, but honestly did not mind in the slightest. He had gotten to peek at his sweetheart’s dreams and make sure they were gentle ones-tampering with the subconscious was normally a dangerous business, but gently nudging it in a particular direction could not hurt. Dende put his forehead to Gohan’s and checked on him.

Right now, Gohan was dreaming that he went to a school for dinosaurs. Each grade was named for a different period in time rather than numbered- Cretaceous, Jurassic, Triassic...

Dende planted his head between Gohan’s face and shoulder and conjured up images of the Earth below and how its day was progressing. No new developments caught the Guardian’s eye, and it was just as well. The smell of Gohan’s skin and the sounds his body made were of much greater interest to Dende in that moment. He kissed Gohan’s rounded ears and along his jaw. The boy sighed and adjusted his arms around Dende.

“You are very affectionate, indeed,” the Guardian said as Gohan nestled into the crook of Dende’s neck.

“Saurischia Sauropodamorpha Sauropoda Diplodocidae Diplodocinae Diplodocus Iongus,” Gohan murmured back.

Dende laughed and started to whisper to Gohan in his home language. “You make me very happy, sleeping one. That I could stay like this forever would be wonderful.”

Gohan answered with words about Tyrannosaurus Rexes and rolled on top of Dende.

“Oh, dear,” Dende laughed. “It seems I must stay here forever. You have trapped me.” He buried his
nose and his hands into Gohan’s hair.

Mister Popo and Piccolo both swept into the room.

Dende sent a psychic greeting to both, but otherwise kept his attention on the boy lying on top of him.

Mister Popo winked and began to clear away the dishes from last night’s dinner. Dende felt a little selfish and ungrateful for not helping, but the genie shook his head vigorously when the Guardian tried to wriggle out of Gohan’s hold and offer assistance.

Piccolo, on the other hand, glided over to the bed and scrutinized both Guardian and boy.

“Why are you not wearing clothes?” Piccolo demanded.

Dende moved a finger from where it rested on Gohan’s back and held it to his lips. *My love sleeps,* Dende reminded him noiselessly.

Piccolo could care less. “Why are you not wearing clothes?” His voice was louder this time.

*Mine became dirty after dinner,* Dende informed Piccolo, pointing to where his discarded robe lay on the ground. *There is bodily fluid all over the collar, and so it is unclean.*

Piccolo’s eyes grew huge. “What?!” He roared, and ripped the sheets from the bed.

Gohan whimpered and held Dende tighter from the sudden change in temperature, but only a few sleepy words chastised Piccolo.

Dende wrapped his arms around Gohan again to keep him warm and soothed. *Why are you doing this? Please let him sleep,* the Guardian told Piccolo, and put his forehead to Gohan’s to encourage him to keep resting.

Piccolo aimed a glowing hand at Gohan’s bare torso, but Mister Popo hurried over and swatted it away.

“No,” the genie scolded quietly. “Son Gohan is sleeping. Clothing is constricting, and what he chooses to not wear in bed is none of your business!” He thrust upon Piccolo a stack of plates. “Help Popo with dishes, and then I will make breakfast.” Mister Popo repositioned the blankets over Gohan and plodded out the door.

Piccolo scowled at the whole situation while Dende blinked at him from beneath where Gohan softly snored.

“Bah,” the huge warrior said, and made a production of whirling around and leaving in a huff. Mister Popo closed the door behind him.

“Our mentor is displeased,” Dende told Gohan fondly. The Guardian, on the other hand, could not be happier.

“Mmm,” Gohan drawled. He shifted and rubbed his hands up and down Dende’s back.

Dende did the same to him. “Do you like this?” He kissed Gohan’s face a few times.

The boy mouthed some gibberish and held the Guardian tighter. Dende chuckled and tickled the boy’s throat with his lips.

Something moved against Dende’s lower body.

It seemed to be something in Gohan’s pants.

“Oh,” Dende said to himself, and thoughtlessly turned his attention back to touching his favorite person. The place in Gohan’s pants grew more insistent on earning attention, and so Dende curiously reached down.

Gohan woke up.

“Good morning,” greeted Dende with a kiss. Gohan’s breath reeked of drowsiness, but Dende could care less.

“Mm. Morning,” Gohan said lazily. He mashed his nose into Dende’s chest and inhaled.

Meanwhile, Dende found what was pressing against his thigh and touched it through Gohan’s pants experimentally. It was probably not good for it to expand so much when it was stuck between not only Dende but the rest of Gohan. The Guardian gently prodded it to the side.

“Ah! Mmmm,” Gohan crooned and closed his eyes. “Oh.”

They shot back open a moment later.

“What are you doing?!” Gohan snatched up Dende’s hands and held them out to rest on the mattress near their sides.

The Guardian was bewildered. “I thought that you might hurt yourself pushing that against me, and so I thought to move it,” Dende said.

“Pushing it against you? What-” Gohan’s manic stare turned mortified. “Oh,” he said, swallowing, and turning that color that Dende liked so well. “I should, um, not, uh,” he picked himself up off of Dende with his arms.

Dende pulled him back down. Gohan let him.

“Dende, I’m so sorry,” the boy said.

“You are so very nervous,” Dende said. “Do not be. I apologize for making you uncomfortable. I had not intended on handling you in such a way. Although,” the Guardian cocked his head, “you did sound like you were enjoying that kind of attention.”

Gohan hid his face.

“Your mood felt not unlike it did last night, when I first removed your shirt.”

“Dende,” Gohan complained.

"But you do enjoy feeling that way, correct?" Dende checked.

The boy stuck his nose in the center of Dende’s collarbones.

The Guardian gently coaxed him back out. “Please answer me. I need to understand these things.”

Gohan looked down and to the side like someone caught doing something wrong. "Yes, I do."
Dende had known Gohan long enough to tell when he was keeping a secret rather than outright lying. "That is not all. What is it you are not telling me?"

Gohan did not answer- he started to play with Dende's long, pointed ears and then sent his fingers to stroke the back of the Guardian's neck and trail down his spine. Soon, he rolled over so that Dende was on top of his chest and then rubbed his fingers into the Guardian's back while he kissed the underside of Dende's jaw.

This was nice. Dende sighed and closed his eyes.

"I want to make you feel good, too," Gohan murmured. "It isn't fair for you to do so many things for me all of the time, especially since some of them are ones that I know I can't do for you in kind."

