Re-fitting the Mould

by Chymy

Summary

Falling in love is in no way like losing a limb. Except, perhaps, for the fact that both of these things hurt.

Which means that Ben - being Ben - must rapidly learn to multi-task.

Notes

Urgh. I know, I know, 'Ben losing his arm' isn't exactly a creative or original idea, but here I am, doing it anyway. I swear this started off as a simple exercise and then spiraled off into a monster when I wasn't looking...and, well. I guess I'll see how it goes.
Everything turns from green to grey

This is what he remembers: a thumb on his cheek like a tear, wiping away water that spills there, with the taste of salt falling to his lips. And a rock at his back, heaviness, crushing weight, where there should be a warmth that spreads into thickness, splintering out into fingers and thumb. And yet no light there to divide the skin, no green light, to help halo his wrist.

Instead, a collection of noise, a dull thud in his head. Things are falling down.

‘I will make this quick,’ says a voice, usually so calm and collected, but this, this time, so shaky that Ben has to clench his teeth in phantom pain. ‘Bite down if you need to.’

There is no green light on his arm anymore, only orange instead. Orange, shaped like a blade and curved impossibly like a flame. He remembers watching, spots in his vision, as it descends.

For that’s where the pain starts. And thankfully, soon after, where the memory ends.

‘I expected gift cards,’ says Ben airily, waving a hand towards the abundance of colour that drifts in over the desk next to his bed. ‘Not flowers.’

He watches in distaste as leaves curl to the floor, overlapping the ledge of wood that juts out above the drawers. Above them and these long tongues of green, lie purple petals and coils of red, forked stomata that arch out of their pollen-filled cores like the filament inside a light-bulb.

Ben stares at them hard, then gives a disdainful sniff. ‘I’m surprised I haven’t started sneezing yet. I mean, really? Giving the recuperating hero weird alien flowers? That strike anyone as a good idea? What if I’m allergic!??’

From the plastic chair pulled up to his side, Rook gives him a fond smile. ‘I do not think peanuts bear such a close resemblance to these ‘weird alien flowers’ that you have to worry about swelling up like a balloon.’

Ben narrows his eyes. ‘Have you been talking to Gwen again? Because for the record, I do not swell up. I just...get a bit puffy in the face. That’s all.’

But Rook ignores him, reaching out with a careful finger to stroke an escaped leaf that falls slightly above the floor to entwine itself with the metal railings beneath Ben’s bed. It trembles a little at his touch and Ben is struck by how fairy-tale like the image is, before he shakes himself. Rook is a little too good at too many things, without having to add the title of ‘plant-whisperer’ amongst them.

‘Dude,’ he mutters, starting to cross his arms before he remembers, with a rush of clear, crisp shock, why he can’t. ‘Dude...’ he murmurs again, trailing off long enough for Rook’s eyes to narrow in suspicion, which, like magic, brings his mind back to his tongue more than quickly enough for him to blurt out his next line. ‘Stop fondling the plant!’
A look of consternation crosses Rook’s brow, but he obligingly drops the leaf to cover up the glint in the metal frame beneath. ‘I was not fondling anything,’ he informs Ben haughtily, ‘it is not my fault, you cannot seem to appreciate the beauty of nature.’

‘I appreciate nature, just fine,’ Ben says, just as testily. ‘At least, when it’s away from me, far enough away that I don’t have to worry about it choking me in the middle of the night.’

‘I would not ask Rook Shar for flowers that would harm you.’

Ben is quiet a moment. Then, with a thumb carefully stroking the covers at his waist, he asks, ‘your sister sent them?’

Rook beams. ‘Yes! She is currently being stationed near the Gardenia Omolía, a solar system famed for its flowery vegetation and aromatic therapies. I asked her for something designed to raise the spirit of another.’ His smile softens, becoming a careful, quiet line that curls into something even Ben doesn’t want to shatter. ‘Thankfully, it appears that you have done a fine enough job raising your own.’

At this, Ben lets his own smile slip free, ignoring the quick clench in his gut. ‘Yeah, you know me. I always bounce back.’

It is not until two hours later, after Rook has exhausted the long list of flowers his sisters had suggested as alternatives, as well as their many, many uses, that he decides to leave the room to fetch Ben some juice. ‘Or some other canned form of beverage, that is not a smoothie,’ he tells Ben pointedly, carefully closing the door behind him, instead of simply allowing it to swing shut. ‘I apologise, but the doctors were most insistent.’

Ben watches him leave and then, with a groan, lets his head thump back against the pillow, the smile escaping his face alongside the whoosh of air his sudden movement throws up.

It’s alright, he tells himself. The smile’s not a lie, not if he’s simply doing what he told Rook he was doing. Bouncing back. Raising his spirits. It’s not a lie, if Rook believes it.

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When Ben pictured losing his arm in the past, he always imagined it being shorn off, in a mess of gristle and gore. And unfortunately, his imagination refused to stop there, choosing to reach past the hours he was awake and dive headfirst into his dreams, pushing him into great, clawed bouts of terror filled with red and crushed bone and leaving him gasping within a mess of crumpled pillows and a duvet that split at his waist. Then he would fling a hand out, seeing it as skeletonal in the gloom as it felt for his wrist and watch before he allowed himself to breathe, feeling both awake and angry at its touch.

Never, once his dream had passed out of prophecy and into real life, did he expect both bad timing and a landslide caused by Cannonbolt’s roll to be the reason he was now, effectively, harmless.

Lame, he thinks. Stupid. But then, hasn’t he always been?

So now he watches on the news as Harangue crows over the triumph of universal karma, at how they are all free from the weight of the terror he causes and thinks, *good luck, buddy. Have fun with all the future terrors I hope they’ll be able to stop without me.* And he sighs, wears a smile on
his face when Grandpa bustles in, or when Gwen arrives with her serious, compassionate face on, Kevin firmly in tow.

‘How you doing, champ?’ his Grandpa asks, taking care to shove cookies into his hands, ones with periwinkle eyeballs in place of the more usual chocolate chips. Not even the nurse’s blanched face is enough to discourage him.

‘Fine,’ Ben always replies, repeating the reply again and again, when Gwen is here, chatting about the advances they’ve made in prosthetics and how she’d sure they could get him a slime-green coloured arm if that’s really what he wanted. The only quiet one is Kevin, and his eyes are dark and thoughtful as he watches them both, smiling when Gwen looks to him for encouragement, but letting a storm settle on his brow as soon as she turns away.

Ben tries not to think on that too much. Kevin, he knows, is often more observant than people give him credit for.

And of course freakin’ Rook is always here in his off hours, asking questions and showing off all the snapshots he’s taken with a tablet, pushing the bright colours of people who are actually getting out there and enjoying their lives, under Ben’s nose.

‘You should have told me how sensitive human skin is to the rays of the sun,’ he tells Ben reproachfully. ‘Just think, all those hours when I saw people wiping grease onto themselves and I thought it some weird family bonding activity, not dissimilar to how other primates on this planet comb lice out of the fur of each other.’

On seeing Ben screw his face up into a wince, Rook frowns and continues rather hurriedly, ‘well, you should have said something! One of the nurses here was nice enough to tell me how sunscreen can prevent cancer.’

Ben rolls his eyes. ‘I’m surprised you didn’t know already. You do so much research, that I would have thought you’d have stumbled onto yet another nugget of trivia involving sun-factor fifty or something.’

‘I am flattered that you think I know everything,’ says Rook a little loftily. ‘But unfortunately, I do not. If I did, I would not have to ask why you are still making no attempt to fit yourself up with a prosthetic arm.’

Ben is quiet at this. For this is the trouble with Rook; he has never been afraid to pry, all his reservations and politeness flying out of the room, when it concerns something he truly cares about.

‘Leave it,’ Ben tells him firmly, turning his head back and away, all so he can stare into the sky. And as though to match his mood, all the window displays is grey, a swirling mist of it that sweeps out to touch the glass with a chill that condenses, dropping tears down to swirl against the sill.

But Rook fastens his mouth into a tight line and Ben has to work hard, after that, to keep the levity in his own voice.

‘It’s no big deal,’ he says, ‘I’m just not feeling ready for it, not yet.’