Dende laid his head by Gohan’s. “Meaning?”

“You know. When, um, when we're in the bedroom, and you try and, um,” Gohan’s voice lowered. “I can’t make you, well, you know.” He gave Dende’s forehead a kiss. “The way you want to please me, I can't do for you.”

"We are in the bedroom now, and what you are doing currently pleases me very much." Dende nuzzled Gohan's ear, and the boy kneaded a little deeper as he worked on Dende's shoulders.

The Guardian hummed and contentedly listened to Gohan’s steadying pulse.

"Your muscles are so different," Gohan mused as he traveled in circles across Dende's back with his hands. “They're set up like mine, but they feel so odd under your skin when I press on them.”

Dende cast a finger across Gohan's breast and touched a nipple. "You have these strange things, and yet you think my body is odd," he teased as the boy tensed and glowed pink.

Suddenly, Gohan wrapped his arms around Dende and flipped them both over so that the boy was on top and the Namek on the bottom. "Oh, you think those are weird, huh?" He grinned and blew a puff of air into Dende's ear to get a rise out of him. The noise was not uncomfortable, but loud and strange, and the air tickled and made Dende curl up into Gohan. "Look at these ears!" Gohan nipped at the tip of the one he was playing with and kissed along the side of the cartilage.

"It would seem you are quite blind- consider your own," Dende said, and rubbed Gohan's left earlobe. "They are like those dried apricots. One might try and eat them."

Gohan argued back by flicking his tongue into Dende's ear, and the Guardian yelped in surprise. "What would possess you to do that?!" Dende’s disgust turned to amusement. “You are certainly the strange one!” He decided.

At that, Gohan laughed and kissed Dende on the jaw. "Oh yeah? Well, you're green."

"Why, yes. Indeed I am. My skin is like the soft, fresh new greens of spring," the Guardian sweetly mocked Gohan. "But your teeth- you have no fangs, and your tongue is red. Very bizarre.” Dende traced over all of those things with an open kiss.

Gohan then reached for another. "You taste like water and sugar," he breathily commented, and Dende’ answering line of banter was lost to an onslaught of Gohan's mouth on his.

"And you smell nice," Gohan added in a hush, pinning Dende down and kissing him breathless.
"Thank you for the compliments, Gohan, but I thought we were playing a differen-"

Gohan cut him off again with more kisses. "And I love you," he eventually whispered into Dende's mouth, and then his warm tongue followed.

Dende put his arms around Gohan's neck and stroked his hair. The Guardian wanted to tell Gohan the same, but the boy was not letting him get a word in edgewise. Dende stole a breath when he could and kissed back while Gohan sent his hands to touch Dende anywhere they could reach.

This was his sweetheart's way- when he was not being mild and kind, Gohan was, to put it lightly, a lot to handle, in every possible way.

Am I bothering you?

Dende jumped at the sudden voice in his head.

Soft, friendly laughter floated through next- it was distinctly Gohan's.

Dende pushed him away. "I forgot that you could do that!" The Guardian said.

"I'm not that great at it. Besides, I like to listen more than I like to speak," Gohan told him, and kissed right at the base of Dende's antennae. They jumped higher on the Guardian's forehead in surprise at the stimulus. "I don't even need special organs to do it, either. So when we were talking about what was weird about you earlier? These are definitely the weirdest thing!"

"Ah, it was only myself who is strange, is it? Because my antennae are not so frivolous as all this lovely hair," Dende scrubbed his hands through Gohan's dark spikes lovingly. "You are the strangest, not I."

"Hmph." Gohan gently licked where one of Dende's antennae began and ghosted kisses along the length of it until he reached the end.

Dende blanked at the direct contact to the most sensitive part of his body.

"You can't even argue, huh?" Gohan teased, and softly tweaked the ends of both.

Dende squeaked.

Gohan chuckled and set his fingertips loose to tickle Dende's sides. The Guardian found himself laughing before he could even defend himself, and so gripped Gohan's head and back for support.

The boy thrust his face to the crook of Dende's neck and forced air against it so that it made a noise like flatulence. That tickled, too.

“What are you doing?!” Dende cried between bouts of laughter as he received more of Gohan’s peculiar attentions. He squirmed and pushed against the boy, but Gohan did not relent. “Th-that is-!” He was already winded from Gohan’s kisses, and this was not helping matters any even though it was fun.

Finally, though, Gohan smoothed his hands out over Dende’s stomach and only let soft touches assault his neck and chest anymore.

The Guardian slowly caught his breath, and Gohan shifted to watch Dende as the violet flush faded from his cheeks. A few stray pieces of the boy’s hair fell softly above his dark eyes.

Then, Gohan kissed Dende one more time, long and hard. It was nice, the Guardian decided. The
whole ordeal was nice, from beginning to end.

Gohan pulled back, and then placed his forehead beneath Dende’s antennae. “The way you felt, when you were laughing,” Gohan said. “Imagine that, but stronger, and… and deeper, and that even though it makes it harder to breathe and it’s so strong you start moving away from it, you don’t ever want it to stop. Like it’s… like it’s fire you want to hold inside of you. It’s difficult, and you can’t do it for long, but you want to feed it and keep it there.” He conjured up more of those sensations that Dende could not understand, not really, but the accompanying affection was sharper and more defined. “Can you kind of imagine that?”

Dende held Gohan tighter. “I believe so.” He tried to mimic the sensation as best he could and send it back to Gohan’s mind.

“A little like that, sort of, but more. A lot more. Like it’s something that once you start feeling, you don’t want to stop until you really can’t take it anymore. That strong.” Gohan moved his forehead away and kissed Dende. “Now imagine that, but starting in one place.”

Dende touched where Gohan’s heart was and felt it beat beneath his palm. “Alright,” he said.

Gohan quirked his eyebrows, and then shook his head with a smile. “Of course that’s where you’d think of first,” he said, and kissed Dende again.

The Guardian blinked at him when they broke away. “The heart is an important part of the body and a powerful muscle, so it would be logical for an extreme stimulus to radiate from-” Dende was cut off by more of Gohan’s adoration.

“I wish,” Gohan said, “that sex could be as pure and as straightforward as you think it is. I wish that it could always be conducted between hearts.”

Dende realized that his sweetheart meant the concept, not the organ. The Guardian nodded. “So that is what you are trying to explain to me.”

Gohan nodded. “Yeah. But the sensation starts,” he reached down and tapped the place where Dende’s legs met, “here, but runs... inside. And then it moves up some, but everything is sensitive when it’s happening.” He wrapped his arms behind Dende’s back. “What I told you about my hesitations last night- what I remember telling you, anyway, was all true, but it’s not the only reason. Sexual desire, um. It’s... carnal,” he explained. “It’s not something you yourself crave. You don’t have those kinds of needs, so I know I can’t really share it with you, and that bothers me.”

The Guardian nodded back, slowly. “If I have neither need nor desire for it, why would you lament my inability?”

Gohan sighed. “Because it feels good. Because you go out of your way to make me feel good. Because I want to go out of my way to make you feel good, and I want to do that because I want to show you how much I love you, and for you to feel it.” He moved one of his hands out from behind Dende and scratched the back of his head with it. “For a lot of people, sex is as close as they can get to doing just that.” Gohan grinned. “I guess I just have a need to be loved, and to give love in return. That’s all. I’m just not sure you are totally prepared for how I might express it in that kind of format, though, since it’s not natural to you.”

Dende remembered the day that Gohan first brought him steamed rice. “Sex satisfies a need in a pleasurable way,” he said. “Like eating.”

Gohan laughed. “Well, yeah, that’s the way I wanted to explain it to you the first time, but you don’t
understand hunger. The whole eating-versus-lust business was a moot point to you.”

Dende frowned and watched Gohan’s eyes examine his face. “Come here,” Dende said, gently pulling on the back of Gohan’s head to bid him come closer.

Gohan moved where Dende lead him, and closed his eyes as the Guardian brought their foreheads together.

Dende remembered Gohan as a child first, of course, with a big smile and hair like either the blackest night or the brightest day, but concrete images like that were too simple. Dende recalled fear, of all things, a fear of death and the fear he felt towards both Krillin and Gohan himself when he first laid eyes on them, and the dawning hope that the boy had inspired in Dende with his smile and kind optimism. When that turned into what the Guardian felt for Gohan now, he could not say, but Dende showed Gohan a memory of wariness- dread, even, of an unknown named Son Goku appearing before his very eyes- and then relief and joy.

“That was the day Moori gave me away to your father with the intention that he would present me to you,” Dende whispered.

Gohan kept silent.

Dende continued his film of memories- how he had watched, apprehensive and teetering on the verge of heartbreak, as Gohan lost himself in rage over the death of Android Sixteen, and, in turn, almost lost his own life, too.

“For me, to know you is to know how dread and horror can miraculously turn to joy. To know you is to watch light be born from darkness. I believe in you and trust you explicitly, and through whatever comes, I will never not love you.”

Dende felt himself grow warm, suddenly. He let that filter into his thoughts and stopped focusing so much on images, though pictures of Gohan as he was now- eating off of Dende’s chopsticks, turning red beneath his thick hair, making silly faces as he recounted what happened to him at school that day, sighing and falling into Dende’s arms when he was spent- invariably poked through.

He held Gohan and sweetly ran his fingers over the boy’s scalp and back as he focused on how he felt about him, and nothing else.

Then, Gohan returned the sentiments. “Did you know,” he said as he enveloped Dende’s consciousness in warmth, “that you were the first person to ever tell me that you would let me go and follow my own path if it would make me happy?”

Dende was not sure what this had to do with anything. “No. No, I did not.”

Gohan moved in for a kiss. “That’s a really huge thing you did,” the boy breathed, and kissed Dende more. “You gave everything up to come be with me, and then you were ready to turn around and give me up just for my own happiness, despite the cost you’d paid.” He hummed and wrapped his tongue around Dende’s.

The Guardian did the same with his own, and ran his hands over Gohan’s chest and arms.

“Nobody else has ever done something quite like that for me. Nobody. Not my mom, not my dad, not Piccolo, nobody. Just you. Everyone else has tried to make me follow some kind of plan they have for me.” Gohan’s voice was quiet, and his fingers were gentle as they stroked Dende’s cheek and rubbed his ears and neck. “It’s rare I’m given such a gift as freedom.” He put his head against Dende’s long enough to give his message of adoration, and then stopped it to kiss him again.
“You’re special. You’re very important to me, Dende,” Gohan’s voice was quiet. “I love you. That’s a lot of why. But, all of those things are also the reason I’m so scared to let you do so many things for me. I want so much to make you happy, and to not scare you or ask too much.”

“There is no need for such caution.” Dende smiled. “I told you at the beginning, and I keep telling you. I even told you when you were drunk. I want for you to let me make you happy. That is what will give me the most pleasure.”

Gohan chastely pressed his lips to the Guardian’s and spoke so closely and so softly that each of his words almost acted as its own kiss. “Then let me do this,” he whispered. “Let me take my time. Let me make sure that you know how much I love you, and how much I mean it every time I say it to you. Let me teach you slow.”

Dende pulled Gohan’s head to him when his sweetheart’s tongue finally entered his mouth again.

“If that is what you wish,” Dende said.

Gohan smiled and kissed his sweetheart until they both ran out of breath, and then the boy kissed him even more after that, and then more after even that.

Chapter End Notes

You lucky suckers. I had most of these last parts already written so you are just getting to ROLL in the updates!

I hope you enjoy them! :)


When Piccolo Finds Out, You May As Well Be Dead Meat!

Chapter Summary

Two months have passed since last chapter.

...You noticed that the rating for this story went up, right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This is the word that is Piccolo’s name,” Dende said, drawing out a particular set of characters on the pages of Gohan’s notebook and moving his hand away so that the boy could see it over Dende’s shoulder.

The Guardian had been teaching Gohan the basics of his home language for a few weeks now and was surprised by how quickly the boy had managed to wrap his head around nearly everything presented to him. Of course, Dende’s sweetheart was brilliant, so this development should not have come as such a surprise. The Guardian smiled to himself and snuggled into the boy in question, who was sitting behind him.

They had moved on to the written alphabet rather than the spoken language today- Gohan had insisted that if Piccolo learn to read and write the language of Earth, his favorite student ought to make an effort to learn the language of Namek- but these were a few advanced words that the Dende thought Gohan might like to know early on.