Rook looks at him for a long while, before letting his gaze flicker and drift round the room, taking in the purple flowers and their wilting leaves, now more grey than green as they attempt to trail their way into Ben’s sheets.

‘It’s not my fault,’ Ben says defensively, hands anchored into the duvet that for the moment, still
rises above the dying coils of plants. ‘I’ve even got people to water them. It’s like they want to die.’

Rook shoots him a very dry look. ‘Imagine that,’ he mutters.

But the conversation between them seems to strangle and die after this, and all Ben can do is offer
half-smiles, feeling his mouth cut into his cheeks as he strains to keep the silence between them
palatable. He isn’t too surprised that the Revonnahgander lasts only nine more minutes until he
makes his excuses and leaves.

Perhaps it’s time he does the same.


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During the night, he is awoken by pain. It bleeds out from his dream into reality and Ben is left
flailing in the sheets, his fingers wrapped around a stem as the plant, Rook’s stupid plant, tightens
round the frame of the bones within. It strangles the blood vessels and rips through the flesh with
the same protrusion of thorns a rose bush holds and Ben has to hold back a cry, choking on his own
tongue as it branches up into the roof of his mouth. But even with all that, with the black, grim
weight lying on his limb and thrusting it down into the sheets as though they could part and
crumble beneath like soil, Ben knows this is wrong, all wrong. Because this pain, this new focus of
gravity on his skin, is all concentrated on the wrong limb, the one that isn’t there.

He grunts, shifts, and daringly, lets out a small scream. It’s not as though he’s back there again,
caught in the memory, with his arm trapped but still there. No, now it is no longer here, but still it
feels...it feels...

Ben’s not an idiot. He knows about phantom pain. The Doctor had warned him, made him a nice
list of what to expect, the nice orderliness of it undermined seconds later, when he had then
adjusted his glasses and informed him that of course, it was different for everybody.

Itching, aching, a tingle of temperature as it changes and tugs on a bunch of nerves that are now
ghosts to the system...all described and noted. But to Ben, it feels as though his arm is trapped
under a solid tonne.

But he won’t tell Grandpa, he won’t. He won’t tell anyone. Other people, stronger, braver people
must have to deal with this all the time. Besides, it’s not as though there’s a proper cure.

He spends the rest of the night whimpering, a troubled sleep touching him only as the first grey
light of the dawn trails in. It touches the window, plays with the sill, and the sight of it before he
drifts off, hopefully into nicer dreams that will hold him, is enough to firm his resolve.
As long as you allow your image to stay

Hours later, he demands that the hospital release him.

‘I want out,’ he says, repeats it firmly enough to get the Doctor’s attention. And given that he doesn’t seem in any danger of toppling over and cracking his knees against the perfectly polished floor of the hospital corridor, they consent.

Outside, Ben blinks in the sun and then scowls at the way it seems to help blue roll out against the sky. It stains everything, everywhere, with a cheery haze and he finds himself walking, head down, to avoid all the green from the park nearby. He keeps walking, out to where he knows the cool darkness of the tunnels are, the ones that lead to Undertown, and to his relief, minutes later, he finds the bustling grind of aliens going about their business infinitely more calming than the bright grey sheen of the buildings that tower above ground.

He supposes it’s simply because he lacks the courage to peer at all the posters and commercials smeared against their sides, the ones that he now fears will be missing his name. It’ll happen, he knows, no matter what he does, and without a watch to hold himself steady in the media’s ratings, he will eventually fade out of the public’s view. But it still hurts, still grinds against his chops a little, at how quickly he knows he will become forgettable, much like a fallen star. He still remembers the brief taste of it before, back when the Vergers were in business.

But he has to admit, it’s also nice down here, amongst aliens who are less likely to stare at a teenager with a missing limb when they have such a messed up assortment of their own to glance over and shrug at. Here, he can blend in against the noise and smell of streets that don’t have anyone to come along and brush the pavements clean every night, here, he can walk under all the different tints of corrugated iron and feel water drip on his head without any rain clouds to pester his view. Here, he can tread over boards and bridges that feel more like cardboard than any earthly wood, and feel more at home than he was in the hospital.

Nobody will bother him, apart from a few kids who remember how much he likes to kick a soccer ball into a net, and even Pakmar does not flinch anymore, not as he brushes him by and passes his new store.

In fact, he finds himself starring into these very windows that hold Pakmar’s new wares with awe, sees them pristine, and gleaming with a glass that shimmers and traps his reflection within a cool blue hue, one that will no longer be smashed and ruined beneath Ben’s alien forms. In fact, if he peers closely enough, he can see Pakmar actually smile as he rings up his customers’ purchases into netted bags of orange and it’s enough to get him to reflect that no, perhaps it isn’t all bad, him being watch-less. That down here, at least, some people are better off.

‘People are not better off!’

Ben stares at Rook, swears he sees his hackles rise from beneath the layers of the Proto-armour, even as his partner’s hands clench the workshop table, the legs creaking under the force of his grip.

‘Hey, man,’ says Kevin nervously, ‘careful with that table. It’s new.’ But he shrugs and backs off,
palms raised in the air as Rook’s eyes swivel to him.

Ben only feels a little jealous of the gesture. After all, it doesn’t carry quite the same effect with only a single palm.

To his right, Gwen sighs, shoving her glasses more firmly onto the bridge of her nose with a quick prod of her finger. She looks tired, her hair frizzed out over the corners of the frames with thin wisps of orange that look, to Ben’s eyes, like thinly-sliced waves of curly cheese.

‘Ben,’ she says, in that firm, no-nonsense shit’s-about-to-go-down voice that Ben both admires and resents about her. ‘I thought we were past this. You know, all this insecure I’m-nothing-without-the-Omnitrix bullshit, that Grandpa and I had had to put up with for years!’

Even Rook flinches at the timbre at her voice and Kevin, worry appearing on his face like an old houseguest, curls a palm over her shoulder as her back comes to rest against his chest.

‘I just...’ Gwen sighs a little, breathing out through her nose. ‘I mean, it’s not like you can’t wear the Omnitrix again. The thing’s practically indestructible after all and we retrieved it weeks ago. Azmuth’s just tuning it up a little, making it voice-activated more so you won’t have to slam the back of your hand against a wall every time you want to ‘go hero.’’

‘But that’s just the point, Gwendolyn,’ says Ben quietly, trying to ignore the way everyone stiffens at the way he says her full name, soft and careful, without a hint of complaint in his tone. ‘I’m not sure if I should, anymore.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ Kevin mutters crossly. ‘Come on man, the universe is a better place with you in it, wrecking the bad guy’s plans and taking names. You know it.’

No, Kevin, Ben wants to snap. You don’t know. You can’t know. No one can. But instead he stays quiet.

Oddly enough, that seems to be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. Because Rook lets out a low, garbled growl of a sentence, one that Ben doesn’t quiet care enough to catch, and stalks out in a brisk, almost soldier-like trot.

Ben shrugs. ‘You guys should take a pointer from Rook. There’s a guy who knows there’s no point worrying about things you can’t change.’

Rook freezes at that, back ram-rod straight. And for one perverse moment, Ben wants him to turn around, charge back in and rake him across the coals with angry formal-sounding sentences, perhaps even with the odd contraction dropped in. But that doesn’t happen. A second ticks by, then another and another. And Rook steps forward, before slamming into his truck at a run, morphing into a whirlwind of blue movement that shifts and grips the wheel like it’s the one thing that can still ground him. But then even that illusion is gone, the engine roaring to life as Rook yanks the wheel and, presumably, presses down on the pedals with such fury that the vehicle backs across the drive at a speed Ben knows for a fact isn’t legal.

There’s silence for a moment as the wheels squeal and the truck shoots into the road to become one of many square-like blocks of motion on the dual carriage way. Then, with perfect comedic timing, Kevin looks at Ben.

‘I’m not driving you back.’

Ben sighs. ‘Fine, fine, I’ll take the bus.’
Except Gwen is looking at him, with such deep pity in her eyes that he can’t quite walk away, not yet. No, he has to hold his ground, glare, and resist the urge to fold his arms, because he just can’t do that anymore, and any fallback on old habits, ones Gwen can still do with both arms, will just cause her pity to swell.

‘What?’ he snaps out.

‘Oh Ben,’ she sighs. ‘I’m used to you hiding stuff from me. But I think Rook has much less patience for it than I do.’