“Oh,” Gohan said, wrapping his arms around Dende and peering down at Piccolo’s written name. “Ancient Namekian looks kind of like the doodles Goten makes in the margins of his paper when he gets bored from studying but mom won’t let him leave the desk.”

Dende grinned. “For all we know, it could be. Perhaps Goten has a hidden talent for alien languages.”

Gohan laughed. “Maybe. But somehow, I doubt that. Then again, you know, languages do tend to be written in pictures, so maybe doodles would be a good way to remember something like this.” He snagged a pencil from the arrangement of books and school supplies spread out on the bed and began to add more lines to Piccolo’s name. Soon, it looked like a crude representation of one of the caped protagonists from the comic books Gohan liked to bring up to the Lookout. “It’s a bird! It’s a plane! No, it’s Mister Piccolo!”

Dende nodded. “Indeed. He is faster than an accelerating projectile and more potent than a large vehicle. And he is, um,” he searched for the words, “able to clear large structures in a single jump.” The Guardian furrowed his eyebrows and wondered why that did not sound quite right.

“I can tell that you were trying to translate your memories of however it was you puzzled out the words into what they meant in Namekian, not the original language you read them off of the page in. But it was close enough.” Gohan peered down at Dende. “You still can’t actually speak this language without pulling the words from someone else’s mind, can you?”
The Guardian looked up at Gohan. “Come again?”

“Maybe “can’t” is the wrong word,” Gohan mused. “Maybe “don’t” is more accurate. But what I mean is, when you talk to me and you don’t know a word, you look into my head- at my existing vocabulary- to pick out the words with the meanings that correlate with what it is you want to say, right?”

“I do know how to speak the Common Speech well enough on my own, but yes, if such a situation should happen as I am speaking to you, Mister Popo, Krillin, or Piccolo, I might look into your mind because you would know what I am doing and would not feel violated by it. Why do you ask?”

Gohan patted Dende’s bald head. “No real reason. It’s just amazing to think about what it is you’ve got stored away up here.”

Dende blushed. He had been thinking the same thing about his sweetheart moments before.

Gohan gently kneaded his fingers into Dende’s scalp. “Say, do you ever wax this thing?”

“No, I do not.” Dende said, frowning in confusion. “Should I? Do you like waxed heads?”

Gohan shrugged. “I dunno. I just know that Master Roshi and Krillin both wax their heads, and I think Chiaotzu and Tien might? I wonder how Tien keeps it out of his eye if he does, or if he has some special kind that acts like a moisturizer for that third eye.”

Dende could see the wheels turning in Gohan’s head and so held his tongue.

“What’ll Tien do when he gets old and needs glasses? Will he just wear a normal pair and then a monocle on his third eye, or maybe some kind of three-lensed contraption?” Gohan reached his head down to use his lips and tongue to tickle Dende’s shoulder and neck between sentences. “Does Tien’s hair grow around his third eye, you think?”

“I should think so,” Dende said, chuckling as Gohan kissed him. “He has eyelashes. Surely he must even have an eyebrow correlating to that third eye, but shaves it. Perhaps this is why he chooses to stay hairless- because in the front of his head, he is bald except for such a third eyebrow and believes it to look unseemly.” Dende would never really know how to judge what was and was not ridiculous in terms of human appearances and standards, but he remembered how very alien Gohan had first appeared to him with his pale skin and full head of thick black hair. Perhaps Tien’s appearance in the eyes of the societies of Earth was comparable in terms of shock value.

“Maybe,” Gohan said, running his hands along Dende’s sides. “And maybe Tien Shinhan is actually a redhead or something and his third eyebrow doesn’t match the other two, or maybe it doesn’t match the hair that might grow from his head.” Gohan breathed in Dende’s scent and sighed. “I never really knew Tien and Chiaotzu all that well. They’re very reclusive. Maybe Yamcha would know the story?”

The two of them gazed at the ceiling of the canopy of the four-poster bed, and shrugged in tandem when they had pondered their fill of the topic. Gohan’s hands became friendlier as he focused his attention back on the Guardian.

Dende wrote out another character on the paper. “This is my name.”

Gohan nodded against the Guardian’s ear and nipped at it. “I suppose you couldn’t write mine since Namek doesn’t have rice and your people don’t eat meals of any kind, right?”

“Well,” Dende considered it, “no. We do not. But we do have a word for food in the context of
predators and their prey. It looks like this.” He scrawled out the Namekian characters for “dead meat”.

“Oh, cool!” Gohan said, sending a hand to caress Dende’s bare ankle and wander up his robe and to his knee. “Does it just mean “food”, or what?”

Dende grimaced. “In a manner of speaking, I suppose.” He wracked his brain for a better, more accurate word to use but was having trouble with the nuances of the concept. "Rice" was highly specific and all of the related words the Guardian could think of were too vague to make sense.

“It’s not something morbid, is it?” Gohan asked. “I really don’t want to one day introduce myself to Piccolo as practice and say something like, “Hello! I am Dead Meat!” And then not know why he is laughing at me.” Gohan kissed one of Dende’s ears and whispered into it. “It’s not “dead meat”, is it?”

“...Perhaps that is enough discussion about this topic for today!” Dende closed the notebook and put it on top of the pile of other textbooks Gohan had been using for his schoolwork earlier.

“Alright, alright.” The boy smiled and untangled himself from Dende long enough to gather up all of his educational debris and put it in the bag leaning against the bedframe. The Guardian lent him a hand. “Thanks,” Gohan said. Then, he climbed back onto the bed next to Dende and pulled him into an embrace. “So it really was “dead meat”, huh?”

“The night sky is very beautiful to behold,” Dende blurted out instead, flushing a deeper shade of purple and determined not to admit to Gohan that he absolutely had written his name as that very thing. “I am sure Piccolo is going to be enjoying the stars from wherever he is meditating on the surface.”

Gohan’s chuckle started deep in his chest. Dende leaned into the source of the noise and listened to how it mixed with the boy’s pulse. “I’m sure,” Gohan said, his voice a low croon, and lifted Dende’s chin for a kiss. “I’m very sure.”

Dende smiled and kissed Gohan again. Gohan replied with a deeper kiss and quickly pulled Dende closer.

The Guardian put his hands on Gohan’s chest in mild bewilderment at his aggressiveness, but happily let the boy part their lips further and further apart.

Gohan used his tongue to trace the planes of Dende's back teeth- but was definitely not thinking about how different they were from the set that Dende himself was familiarizing himself with. No, Gohan was too busy tracing the Guardian’s body from underneath his robe and searching the white fabric for an opening.

Dende did not need to be psychic to figure out that Gohan’s attention was not at all on how fascinatingly different the two of them were, but how they might be the same.

The Guardian chuckled as he broke his face away from Gohan's. "To think, it was you who accused me of being too forwa--"

Gohan cut him off with another long kiss, and then another.

Dende humored him a few minutes more before he again tried to tease Gohan with words and see if he could make the boy blush and laugh. "And are you still so sure that I am not your lo--"

Gohan silenced Dende with kisses once again and pulled him over so that the Guardian straddled
Gohan's lap with his knees. The boy had become progressively more insistent on giving him this kind of attention since the day he had blown his nose in Dende's collar. Usually, though, these sessions did not grow so intimate so quickly.

Dende shrugged to himself and ran his fingers through Gohan's hair- his sweetheart liked getting affection as much as giving it during these bursts, and Dende thought his hair was fascinating. After all, Dende would never have any on his own head, much like Tien Shinhan. This kind of touch was usually par for the course.

Today, though, it made Gohan very excitable. He swelled into Dende and let his hands wander to the Guardian's thighs before pulling Dende's legs out from under him so that he fell into Gohan's lap. Dende grabbed Gohan's head and neck in surprise. A noise rumbled forth from the back of Gohan's throat and he kissed Dende harder and faster.

The boy was serious.

Dende should probably stop playing, too.

The Guardian did his best to recall the charts of erogenous zones he had seen in several of the books he had read on the topic of intimacy, but Gohan's impatient advances made it difficult. Dende could not remember which ones were specific to which sex.

Well, trial and error would work just fine. Most of them were the same, anyway.

Dende unbuttoned the top of Gohan's collar and pushed one hand across his collarbones and around to the back of Gohan's neck. The fingers of his other hand drifted down over the exposed part of the boy's chest.

Gohan sighed between kisses and his grip lamented how modest Dende's robe was. He squeezed the Guardian's waist through it and tried to trace out his abdomen and chest beneath it, too.

Dende, meanwhile, had opened Gohan's shirt to the middle of his stomach and mimicked the boy's actions on his bare skin. Then, Gohan tugged at the robe again and Dende finally realized that he was trying to ask the Guardian a question.

"You can touch me, too, of course, if that is what you want," Dende said, separating himself from Gohan's mouth and pressing his nose to his warm neck. The Guardian could hear the blood accelerating in its journey through Gohan's body and smell his excitement.

Gohan found the hem of Dende's robe and forced it up around the Guardian's waist. When Dende's belt stopped his climb, Gohan growled and forced Dende out from the crook of his neck for another kiss while he unwrapped it.

Dende rubbed Gohan's chest gently and blindly until he found a nipple, and then focused his attention there. Gohan stiffened both in posture and then, as Dende continued to kiss him and play with him, between his legs.

Normally, Gohan did not let this part go on for very long. He would stop at the first signs of his arousal and pry himself away from his sweetheart's loving hands. Today, though, that was proving to be difficult for him.

Gohan finally stilled his fingers on Dende's exposed body and broke their kiss by a centimeter. "Maybe, um, maybe we should stop," he whispered. His face was flushed and his hands were still squeezing Dende's waist and grinding their hips together.
Dende looked knowingly at Gohan. "Is that really what you want?"

Gohan panted and stroked Dende's sides with his thumbs, but did not say anything.

Dende gave him a minute. "You know," he started, "I liked the food we ate at your house. I do not think I will ever crave it, but it was interesting."

Gohan pressed their foreheads together. "I told you. This is not quite the same kind of thing."

Dende tried his best to decode whatever sensation Gohan was feeling and differentiate it from what little he understood of hunger. He was unsuccessful.

"Maybe not to you," Dende said, and kissed him. "And, you know," the Guardian narrowed his eyes, "I like the taste of steamed rice."

Gohan turned a deeper shade of pink. The rice jokes always worked.

"You want me to know that you love me, yes?"

"Yes, absolutely," Gohan answered, punctuating his statement with another kiss. Dende’s adoring noises of surprise convinced him to make it last.

Then, Dende pulled apart from his sweetheart and held Gohan just far enough away to render him unable to interrupt again. “Do I know that you love me?”

Gohan moved one hand to hold Dende’s. “Huh? Why would…?” His face lined itself with concern. “You do, don’t you?”

The Guardian teased his sweetheart by softly kissing him and moving away each time Gohan tried to do the same in return. “Do I?” Dende echoed, sending the words into Gohan’s mouth to occupy his warm tongue in place of Dende’s own.

“Why are you asking me this, Dende?” Gohan stroked the Guardian’s cheek and tried to prompt him to hold his face where it was.

Dende defiantly took Gohan’s hand and guided it back to mirror its twin’s position on the Guardian’s waist. “Because I wish to know your answer,” Dende said, stealing another kiss while denying Gohan’s own attempts to take the same.

The boy’s whispers grew concerned, and his eyes searched Dende’s face from beneath furrowed brows. “Am I doing something wrong?”

“No, not at all. I only wish to know what you think. And this is a yes or no question that I am asking, and I am still awaiting your answer.”

When Gohan’s confused face began to obscure itself in shadows of self-doubt, Dende was sorely tempted to stop playing this game with his sweetheart’s head and kiss him until they were both dizzy, but that would solve very little. Instead, the Guardian pressed their foreheads together and ran his hands down the back of Gohan’s neck and the front of his exposed torso.

The Guardian thought about the past eight months and all the little things Gohan would do- how Gohan would bring books for the two to read together, how he would stay late, late into the night when he was not supposed to, how he would carry Dende in his arms whenever they went somewhere just because he wanted to, his sudden, short, extraneous visits on the days he was not scheduled to come and how he would give Dende a strong kiss and nothing else before he
immediately had to leave, the orchards and springs he would specifically search out and take Dende to see, the way he smiled at his sweetheart when he thought nobody- not even Dende- was watching him, and how sweetly his hands were tracing circles on Dende’s waist even now, and how badly Dende knew Gohan wanted to forego all of this and show Dende exactly how he felt right this instant.

“So,” the Guardian asked his sweetheart again as he moved his face away, “do I know that you love me?”