Ben feels as though his heart is in his throat. But he forces it down, waits until it feels like nothing more than a weird murmur against his windpipe, before he speaks.

‘Nobody asked you to wait around for me, neither of you. I know I didn’t. Heck, the rest of the world didn’t.’ He really hopes he isn’t sneering. She doesn’t deserve that. ‘Face it, Gwen. I don’t need anyone to unearth me. It’s not worth the effort.’

But now she’s beaming at him, her teeth hopelessly white with the same shine he can see reflected in the rims of Kevin’s car, even in the sun-tilted windows and polished wing mirrors nearby. It takes all of half of a second to realise that she’s happy because he’s dropped the ‘dolyn’ from her name.

‘Maybe you should let the people around you be the judge of that,’ she whispers, and oh God, she better not start crying. ‘There are people who would love for you to open up. And maybe, you know, they’ve been waiting for a really long time?’

Ben eyes her and her smile widens.

‘Rook and I talk,’ she says sweetly.

And stupidly, just like that, it clicks.

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Ben is stupid, when it comes to love. It’s not something he thinks about, or even likes to think about it, but he knows that he doesn’t always notice things until it’s too late. Case in point, Julie.

Just...damn Gwen. Damn her.

Now he actually has to think.
Ben does something he’s never done before. He texts Rook. For a moment, he stares down at the phone, reading the bold line of text he’s inputted, and resists the urge to send an emoticon alongside it, before he shakes his head and decisively places the pad of his thumb against the ‘send’ button. Then he tucks the phone back down into his pocket to nestle against his keys.

And even as he walks into the club, letting himself drown in the beat of music that he isn’t even fond of, he feels an audible sense of wrongness. He’s never really noticed before, but he has always rung Rook, so much so that he has never actually had to text him like a normal teenager. Which is weird, because he’s basically missed out on an opportunity to make Rook freak over all the emoticons he’d send and hear corresponding rants about ‘strange symbols’ and ‘yellow-faced cuniforms’ as he’d probably dub them. Looks like that task has fallen to Gwen.

Either way, this new, sudden reliance on letters being flashed over onto a screen instead of being thrown out into ears, is going to give Rook a very clear, cold message.

‘I suck,’ Ben murmurs and then shoves himself forward, into the strobe lights and around the dotted swirl of tables, all of them pushed out into minimalistic colours, black and white, like a fancy series of ying-yang symbols. He breathes, ducking down under the arm of a nearby Tetramand as he swings both his arm and his partner across the floor, before wincing at the twang of guitar from some overeager bass player nearby, and making a beeline for the bar.

‘Get me a coke,’ he croaks out, sliding his hood down over his hair and tucking his jaw-line back into the shadowed pocket it forms over his neck. ‘You do take earth currency, right?’ he adds after a moment.

The bartender, some Kineceleran wearing a pink, ‘kiss-me-quick’ t-shirt eyes him with guileless white eyes. Ben tries not to meet his stare too boldly in return; his green eyes aren’t that distinctive on a human, but along with his customary hoodie, they might as well be a flashing neon sign. Oh, right, and the whole one-arm thing probably doesn’t help either.

But after a moment, the bartender simply sighs. ‘Sure kid. Just don’t let the red-spots catch ya. You’re awful small to be in here.’

Hidden beneath his hood, Ben rolls his eyes, but keeps his tongue in check. And then he waits. And waits. He’s still waiting, even after he’s rolled his money across the bar and had the glass slid into his hand and after a while, he can feel his sweat build up against the side, pasting it against the skin. He clicks his tongue and then, after a few more seconds, casually rolls back his hood, just enough to let his eyes show properly. The bartender is on the other side, arguing with a few Merlinisapiens about the price of something called a dalmacoquerean and Ben takes the opportunity to look round. It’s not so much that he has a game plan here, but...
Ah. Rook is here, making waves simply by being dressed in his armour. That, or perhaps he’s simply acclaimed enough fame by appearing on TV the same time as Ben does. Either way, Ben is forced to cock his head to the side, to smile faintly as the crowd parts around him, limbs and tentacles scuttling or, well, crawling, over tiles flecked with the pink and green reflections from the rotating disco ball overhead. It’s both funny and flattering to see, like Rook’s anger is enough to press out into the air around him, propelling a small, invisible shield that causes even the Tetramand to swerve away into the band circle.

But Rook ignores all this, practically bristling as his eyes narrow to mere slits upon seeing Ben’s face. Ben has enough time to admire the way this accent the black markings surrounding them, enough to make them bloom out like split paint, before his partner is there, towering over him like always. But all Ben does, is simply lean back, letting his hood slide all the way off his hair enough for him to imagine he sees a flicker pass through the eyes above, something gold and hungry.

‘Ben.’

‘Yes?’

For a moment it looks like Rook wants to punch him. And yet, when Rook sighs a moment later, and lets his shoulders fall into relaxation, Ben finds himself thoroughly unsurprised.

‘What are you doing?’ the Revonnahgander questions quietly. ‘I know you like having fun. But at a club? Forgive me, but this does not appear to be your scene.’

‘My scene?’ Ben says back, equally as quietly. ‘No, you’re right. My scene is being the hero, making waves. Making a real buzz.’ He pauses, then gives a low, shallow laugh. ‘You know, it’s funny, but I never asked who they’ve partnered you up with while I’ve been gone. I know Grandpa wouldn’t let you wander off on your own. And I think I know you well enough to know that you wouldn’t simply ask for time off, especially if it’s to keep someone like me company.’

Rook sucks in a breath and Ben’s eyes widen.

‘Wow. Oh, wow, buddy. You have been out patrolling alone. How’d you make sure Grandpa didn’t catch you?’

‘Because I know how to be subtle,’ Rook growls, ‘unlike you.’ His hand dives into one of his suit’s many, many grey pockets and he yanks out his phone, the screen lighting up like a torch as he shoves it front of Ben’s face. And Ben stares, his own message glaring back at him, in fine strokes of chunky black.

Hey rook. going to the dudes-only-no-dames-no-games club near boxbell avenue. figured you’d get tired.

The phone abruptly disappears as Rook’s face replaces it, leaning close enough for their noses to dance centimetres away from each. Ben blinks, paralysed.

‘You never text me!’ Rook declares, each word low and cold, as though he’s forced his temper down into a simmer, rather than let it thrive inside a shout. ‘And you have never once sent me an annoying emoticon, the power of which even Gwendolyn falls prey to! And you always, always know that eventually, no matter what stupid situation you have become entangled in, that I will find you!’

‘I’m not in danger here, dude,’ Ben retorts. ‘Well,’ he amends, laughing nervously at the tight fury in Rook’s eyes, ‘except maybe from you.’
‘No,’ Rook says tightly, ‘not even now.’ Then he sighs, and something, some part of him, seems to relax. ‘Why are you at an alien gay bar, Ben? You have always seemed...’

‘...Straight?’

‘No,’ Rook responds flatly. ‘Uninterested. Even with Ester. Though maybe not with Kai.’

Ben frowns, tapping his fingers idly against his glass. ‘Kai was different. Is different. There’s something about her that makes me both mad, like really angry at her, but also makes me think, wow, that she’s amazing at the same time.’

A wry smile pulls at Rook’s lips. ‘I think I have some idea of what you mean, yes.’

Ben cocks his head to the side. ‘Rayona?’

‘No.’ There’s definitely an undercurrent of annoyance filling that entire word. ‘I like Rayona. She is lovely and kind and thoroughly sensible. But we do not fit well together. Not anymore.’

‘Anymore, huh? Tough break.’

‘Very tough.’

Ben watches the coke in his glass, the way hardly any bubbles rise to knock against the rim. He’s been waiting a long time, long enough for him to take one more deep breath, and not have Rook mind it too much, at least he hopes not. ‘Tough as all that,’ he says slowly, ‘and you’re still in love with me.’

And even with all the music spilling out, into the gaps between their faces, Ben swears he can hear Rook’s heart stutter and stop. Or maybe it’s the way his face freezes, the fur dipped with pastel shades of purple, blotches from the lights above that never stay still, not even for a second, one that in this moment seems to outlast a minute.

‘Rook...’ he breathes.

‘Gwen told you.’ The sentence falls into his ears, very, very flat and Ben does not miss the way Gwen’s name has been chopped short, divided from the usual respect Rook gives it.

‘Well, yeah, because I’m dumb and she wants to help fix that, like she always does,’ he offers. ‘Don’t be mad at her, please?’

‘I need a drink,’ says Rook hollowly, then, in a move Ben never thought he’d see him make, plops a wad of cash down onto the counter.

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Ben is stupid when it comes to love, his intelligence being non-existent when it comes to confessions. But he knows Rook, knows his partner is comfortable in the quiet hum of the truck, or at the table outside Mr Smoothie’s. He’s comfortable talking about things Ben doesn’t know about and more than comfortable at steering the conversation away from the direction Ben often wants it to go.

And he’s been hinting, the last few days, that he wants Ben to wake up, to escape from the
hospital, himself, and anything else that holds him back, prevents him from going hero.

And perhaps deep down, Ben wants to return the favour.

‘So,’ says Ben airily, fingers drumming against the counter as Rook chucks back a whole glass of some...black stuff with a pink tentacle wedged in the middle of its froth. Ew. ‘What was it that drew you to me? Was it my charm? My rakish good looks?’ He waggles his eyebrows, trying to make a joke of it. He wants Rook relaxed and unafraid, not drunk.

But Rook doesn’t even favour him with a glance, lips pursed as he stares down into the bottom of his now mostly empty glass. Then, casually, his finger dips down, swirling into the rim of the glass to stroke the tentacle up against its sides, leaving behind a mushy streak of white that resembles the run of water into chalk. Ben makes a face at it, before Rook’s mouth swoops down and, with greedy relish, sucks the tentacle up with one long slurp.

‘Ugh! Dude, come on!’

Rook smiles privately and then shoves the glass back, watching it roll forward and then disappear in a flash of blue and black. Ben watches as a streak of pink accompanies the movement, fading from view as the barman from before races past.

‘Another one, please,’ Rook calls after him, and then, as though he’s been dreading this, turns back to face Ben. ‘You are not a shopping list or a car, Ben,’ he says firmly. ‘I am not going to break you down into a list of qualities I find...alluring.’

‘Dude,’ Ben says, fighting down a blush at the way Rook has clearly given thought to his last word; indeed, the very nature of it seems to roll through the sound it lets out in the careful hush of his voice. ‘You like, did the exact same thing not five minutes ago, when you were describing Rayona. Remember? Lovely, kind, sensible Rayona? ’

Rook stares at them. And then, rather crossly, says, ‘well, if I was to make a list of your attractive qualities, your attitude would not be among them.’

Ben raises an eyebrow and leans back slightly, a hand coming up between them to wag a finger at Rook. ‘Whoa, there, don’t get in a huff. Besides, like eighty percent of me is all Ben Ten attitude, trademarked and stamped. Take that away and you’ll be left with a very small list. ‘ He shakes his head and cringes. ‘Ugh. You sure you’re in love with me? You might just be coming down with something.’

‘No,’ says Rook gently, and Ben is pleased to note the amusement flowing into his voice, to notice, even, the way it manages to soften the slump in his shoulders, before lifting them back up. ‘I am not sick. Though, I have noticed that you humans have an odd number of expressions relating love to a form of sickness. Or at least, you describe it as such.’ He tilts his head to the side. ‘Why? It is a feeling of worth, to place such value in another. Should it not be described more fondly?’

‘You mean to tell me you’ve managed to look up expressions about love, but failed to stumble across any of the great romantic poems or plays or whatever?’ Ben shakes his head again and makes a face. ‘Wow. And here I thought your research skills were top notch.’
Now it is Rook’s turn to make a face. Or at the very least, his nose crinkles. ‘I have read the works of Shakespeare, but admittedly the language is a little too archaic for me to grasp in places. Especially given that English is not my native tongue.’

Well, oops. Doesn’t Ben feel like a jerk now.

‘And,’ continues Rook, now thoroughly warming to his subject, ‘Kevin recommended I read the works of Stephanie Meyer, saying that it would reveal all I need to know about human psychology in regards to romance.’

Ben’s jaw clenches.

‘It was an...interesting portrayal of the dangers of romantising the tendencies of the obsessive. If only the main character had seen the behaviour for what it was, as both increasingly pervasive and dangerous to her own sense of identity! Instead it led to the ruin of her own humanity and succeeded in robbing her what little individuality she had left. The vampiric transformation was a metaphor for brainwashing, yes?’ Rook shakes his head, not waiting for Ben to either affirm or deny. ‘It was a very sad tale indeed, and a good cautionary one. Perhaps that is why you all correlate love to sickness? For fear of falling into such a dysfunctional relationship?’

Ben’s jaw falls open.

‘Right... ’ he says slowly. ‘Well, that’s certainly one interpretation. But honestly dude, think about it. I mean, have your feelings for me really been something you savoured? Have they really made life so happy for you, that they deserve to be, I dunno, celebrated or whatever? Or has it just made everything harder and more messed up? ’ He pauses to smirk. ‘You know, like a sickness. ’

Rook pauses to swallow down whatever thought had been on the tip of his tongue. He’s still mulling it over as the barman speeds back, a glass of new frothy black, complete with tentacle, spouting by his furry hand with only the cool clink of pressure to reveal its presence. He blinks a few times before lifting it to his lips. And Ben lets his smirk soften, the line of his mouth drifting into a smile as he watches his friend swallow it down.

‘No,’ Rook manages, eyeing the tentacle as it gives a pathetic wiggle. ‘You are not a disease. I have to admit, I am slightly uncomfortable with this metaphor you keep throwing around. My feelings for you are not bad, Ben. Intrinsically, or otherwise.’

‘But-’

‘No,’ Rook cuts off, more firmly this time. ‘I love you,’ he continues, and Ben has to ignore the shiver that runs through his bones and short-circuits his very nerves at how easily his partner throws that out. ‘It is simple, and it is fact. And all that can change something like that is time.’

Rook turns to him, and while his gaze seems a little...whoozy, there’s still enough of him left in there for Ben himself to feel unsteady. ‘It is not something you can cure me of. And is that not what you’re doing here, Ben? Trying to make me move on? With words and...’ and here he seems to choke, waving his hand at the dance-floor, his nose crinkling at the swirl of limbs and the coloured assortment of glistening skin and sweat-soaked fur. The crowd moves, jives, as if to spite him, a river of excited motion to the current of their bobbing heads.

‘...Temptation,’ Rook finishes grandly, all of him suddenly stiff and angry.

Ben for his part, is already stiff. Mostly at the earlier use of an contraction.

‘Ooookay,’ he says. ‘Totally not what I was going for. I mean, I just want to stop you hurting. And
for me, to stop hurting you. It’s not like I can stop existing, you know? And don’t even pretend you haven’t been doing something similar ever since I woke up in the hospital with only-’ And now it is Ben’s turn to choke off. Because even now, after everything, he still can’t say it.

He stares at the spot in front of him, the one vacant of the barman, and sees it filled instead with rows of glasses that twinkle with the diamond-like tweaks of light that infest sand placed under sunlight. He doesn’t blink, doesn’t move, and yet, suddenly, they seem to glisten, dip, and waver, all with a suspicious shimmer. Ben barely has time to blink before warmth joins the spreading coolness on his cheek, the beginning trek of his tears lapped calmly away by fur.

It is both a little like the way he once smashed his face against a teddy, five and a half years old and alone in his room at night, and, also, not at all like that. For one thing, Rook’s finger is much thinner and strangely warmer. Or perhaps not so strangely considering all the blood pumping away in there; knowing what he knows about Rook now, the poor guy’s heart probably beating up a thunderstorm at the contact.

‘Is this not alright?’

Ben blinks and let his vision clear, at least a little so that he can see that, yup, Rook is totally touching his cheek with a finger, and that the arm attached to it is ramrod straight. Rook for his part, looks a little spooked.

Ben thinks about what he could say to reassure him. He also thinks about the way he could make Rook back off, run away with a few words, like ‘this is kinda weird, dude.’ But honestly, he’s not entirely sure what he wants. So in the end, he settles with something true.