Gohan’s shy smile was adorable. He nodded and leaned in towards Dende with closed eyes. “Yes.”

Dende used his lips to toy with Gohan’s own, but still pulled himself just out of their reach as the boy tried to complete his end of the kiss. When Gohan’s next attempt to share his affection failed, too, he grew visibly upset.

“What’s still bothering you?” The boy asked Dende.

The Guardian smiled and spoke against his sweetheart’s lips. “I am not the one who is bothered,” he said, and slipped his tongue into Gohan’s mouth long enough to tempt the boy to try to do the same, but not long enough for him to succeed.

Gohan continued his pursuit anyway and managed to gently bite down on Dende’s lower lip. The Guardian pulled it away and then flattened both of his lips over his clenched teeth. Gohan’s response was to kiss on top of Dende’s sealed mouth and press his nose to the Guardian’s purpled cheek when that accomplished nothing.

“What is it?” Gohan whispered. “Why don’t you want me to kiss you anymore?”

Dende enticed Gohan again with a sudden intrusion from his tongue into the boy’s mouth and another quick denial of Gohan’s excited one.

“Hey,” Dende’s sweetheart said as his affection was again thrown to the wayside, “this isn’t fair.”

In answer, Dende repeated his act of one-sided intimacy and cut off Gohan’s attempts to reciprocate once more.

“Please talk to me,” Gohan finally pleaded. He looked almost heartbroken, and Dende decided that was enough.

“You give me all of your love that I could think to ask for, and more,” Dende said. “Yet you do not let me give you enough of mine to satisfy you. I try and give it to you, and you consistently insist on pushing me away.” He entered Gohan’s mouth again and then immediately left the boy wanting.

“Even if some of these things shall never please me, I can tell it would very much please you, and so, I feel denied. I am not allowed to even try to learn how to love you past this part even though I have known for some time that it is something you are now craving whenever we are around one another. It is obvious in everything you do.”

Gohan ran the pads of his fingers over Dende’s skin and looked anywhere but at his sweetheart.

Then, the Guardian moved his hands to Gohan’s shoulders and tilted his head to look into the boy’s dark eyes. "A yes, or a no. Do not tell me what you think that I would want. You have done that long enough. Tell me what you want. Studying, or martial arts."

"Ah, excellent! Something new for me to try." The Guardian pressed his lips to Gohan's reddened face and traced over his chest again. Dende accepted Gohan’s returning kiss and opened his mouth wider for his sweetheart to explore more thoroughly while he reignited his desire.

The boy slowly moved his hands back beneath Dende's robe so that he could push his fingers further up and across Dende's back and abdomen.

Dende unbuttoned more of Gohan's shirt and Gohan himself ripped the tail ends out of his pants.

"You do not like clothing?" Dende gasped out between heated kisses.

Gohan wordlessly shimmied Dende's robe higher up on his body. When it caught on the Guardian's arms, he worried it with his clenched fists. It tore.

Gohan looked down. "Oh."

Dende laughed at him. "I believe that is a no," he said. Gohan had a horrible track record when it came to apparel care, and was keeping true to form.

Gohan sheepishly tried to close the robe back together with his hands, and accidentally tore it from the shoulder seams, as well. Dende had noticed that he grew stronger the more excited he became- Gohan was not very accustomed to arousal and was thus not totally aware of what it could cause him to do.

"Do not worry yourself about that," Dende said, sliding the ruined clothes off of his center and arms and then resuming his original track across Gohan's torso.

Gohan regained his momentum for kisses and his hands sped up their own journey across Dende's body to keep an even pace with the Guardian’s.

Gohan seemed especially fond of Dende's waist, chest, abdomen, and upper leg. Soon, though, he moved his lips from Dende's to caress the Guardian's collar and shoulders, too.

It tickled. Dende grabbed Gohan's shoulder blade and nipple as he laughed, and the boy groaned.

Dende was not sure if that was a positive or negative sign, so he gently stroked both areas in apology and moved Gohan's face back up to kiss him on the mouth.

Gohan held Dende's mouth and clumsily guided the Guardian's hands to his belt. Dende took the hint and shifted himself across the stiffness in the boy's lap to unbuckle it, which made Gohan hiss. The Guardian scooted off of him in concern.

Gohan leaned over to kiss Dende again, harder, while he unzipped his pants himself- or, Gohan tried to unzip them, but he tore through the whole inseam and down through the crotch of the khaki by accident.

Concerned, Dende lit his hands with a healing light, but Gohan shook his head and pushed his pants down off of himself. Then, he threw them out of his way.

Dende knew what was underneath Gohan's stretched underwear. Rather, he had seen illustrations of it and read about its functions. There were even a handful of creatures on Namek that reproduced sexually, so the intellectual concepts of sexual organs and mating were not wholly alien to Dende.
However, engaging in sexual activity, especially when it was meant only to breed pleasure, was.

But it was only logical that Dende at least try the peculiar coupling custom with Gohan. After all, the boy was his special person.

Dende reached out for his love and brushed the skin underneath Gohan's waistband. The boy swallowed and shyly captured Dende's hand in his own warm ones.

"I don't know if you, um, really know what, uh, what to... to do," Gohan whispered. "And, um, I guess I don't know what to do with you either, after getting this far, so, um, if I do something weird, I'm really so."

Dende shut him up with a kiss.

It was true that Dende was a Namek and could not exactly fulfil the conventional role of either a female or a male, but he had already prepared himself for Gohan's naiveté and taken special care to look up ways to stimulate him without using intrinsic sexual organs. Dende gently cast his free fingers over the sensitive, covered area in Gohan's lap. Gohan's end of their kiss became sloppy as he opened his jaw to let out a soft cry of surprise.

Dende continued and listened carefully to Gohan's moans- he thought it was bizarre for a creature to be wired to produce ones of pleasure and not exclusively pain.

Gohan snaked his arms around Dende and kissed him again with an open mouth- it was raw, forceful, and unpracticed, and Dende suspected this combination was the product of Gohan's youthful inexperience crossed with his sweet and sincere personality.

The mound in Gohan's underwear grew larger and firmer, and the boy himself became more aggressive- Dende felt teeth on his lips rather than just tongue and bruises forming where Gohan's fingers were.

"Please not so rough," The Guardian asked, suddenly very thankful that his skin was designed to withstand more than a human's could.