‘You’ve done this before, right? Back when I-’

‘Yes,’ Rook interrupts, and it occurs to Ben that perhaps it’s just as painful for Rook to remember as well. ‘With my thumb. The rest of my hand was like this.’

The muscles holding Rook’s wrist hostage in the air relax, and the rest of his hand glides round the contours of Ben’s cheek, nestling into his hair with an abject grace that Ben almost envies. Almost. It’s just so typically Rook, co-ordinated and easy, that it’s hard not to feel a tiny bit resentful. But then that vanishes, with a tingle, as Rook’s fingertips curl into his very skin, scraping against the bristling tug of brown roots and resting, nestling, like the marked spot on a treasure map.

‘Huh,’ Ben manages. ‘No, I don’t remember that.’

‘You were in a lot of pain at the time.’ But Rook sounds distracted even as he mutters it, his finger migrating from the wet trails it traps against Ben’s cheek, all so that his thumb can swish up into its place.

Ben giggles nervously, the jitter in his throat, in his mouth, made worse by the look of annoyance passing over Rook’s face. Perhaps he doesn’t like the vibration it sends up into his palm. ‘And here I thought you were angry with me. I mean, the contractions, dude. A dead give-away.’

The annoyance on Rook’s face, if anything, only worsens.

‘I am...weak against you, in certain circumstances,’ he says. ‘It is probably not a good idea to tell you any of this; you seem the type to shamelessly exploit it, after all-’

‘Hey!’

‘-but since Gwen has seen fit to spill my secrets’-
‘Oh wow, you’re still calling her Gwen. Ooooh, she’s in trouble. *Unreal.* I don’t think I’ve ever seen you mad at her.’

‘...your glee is noted. At any rate, it seems stupid to hide from you.’

‘Hmm.’ Ben can see his point. And he can’t help but admit he feels powerful, like this, for all that his motion suddenly seems frozen by the touch of a single hand, the simple curve of a palm holding him in place, like a slot. Because with just a word, a jerk, he could break everything between them.

It’s a little frightening. He hasn’t felt this strong since he was wearing the Omnitrix and had a little more flesh and blood to spare. Perverse too. His friend is literally baring his heart open and all Ben can now think about is how he could wrestle it from him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says. ‘I guess I kinda wanted to fix you, like you’ve been trying to fix me. But I guess both are kinda impossible.’

‘Not at all,’ Rook says smoothly. ‘You can take steps to ‘fix’ yourself. And as for me...there is nothing really to fix. Either way, I am not leaving you.’

‘But-’

‘You do not have to feel the same way,’ Rook breaks in gently. ‘You like Kai.’

‘I don’t love her,’ Ben protests, not realising until he speaks how true the sentence is and how important the distinction is. Rook loves him, not likes. He hasn’t run away from the words, hasn’t denied or stepped away the way Ben thought he initially would. He owns them. It leaves Ben feeling very small in contrast.

‘According to Spanner, that will change,’ Rook points out, ‘perhaps it already has.’ He smiles and takes his hand away. And Ben finds himself leaning into the space it leaves behind, wanting to drift into the lost warmth and catch it.

‘Come,’ says Rook finally. ‘I will take you home.’

And without a word, Ben lets the lost hand close over his arm, the one he still has, and drag him from his seat.

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The next day, without protest, he signs up to see a prostheticist.
And yet casting out fate, adrift and afar

Chapter Notes

I have to admit, I’ve never actually been to a prostheticist. The closest I’ve ever come to it, is when I had to have plaster casts made of my feet when I was a young child because my mother wished for my feet to not be so...flat. My memories of this time are a little hazy, so bear with me.

Having said that, I apologise for any details I get wrong here.

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‘Does this hurt?’ she asks and Ben stiffens, allowing her to work his muscles like a rope she can all too easily twist through her fingers.

And she doesn’t flinch, not even once, at the purple stains in his skin that cling beneath the bandages she has to pry open. He watches carefully as her nails, cautiously clipped short, twinkle round the edges of the scissors she holds, their delicate snips opening up the stiff gauze with tiny clinks of sound. And then he hisses slightly, as she pulls them away.

She tuts. ‘You should have come sooner. The quicker I can make a cast, the quicker you can learn to reshape yourself, to re-learn how to move.’

Oh God, Ben can’t help but think. Please don’t let her start talking like Rook.

‘Doctor Bluebell,’ he says, shoving the thought away, down deep instead. ‘You know, I’m not exactly a piece of clay, right?’

She smiles privately. ‘Oh, I know. I can tell by the way you opened your mouth just now. That and the mutinous expression on your face.’

‘Riiight.’ Ben’s mind goes blank. She’s not really someone he has to smile at, after all. And given that she’s gonna fit him up with a new arm, well, it seems stupid to act all stoic. He doesn’t want to limp around in pain for the rest of his life.

‘Let’s start with a simple mould,’ she says. ‘And once we actually get a working model done, I can show you some exercises.’

Exercises. Ah, Rook’s gonna love this.

‘Right,’ he says for the second time, ‘show me the magic.’

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‘It was fine,’ he tells Grandpa afterwards, ‘ kinda like someone spilling your cooking over my arm. Or else just some really weird jello.’

Grandpa Max frowns. ‘You think my cooking is weird?’

Ben stares at him a moment. It’s strange but no matter how many disgusted faces he and Gwen have made over the years, the old man always misses it, choosing instead to smile over the new simmering broth of alien food he cooks up. Of course, there is another, much simpler explanation; that Grandpa Max is actually a crafty sadist in disguise. But Ben really hopes that isn’t the case.

‘Really, Grandpa?’ he asks. ‘That’s what you’re choosing to take away from this? That I think your cooking is weird?’

Grandpa Max crosses his arms, a stern look on his face, one that folds his brow in two. But barely a second passes before this lifts and he breaks into a wide grin. ‘Nah, I’m just messing with you, sport. I’m pleased that you’re actually getting on with things. For a moment there, you had us all worried.’

Ben grins weakly. ‘What can I say? I’m a work in progress. Least, that’s what the prostheticist says.’

In his single hand he’s already firing off a text to Gwen: ‘Don’t care wat u say. Not getting a green arm. not a ninja turtle.’ He hopes she’ll get a kick out of it, if nothing else. He’s debating over what to say to Kevin, if he should try to turn things into a joke, when his Grandpa clears his throat.

‘But seriously, Ben, I’m just glad you’re not in any pain.’

Ben pauses to let the words crash into him. Pauses, long enough to muster up the energy to deliver a smile back to his Grandpa, one big enough and bright enough to chase the worries away.

‘Yeah.’

He glances back to his shoulder. He hadn’t been lying; it really had felt like jello at the time, cool and oddly refreshing as it was brought to rest against the bruised sting of nerves. Nerves that had been neatly slit away by a surgeon’s knife, a week ago, hours after the rushed hacking of Rook’s proto-tool.

The plaster’s gone now, removed and sent off to a lab or another place suitably boring, all so that its sides and angles can be dissected into measurements that will sit within a metal frame. And back in its steed have come these bandages, new, of course, resting there like an additional hilltop. It seems strange, to know he simply has to crane his neck a little to see nothing but air and an absence that will reveal floor tiles and bed-sheets.

‘I think they’re trying to make a socket,’ he says slowly. ‘I think to fit in or swivel in, I guess, the, you know, the actual limb.’

Max raises his eyebrows.

‘Well, okay, I guess it’s a little more complicated than that. I just can’t help think of it as similar to the stand I’ve got for my Sumo Slammer figures at home.’

Max grins and ruffles his hair.
'Well, as long as your metaphors are up to scratch, I suppose I have nothing to worry about.'

Ben smiles under the onslaught and adopts a pleading look.

'Good. Now can I please, please, get out of here? Again? I really don’t need to be in here.'

Max surveys him and Ben tries hard not to shuffle or fidget or anything else that would make him appear unsuitable for the world outside. His Grandpa had practically had to wrestle him back to the hospital for a customary check-up with his words a few minutes ago, the worry almost eating up the wrinkles in his old brow as he pleaded with him.

'I guess there’s no harm…'

His Grandpa trails off and Ben starts mentally running through the menu at Mr Smoothie’s. It’s been a while since he’s had a Cranberry Crush, so maybe-

'…once they’re given you the all-clear.'

Oh, fiddlesticks.

Right,’ Ben says, trying hard not to let his smile fade too much. ‘Can’t forget about that.’

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The rest of the day slips by quietly. Ben has to beg his Grandpa to let him go off to eat someplace that isn’t his Grandpa’s kitchen.

‘I’ll get a salad or something healthy, I promise!’ he says exasperated. ‘It’s just that purple couscous, it looks like its alien baby worms or something.’

‘Actually, it’s-’

Ben holds a hand up. ‘Yeah. I don’t actually want to know, Grandpa.’

‘Oh,’ Grandpa Max looks down at the ground briefly. ‘Oh. Okay then.’

Oh. Oh no. Ben is not giving into guilt, not again.

‘I’ll phone Rook,’ he offers, waving in his phone in front of his Grandpa’s face enticingly. ‘C’mon, you know what he’s like about health. He’ll probably have a few good places in mind.’

His Grandpa seems to perk up at this. ‘Alright, then. If you’re sure you can manage.’

‘Yep,’ Ben pronounces, firmly. ‘I always do.’

But, when he’s Grandpa’s back is turned, it’s not Rook’s number he dials. It’s Kai’s.

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An hour later, Ben all too easily destroys his promise to his Grandfather over a chocolate and kiwi flavoured smoothie. His breath rattles the straw and he watches idly as it spins, the sun sloshing it into brilliance with a white Rook would probably gaze at if he were here, eyes big and wide like a kitten’s.

Ben groans and thumps his head against the table.

‘I’m such a creepy friend,’ he mumbles, feeling lighter somehow as his fringe smooshes against the side of the smoothie cup. Even through all that hair, the cool temperature drifts down to meet against his forehead, providing relief than even the tilted shadow of the parasol overhead can’t seem to give.

And from the seat across him, he feels Kai smirk. Not sees. Feels.

‘You’ve always been creepy,’ she says. ‘In fact, it’s kinda weird. For someone who can turn into different aliens, it’s actually mindboggling how much creepier you are as human.’

‘Gee, thanks,’ Ben mutters, lifting his head up just enough to glare at her through his fringe.

She makes a face at him. ‘Don’t do that. You look emo.’

Ben abruptly remembers one of his alternate selves, his slouch, and the way his hair fell to rest over his eyes as he bundled the rest of his height inside a dark hood. The image is almost enough to make him straighten in his seat. Almost.

‘I do what I want,’ he says defiantly, eyeing her as she takes a long slurp through her straw.

‘Yes. And it makes you seem creepy,’ she tells him, equally as defiantly.

Ben stares at her, at the way she meets his gaze head-on, her own eyes narrowed in challenge. He’s never quite sure how to answer her, or how to deal with the fact that she’s his future soul mate. Every part of her is secure and unfazed, like she’s already looked inside herself and scooped out the parts that could cripple her, wiping them off her fingers with a no more than a tut.

‘What flavour is that anyway?’ he asks, pointing at her drink. ‘Or does asking that question make me seem creepy too?’

‘Lemon and apple,’ she answers quickly. ‘And no, that doesn’t make you seem creepy. Just an oblivious arsehole, who can’t even remember the flavour of the drinks he ordered five minutes ago for his friend.’

‘Oh, so we’re friends now?’

Kai pauses, the straw half-hanging out of her mouth. And all of a sudden she doesn’t look so confident anymore. Her hands clench against the table and Ben feels an urge, suddenly, to reach across and smooth out the tight points of her knuckles with his palm.

‘Yes,’ she says quietly. ‘We’re friends. Or at least, I’d like us to be. But Ben’ – and here she looks at him, her eyes wide and frightened and pleading – ‘this isn’t a date.’

‘Oh.’ Ben swallows and nods, trying to look anywhere that isn’t her eyes, still so wide and fawn-brown that it’s ridiculous. She could be a Disney character really, with eyes like that. ‘Okay. Sure.’

Kai sighs. ‘I just...’
Ben doesn’t look up, but can picture the frown on her face, the way her teeth pierce her lip as she sucks it in to think. It’s frightening how quickly he notices these small things about her, frightening in the same way gravity is when it draws him down through hundreds of feet. It’s like he doesn’t have a choice. And he wonders again, about the trap Spanner has set for them both with merely his words.

‘I’m scared,’ Kai finally confesses. ‘I like you, but I’m not even sure why half the time. It feels like fate, or whatever, is tricking me just because some guy in a spacesuit said I’m gonna marry you one day. I don’t like being jerked around like that.’

Ben snorts. For once, he actually understands what she means.

‘I mean you don’t even respect the work that I do. You get that it’s important to me, sure, but you don’t want to care about it, or even think about it too much.’

Ben straightens and opens his mouth, perhaps to protest, or maybe just to mouth off about the fact that he totally does care, no, really. But then he stops. Kai is looking small and afraid, her eyes fixed on the polished vanish of the table rather than on her smoothie and her hair has half fallen into shadow, the shade from the parasol drawing boundary lines across her cheek. On her, it’s a look that spells wrongness.

‘Kai,’ he says, ‘you’re right; this isn’t a date. Maybe I wanted it to be or needed it to be or, or whatever. And maybe you kinda felt the same. But I guess...maybe we both need to go away and think about what we want.’

Kai looks up and it’s like the sun slides into her smile as she beams at him. ‘Yeah, Ben,’ she says, half-laughing as she runs a shaky hand through her hair. ‘Yeah, that sounds good. And guess what?’

Ben raises an eyebrow. ‘What?’

‘For once, you don’t sound creepy at all.’

‘Dude,’ Kevin interjects later, his head buried in the boot of his car, ‘that defiantly sounded creepy.’

Ben looks down at the line of Kevin’s back, and at the pristine black of his t-shirt. He imagines slapping some actual colour into the fabric, something wet and messy like the paint that lolls inside an open canister nearby. But instead he bites down on the straw in his smoothie and sucks.

And yet, this silence is still enough to make Kevin stiffen and two seconds later, yank his head out of the depths of his car long enough to glare. ‘Wow. Not even a cheeky rejoinder? You must have it bad.’

Ben frowns, casually flicking his straw away with a finger. ‘For Kai? You know, I actually don’t know.’

The thought of her still hurts, still pulls on him like gravity. He likes her smile, her attitude, and memories of her sometimes clutch hold of his dreams, long enough to transform them into shaky
pornos, albeit ones without any real detail to them. Spanner would probably say that means it’s meant to be. But then again, Kai’s not the only one he dreams about.

Kevin’s shoulders slump. ‘Oh, well, if you don’t know, then I guess it wasn’t actually serious. You can say a lot of jacked-up stuff about a break-up. But if ‘I don’t know’ is one of them, then maybe it’s for the best that you say adios.’

Ben stares at him. ‘Wow. When did you become so wise?’

‘I got a girlfriend who reads Aristotle. For fun. You do the math.’

Ben makes a face. ‘Great. The last thing we need is for Gwen to turn into an actual philosopher.’

Kevin sighs. ‘You’re running away from the subject again. Looks like Gwen, the philosopher, was right; you do that a lot.’

Ben stares down. He wants to fiddle with the straw in his smoothie, but he can’t. He doesn’t have a spare hand anymore.

‘I don’t know how to feel about this,’ he says truthfully. ‘You know, she didn’t say anything about my arm, not once. She just treated me the way she always had. It was actually kinda refreshing.’

Kevin snorts and gives him a look. ‘Probably because she doesn’t have to stay around you day after day and watch you slip into a funk. She doesn’t have to focus on waking you up. We do.’

There’s something dark in Kevin’s voice now, Ben notes. Something not quite hidden. It boils under his words like a quiet, simmering temper.

‘Dude,’ he says in surprise. ‘Are you actually mad at her?’

Kevin snorts. ‘Yeah, no kidding. She brushes in and has a smoothie with you like it’s no big deal. And she what? Doesn’t even mention the fact you only have one arm? Doesn’t ask you what you’re doing about it and the Omnitrix? That’s messed up.’

Ben steps back, stung. ‘She treated me like a normal person. What’s wrong with that?’

‘Nothing,’ says Kevin blackly. ‘Except that’s precisely what she’s gonna do afterwards, swan off and do nothing. It’s easy to play nice like that. It’s much harder to be tough and actually get stuff done.’