The boy's grip slackened and he moved his face to Dende's neck. The Guardian continued to handle Gohan's lap with gentle strokes and listened to the soft, insistent gasps Gohan made between kisses.

Eventually, though, Gohan's loose hold turned mean again and his teeth came back out to sink themselves into Dende's neck each time there was a lull in the Guardian's steady, exploratory touches. The boy's mood was also becoming distinctly more agitated.

"What are you trying to tell me?" Dende asked.

"Don't tease me anymore," Gohan breathed. Dende could not say if it was a plea or a command.

But, teasing? It had not been Dende's intention to frustrate the person he loved. "What do you mean?"

Gohan's patience had apparently been worn thin indeed- he looked down, ripped his underwear in half, and then tore either side off of his legs in two clean, quick motions. His aura melted back into one of demureness once he realized what he had just done.

Gohan retreated back to Dende's neck, and the Guardian could feel his sweetheart's embarrassment warming against his skin. "Try holding me with, uh, with your whole hand, and... and touching, um, h-harder..."
Dende looked down at Gohan's exposed body and tentatively gripped around what he had been blindly ghosting earlier. It felt weird - like some kind of hose made of soft skin? It was not unlike a fleshy, curved cucumber with a lump on the end. The Guardian considered telling Gohan his observation to see if he would laugh, but decided to wait - that might make the boy feel even more self-conscious than he already was.

*Intimacy for Dummies* said to create friction in order to generate pleasure, much like Gohan had instructed. So, Dende squeezed, and then he pulled.

Gohan's hands were on Dende's faster than the Guardian could follow. "Ah! Not... not that hard," Gohan told him, wincing. "And, um, I think your thumb sh-should be, um," Dende was a little afraid that if Gohan's heartbeat got any louder and faster, Korin would send a noise complaint.

Dende snuggled into Gohan's side and wrapped one of the boy's arms around the back of his trunk to hold the two close. With a soft croon, Gohan rubbed Dende's ribs and hip as his fingers made contact while Dende craned his own head upwards, pulled his shy sweetheart down by the back of the neck, and brought their mouths together.

Then, the Guardian layered Gohan's free hand over his own and guided them both around the stiffened, eager form emerging from Gohan's base.

"Show me this way," Dende said, breaking the kiss.

The boy looked to and from Dende's eyes and their hands.

"Teach me how you want me to make you happy," the Guardian reiterated.

Gohan pressed his forehead against Dende's - which communicated to the Guardian a rush of nervousness, affection, and gibberish- and bashfully guided Dende's hand up and down himself. They were unsynchronized, at first, but soon Dende understood the correct pressure and pattern of movement Gohan was after and followed the boy's lead. Gohan gradually sped up the movements and started to kiss Dende again as he commanded the two of them grow more forceful with their hands.

Eventually, Gohan took Dende's thumb and rubbed it across the top of himself. "*There,*" he moaned, and Dende took the opportunity to run his unoccupied fingers through the boy's hair and engage his neck with kisses the same way he had done the day Gohan had brought the comic book about the cats.

The Guardian continued handling Gohan both with and without the boy's instruction until he suddenly twitched and bid Dende kiss him on the lips again, hard. The boy tried to say something, too, but it devolved into whines in the back of his throat as he urgently claimed the inside of Dende's mouth with his tongue and fervently squeezed the Guardian's body against his own.

Then Gohan seized up, raised his head, and cried out, and Dende felt something wet leak onto his fingers.

Gohan slowly relaxed and then grew pliable in Dende's hand.

"Is that all you wanted?" Dende finally asked him softly, still running his other hand through Gohan's hair.

Gohan gently coaxed the Guardian's wet fingers off of him and intertwined them with his own, moisture and all, and Dende was suddenly faced with his lover's dark eyes. They were gentle and warm, and so was the next kiss that Gohan gave.
"Love you," is all Gohan could really say about it, and he pulled Dende down to lay with him on the sheets. "I love you."

Dende moved Gohan's body closer and pressed their foreheads together so that Dende could tell him the same thing, only without words, as Gohan drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I've never written an NSFW before and believe it or not I started this story thinking, "Oh! It will be good practice because it will start me off very tamely and demure but I can still just jump right in!"

LOL JK because here we are, at chapter 10, and FINALLY I got around to having a chapter where these two sort of bang. I also considered doing another chapter where they go to a party BEFORE this chapter but after thinking about it further I was like, "it might be better from a storytelling point of view if I have those kinds of things happen AFTER their first encounter because plans and things that I have for the story", but to you guys it may seem weird by nature of the end of last chapter to have this very next chapter feature them getting... A little closer. If so, say so.
Thank You

Chapter Summary

...Happy whatever you celebrate. Have some more soft porn.

Dende stroked Gohan’s exposed chest as the soft, hazy light of the stars outside filtered through the spaces between the columns and into the bedroom- this was the second time Gohan had spent the night so close to Dende, and the Guardian found it exceptionally pleasing to have his sweetheart here and all to himself for hours on end.

Gohan had fallen into a deep sleep after he had allowed Dende to explore his body and caress his most sensitive parts, and the Guardian had been taking full advantage of it.

Nameks did not need sleep unless they lost an excess amount of energy, and for once, Dende was immensely grateful. Earth’s dark nights had always unsettled him; Dende’s birthplace had three suns to eternally keep the land full of light, and consciously enduring prolonged darkness always put some small part of him on edge. The Guardian thought stars were beautiful, yes, but that alone could not quell his subconscious worry that the sun would not rise in the morning. Gohan’s presence was reassuring.

It was also very satisfying for Dende to be able to further familiarize himself with Gohan’s whole body.

Dende gently massaged the muscles in Gohan’s shoulders and arms and listened to his sighs. The Guardian wished he could trap each one in a bottle so that he could take them out and listen to them whenever he liked. When Gohan stopped making noise, Dende leaned down and kissed his open mouth and played with Gohan’s lips and tongue until the boy muttered something else and turned his face away. Dende chuckled and kissed his ear and the side of his neck instead.

Gohan’s pulse was steady and slow. Dende traced around where his heart was. Piccolo often had trouble remembering which side of the chest it was on in humans, but then again, Piccolo was a warrior, not a healer, and so it was not as imperative that he know.