Be the hero or go home. It echoes in Ben’s head like a mantra and he shakes it off, annoyed.

‘Well,’ he snaps, ‘at least she didn’t act like I was a cripple!’ He spins on his heel and walks off in a huff.

‘That’s it, walk away!’ Kevin yells after him. ‘You’re getting real good at that!’

Ben tries not to flinch when he hears the quick clash of metal as Kevin thrusts his wretch down against the work-table in anger. For it resounds with all the finality of a slammed door.

Chapter End Notes
Oh. Oh no.

Also, hopefully I didn't end up villianising Kai here. She's the same age as Ben, has a promising career and is essentially the Lara Croft of their universe. She's a little young to be tied down by 'destiny' or however Spanner wants to justify it.

I mean, I'm still not that fond of her. But I don't exactly want her unhappy, either.
Rook hasn’t really called him since the whole gay club incident. Yeeeah. Looking back on it, Ben can freely admit that perhaps this wasn’t one of his better ideas. Dimly, he tries to swish away Kevin’s whole ‘doing nothing is easy’ speech from out of his mind because the whole thing with Rook should prove, without a doubt, that maybe doing nothing is the best course of action to take. Hell, it seems to be what the guy himself wants.

But still...

Ben tells himself it’s for the best. It’s not like he and Rook text each other after all. He isn’t Gwen and can’t really talk about the Lost civilisation of Atlantis or whatever geeky thing they both like to boil their brains over. And honestly, he suspects that if Rook were to fire off a text on him, the guy would get lost halfway into the conversation with all the abbreviations and emoticons Ben would send back to him furiously, half out of spite. Or else he would get bored, very, very quickly.

Which is why he is surprised the next morning when his phone beeps. He groans, rolling onto his side and upsetting the smooth feel of his duvet as it swirls down to catch on the knob of his hip bone. The air brushes against his side, cold, unbearably so, and he groans again, realising that he forgot to turn the radiator on last night.

‘Stupid...’ he mutters and props himself up onto his elbow to rub at the sleep in his eyes. ‘Alright, alright....’ He yawns, hand already dipping down to brush against the carpet, fumbling over the upturned corner of an old magazine as he searches for his phone. ‘Ah-ha! Gotcha!’

He fiddles with the screen for a second, squinting at the sudden flare of brightness, before he feels his eyebrows rise.

*Come outside.*

Huh, okay then.

Ben fumbles his way out of bed and stumbles out through the house until he reaches the main door. He glances down at his phone again, feeling the cold, impersonal feel of it strike him full in the chest. Rook hasn’t even added a ‘please’ onto the end. A little lame of him, but hey, Ben can take a point when it’s made. Shrugging, he opens the door.

Rook’s head spins round instantly, and Ben pauses, his heart shifting slightly at the sight. Rook’s back is still turned to him, the rest of him hunched over on the doorstep, and considering how much of him is all bendy legs and elastic arms that often seem to eclipse the length of Ben’s very body, the sight is a powerful one. The main point is that Rook looks wrong all coiled up like that, on a step that seems like a pebble in comparison. And maybe a little like a dog too, faithfully waiting for his master to grant him passage through the door.

Whoah there, Ben thinks and crushes the thought mercilessly.

‘Dude,’ he says instead, ‘you made your point. Text messages don’t suit us at all.’
Rook groans and unfurls himself from the step. His eyes take in Ben’s sleep-rumpled form and he shakes his head slowly.

‘Well. You certainly look refreshed and ready for the day.’

Ben rolls his eyes. ‘It’s kinda hard to dress myself with only one arm,’ he points out. ‘And my Mum could do with the break.’

‘Hmm.’ Rook tilts his head to the side slowly. ‘I could do it,’ he offers, before his face falls as a new thought crosses it. ‘If, that is, you wouldn’t mind.’ He coughs and peers straight ahead into the open hallway that he suddenly, for some reason, seems to find incredibly engrossing.

Ben feels his lips quirk in amusement. ‘It’s not like we haven’t shared a room before,’ he points out. ‘You’ve seen me naked, or I guess near enough to it, plenty of times before.’

Rook meets his eyes hesitantly before glancing away, appearing even more flustered than before.

‘You did not know that I-’

‘Had a craving for this hot, hot bod?’

Ben bursts out laughing at the appalled look Rook gives him. ‘Nah, it’s cool. I’m not gonna suddenly freak out on you.’ He turns and attempts to saunter away as best he can. ‘Come on in,’ he calls over his shoulder.

And Rook, like a man walking up to the noose, follows him inside.

For a moment, Ben forgets how awkward things should be between them. Rook sits on his bed and politely listens as Ben tells him about sitting like a dummy and letting some woman in her thirties pour plaster over him.

‘I mean, she was nice and everything, but I kinda felt like I was some new art project of hers or something. All this, ‘tell me if it hurts,’ and ‘please tell me what you feel when I squeeze down here.’

As with his Grandpa, Ben is careful to omit certain details. Such as how, in one moment, a sudden rush of heat travelled down through the space where his arm should have been and reduced him to tears he had to blink away. And all of it happening as this stranger stared at him in concern.

Because he will never tell. Never. Really, he muses, doctor-patient confidentiality is a god-send.

‘You felt like an object, instead of a person,’ Rook murmurs, both unaware and sympathetic, and Ben can’t help but let the smile overtake his face at the sentiment. Because Rook always means the weird stuff he says and never feels embarrassed at saying it.

‘Kinda, I guess. But it was still nicer than, err, well...’

‘The way the media treats you,’ prompts Rook. ‘Yes, I imagine so. This woman, after all, is invested in your well-being in a way they do not have to be.’
'Right, right, ' Ben laughs. ‘I’m like their chew-toy, and they’re the dog. At least she was asking sensible questions.’ He pauses for a moment. ‘Hey, is it weird that I’m probably going to miss all the weird questions they ask me too?’

Rook bears his teeth in a grin. ‘You mean like ‘what did you have for breakfast?’’

‘Nah. I was thinking more along the lines of, ‘how do you think your actions reflect on Earth as a tourist destination’ or ‘do you still consider yourself fully human with all your wacky shape-shifting nonsense?’’

Rook frowns at this. ‘Ben...’

Ben sniggers at his expression and flops down next to him, crashing his head carefully into the thick bulge of muscle that makes up Rook’s upper arm. It stiffens at the contact, and though Ben feels a little mean, he loops his arm through the gap between his friend’s elbow and hip and leans in closer, hanging like a parasite from the limb.

‘Hey,’ he says, a little too casually. ‘If I were to give the Omnitrix away to someone, like maybe to someone like you-’

The room suddenly shifts and spins, a whirlwind of green duvet launching away from his legs, all as Rook abruptly thrusts him down into his lap. And Ben blinks up into that narrow orange glare, his back splayed against the lean rafters of Rook’s legs, before he narrows his own eyes.

‘Hey, I’m pretty sure Rayona never got this sort of treatment!’

‘How would you know? ’ Rook responds coldly. ‘You were not with us for every minute of our relationship.’

‘Uh...’

That’s a good point actually, and one Ben tries not to focus on too much but it’s difficult, what with Rook’s hand coming up to cradle the back of his neck, and Ben can’t help but jerk abruptly at this new warmth, almost knocking his head into the corner of his desk in the process. To which Rook sighs, and carefully pulls him up a little, just enough for Ben to rest his chest against the armoured plates attached to his own.

‘Jeez,’ Ben mutters, curling up enough for his cheek to smash into that same smooth blue. ‘We are really bad at this.’

But Rook doesn’t seem to be in the mood for self-pity. ‘I am not taking your Omnitrix, Ben.’

Ben sighs. ‘I don’t exactly think it should be shoved inside a shoebox, collecting dust either, buddy.’

Rook frowns, a familiar wrinkle forming on his nose. ‘You are keeping the Omnitrix inside a shoebox. Forgive me, if that does not sound very secure.’

Ben shrugs. ‘Hey, it’s what I did for the five years I didn’t wear it. For some reason nobody ever came looking for it in my closet.’

Rook shakes his head at the fickle nature of the universe. The one time everybody has a shot at gaining the Omnitrix for themselves and they don’t think to rummage through a teenager’s bedroom. ‘No wonder criminals keep trying to break into the secure vault at headquarters. I, myself, thought for sure that it would be in-’
‘I know, right?’ Ben smirks up at him, hair smudging into the fingers Rook keeps buried against his neck. ‘That’s what makes it so brilliant.’