Then, Dende ran his fingers down Gohan’s abdomen and outlined the grooves between each muscle, right to left and top to bottom, and used his other hand to pet his sweetheart’s obliques.

Gohan’s skin was soft and smooth despite his physique, and Dende leaned over and kissed behind everywhere his hands travelled. Then, he let both sets of his fingers crawl down to Gohan’s thighs to follow their contours, and then between them.

Dende handled Gohan with care- he was soft and sensitive here. Gently, the Guardian rested his hand around his lover and used his thumb to stroke Gohan from base to the tip, and then gave the area a few parting kisses before turning his attention towards massaging Gohan’s calves and tracing over his toes one by one.

Dende’s sweetheart jerked his feet away when the Guardian began to gently rub his nails across his arches, and then rolled over on his side with his back to Dende when the Guardian persisted in tickling the bottoms of his feet.
Dende laughed and shimmied himself back up to the pillows where Gohan’s head rested, dragging his hands along the backs of his lover’s legs and then over his buttock and side as he went. When Dende was able to bury his face in the back of Gohan’s neck and absorb his smell, the Guardian began to knead the boy’s shoulder blade and back.

Gohan stirred. Dende moved his loving touches to the front of his sweetheart’s torso and kissed down his spine and across his shoulder.

“That feels nice,” Gohan murmured.

Dende wrapped both of his arms around Gohan and let his fingers roam over his collarbones, his chest, his abdomen...

Gohan sighed and leaned back into Dende, who kissed Gohan’s ear and rested his face in the crook of his neck. The Guardian traced around Gohan’s nipples and tweaked them, which earned another soft moan.

Dende let a soft laugh accompany his next few kisses to Gohan’s cheek and neck. “You seem very fond of that, hm?”

“I like all of it,” Gohan admitted, twisting his head around and discovering Dende’s mouth moving to cover his.

The Guardian tapped their foreheads together long enough to send the memory of Gohan panting and then falling asleep in Dende’s arms not four hours ago. “You are very sweet,” Dende said, kissing his lover again and caressing his body with eager hands.

“No, I’m just, um, very inexperienced.” Gohan faced forwards and the rising heat from his cheeks encouraged Dende to trace the boy’s muscles until they lead the Guardian to his lover’s groin. He sent one hand back to Gohan’s chest and stomach, but let the other stay its course through the coarse hair between his hips.

“I still think it sweet,” Dende assured, and discovered that his sweetheart’s body was reacting to the Guardian’s touch in much the same way as it had earlier that night. “Again?” Dende asked, curling his fingers around Gohan.

“You don’t, um, have to do that,” Gohan tensed and tried to hide his face in the pillow beneath his head.

Dende let go and ghosted his nails along Gohan’s inner thigh, which made his lover shiver. “This is not a question of need. Would you like for me to? Perhaps I was not thorough enough the first time and you require more attention.”

Gohan’s heartbeat was speeding up again. “N-no,” he said, his neck turning red. “That’s not it. I’m, um,” he swallowed. “I’m… not a child, but I’m really young, Dende. It has nothing to do with thoroughness.”

The Guardian nodded. “Oh. Of course. You are at a prime mating age.” It still escaped him that Gohan was a mammal, sometimes. “You have markedly frequent desire.” Dende thought about how much Gohan ate and realized that his two appetites possibly correlated with one another.

The color deepening in Gohan’s neck coupled with his silence sent Dende a clear affirmative.

“This is nothing to be ashamed of,” Dende said, still playing with Gohan’s inner thighs. He used the arm tracing over his sweetheart’s abdomen to pull Gohan closer. “I am happy to satisfy you. Say you
want more,” Dende said, gently pressing his finger to Gohan’s tip and eliciting a groan, “and you shall have more.” He kissed Gohan’s neck and softly nibbled his ear like his sweetheart enjoyed doing to Dende’s.

“...You don’t ever have to if you don’t want to,” Gohan said. “Even if I ask, you can say no.”

“I am aware,” Dende whispered with a smile. “But that is not the case now. Should I take your answer as a yes?”

Gohan reached down to hold the hand Dende had centered on his abdomen and nodded.

Dende molded his body to sit around Gohan’s better and let his fingers lovingly trace up and down Gohan’s wanting form. “I will still need your help. Please tell me when I should hold you down here,” Dende whispered, massaging the sensitive area between Gohan’s legs. “Tell me whatever it is that you want.”

“Um, go ahead and, um, h-hold me now,” Gohan said. “Like last night. Play, um, gentler, until you get used to it, and then gradually get faster. Please.”

Dende murmured into Gohan’s ear with a few kisses. “You need not say please to me,” the Guardian assured him, and began to move his hand up and down for his sweetheart. He pulled Gohan’s center closer, too, and kissed his neck when his lover moved his head in pleasure.

“Thank you,” Gohan whispered.

Dende kissed the corner of Gohan’s jaw. “To make you happy makes me happy,” he said. “You need not thank me.” The Guardian relished the sounds of his lover’s heartbeat.

“I- hmnf, oh, like that,” Gohan said, his voice a little more confidently quiet, “now more,” he commanded.

Dende sped up and adjusted his hand so that his index finger lead up the subtle cleft on Gohan’s rigid underside rather than with his thumb.

Gohan approved with a hitch of his breath. “I like that,” he whispered, “but later. Stay the other way,” he instructed.

Dende nodded into his sweetheart’s skin and gradually began to press harder every time his thumb rested near Gohan’s tip.

Dende’s sweetheart tensed. “The... the other thing now, with your other finger,” he begged.

The Guardian obliged and then eventually stopped his up and down motion to circle and press on his lover’s sensitive head. “Should I stay here?” He asked, letting his other hand drop away from Gohan’s and using it to massage the rest of his arousal.

“Y-yes,” Gohan said, starting to writhe and grab at the sheets. “Yes, yes, yes! Please,” he gasped. “Press there, a-and there. You’re,” he sucked in a breath, “so close-!”

Dende smiled as Gohan’s breaths grew ragged and his head finally snapped backwards with a sharp inhale of pleasure.

“Good?” Dende asked, feeling his lover relax and slacken.

“Yeah,” Gohan said, rolling over and enveloping Dende in his arms.
Dende kissed him. “More?”

“No,” Gohan said, “thank you.”

“Thank you,” Dende corrected, resting his forehead against Gohan’s. “Thank you for teaching me.”

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