Rook shakes his head again and rearranges his face into a suitably grave expression. ‘If you say so. But Ben I cannot, no, I will not accept that the Omnitrix should not belong to you anymore. You have made it your own through trial and error and that is not something I believe simply anybody could do.’

Ben stares at him levelly for a minute. And swallows. ‘I—’

‘Azmuth said he would be back to make more adjustments,’ Rook says, ‘and if he does not, well then, I shall be flying up to Galvan Prime to make a few suggestions of my own.’

Ben laughs. ‘I’d like to see that! But the last time I checked, the Omnitrix converts DNA, not whatever material they’re using to build me a new arm.’

‘Not all your aliens are primarily organic in nature,’ Rook says primly. ‘And if they can be converted back into human flesh, I see no reason why a prosthetic limb cannot be coaxed into morphing into a suitable replica of an alien’s limb.’

Ben raises an eyebrow. ‘Even for something like Goop?’ he asks, a challenge to his tone.

Rook pauses. ‘Well,’ he says, after moment of thought, ‘perhaps not every transformation will be accessible to you anymore.’

Ben sighs. ‘Well, either way, you’re certainly being more proactive than I am.’

Rook leans down, close enough to nuzzle his nose into Ben’s hair. ‘Forgive me,’ he says. ‘I have not properly expressed how happy I am that you are making steps to recovery. I am glad to see you smile properly, and to see you actually doing something about your missing arm.’

Ben chuckles, wrinkling his nose at the way fur from Rook’s chin brushes against his forehead. It’s not an unpleasant feeling, just strange. ‘My, my, someone’s feeling bold.’

Rook draws back sheepishly. ‘Yes. I apologise for the liberties I am taking. I suppose I am just relieved that you are not ‘freaked out’ by me, or backing away from any sort of physical contact.’

Ben smiles again. But he is feeling a little wary, it’s true, because this isn’t normal for them, not by any stretch. And Rook isn’t being as cautious as he thought he would be. He seems...almost playful. And Ben can’t help but wonder how much of that is his fault, since he hasn’t exactly been discouraging him.

‘Isn’t this the point where you tell me to get out and see Kai?’ he asks cautiously. But to his surprise, Rook doesn’t automatically tense or pull back. Instead he nuzzles his way a little deeper into Ben’s hairline.

‘I have been informed by Kevin that both of you wish to take a mutual break from each other.’

‘I guess.’ Ben wriggles, now uncomfortable at the turn of the conversation. ‘What gives, man? Yesterday you were singing her praises. Now you act as if you’re making a play for me.’

There’s a pause. Then Rook’s head draws back and, unbidden, Ben finds himself tilting his head back to follow it. ‘Would it be so bad if I was?’ the Revonnahgander asks.

Ben’s mouth promptly drops open.
‘I mean no disrespect to either Miss Green or Spanner,’ says Rook, though Ben has to frown a little at the frost he can hear bleeding through into his friend’s tone. ‘I am just...’

Ben snorts and breathes out through his nose. ‘You’ve just gone off her, haven’t you?’ he says dully. ‘Look, just because she didn’t stick around to hold my remaining hand, doesn’t mean—’

‘She did what was right for her,’ Rook cuts in firmly. ‘And that is well and good. But it is not what is right for you. I think you need people round you, no matter how you may protest. And while I am sure Miss Green cares, she does not appear to know you as well as she should. Though,’ he adds, and oh boy, Ben just knows he is not imagining the sheer amount of snit in that tone: ‘maybe if she stuck around, she would be able to remedy that.’

Ben bites his cheek, mostly to stop himself breaking out into laughter at the thought of Rook throwing a hissy fit like some teenage girl. ‘Wow,’ he says. ‘You are acting like every mean girl from every movie made about high school, ever.’

There’s a brief silence. Then—

‘Excuse me?’

To his credit, Rook sounds genuinely confused.

And Ben leans back, all the better to view his face. He might as well have fun with this, after all.

‘Alright, Romeo, I give up. If Kai doesn’t want me, then I guess I’ll give you a spin.’

He grins at the dawning look of disbelief on Rook’s face.

‘Let’s go out on a date.’

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Rook stammers. And nearly drops Ben. Which, given that he narrowly misses ramming his skull against the desk for the second time, Ben finds a lot more funny than he probably should.

Nevertheless, somehow, despite the truly confused look on Rook’s face, he wrangles an agreement out of the guy.

‘I guess it would be mean to make you eat chilli fries,’ he says musingly. ‘And you’re not like, super keen on Sumo Slammers, and there’s nothing good on at the movies right now—’

‘It does not have to be on this world.’

Ben stares down at Rook. The poor guy is staring at the floor and it’s actually in a weird way, kinda adorable. Ben’s never had anyone this shy wanting to date him before. Julie was quietly confident, Ester was eager, and Kai. Well.

‘This date,’ Rook says, confidence slowly seeping back into his tone. ‘It does not have to be a customary earth one, since I am, as you are so fond of pointing out sometimes, an alien.’

Ben looks at him warily. ‘You aren’t gonna make me eat space hoppers, are you? I’m not going anywhere where I have to eat insects.’
Rook smiles gently, and greatly daring, reaches down to take Ben’s hand. ‘No,’ he says softly, and Ben ignores the sudden jump and clench of his heart at the way Rook’s fingers run down to tangle with his own. ‘No, there will be no space ‘hoppers’, that, I can promise.’

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Always make sure you have a good life insurance policy in place when dating aliens. Not so much because of the alien in question, but because of their choice in venue when on said date.
Electricity darts through the atmosphere, launching from spike to spike and dancing in unison between strange, jagged black things that spin round and round to resemble miniature whirlwinds, whirlwinds, Ben thinks, with teeth. He peers closer, his nose smashing against the window in his eagerness and sees, in the stray seconds where he can concentrate, their forms breaking free of motion in the same way a child’s spinning top can run out of kinetic energy and drift onto its side. Windows flash like emeralds before him, their green shapes just as jagged and torn as the spiked towers they belong to, and in the faintest snatches of seconds behind them whizz stray currents of black and blue wind. Or what Ben assumes to be black and blue, since the green glass dappling over their natural hues has given the aliens inside the whole 'Emerald City' makeover straight from the 'Wizard of Oz'.

‘Dude,’ he breathes, ‘you took me to Kinet! XIR8’s planet!’ Then he turns to Rook and makes his face carefully blank. ‘We’re definitely gonna die here,’ he declares solemnly.

As though to give heat to his words, a lightning bolt suddenly arches out of another tower to crackle against the one that has spun to a temporary halt and in less than a second, it spins back into an upright position, already starting to whirl back round into a frightening blur of speed.

But Rook simply looks at him smugly. ‘Oh no,’ he says, his voice taking on that informative air, that even now, after all this time, Ben isn’t sure whether to be endeared by or annoyed at. ‘We are not actually going inside those buildings. I would make for a poor date if I allowed you to splatter against the walls inside.’

‘Ookay,’ says Ben, tugging against his hoodie awkwardly. ‘Well, where are we going, then?’

Rook cocks an eyebrow at him. ‘I thought humans liked surprises?’

‘As long as the surprises don’t ‘splatter’ them,’ Ben murmurs, eyeing Rook.

Rook frowns a little, mostly for using his own words against him, and Ben shakes his head and smiles. Out on a date, and the guy’s still the same. He’s even dressed head to toe in his customary armour, not that Ben expects anything else, and secretly he’s even glad of it. He leans back and conjures up an image of Rook in a tux, holding himself awkwardly and glancing over at a youtube video to see if he’s fastened the wrist cuffs correctly. He smiles again and tugs at his hoodie a little more confidently. He suddenly feels justified in his informal attire, glad that he hasn’t told his mother what exactly he’s doing this evening, since just the mere mention of the word ‘date’ is usually enough for her to give him a look and ask if he’s going to smarten up for once.

‘We will not be splattered,’ Rook tells him, finally, ‘but we may well be fried.’

Ben perks up in alarm, his hoodie falling free from his fingers entirely. ‘I’m sorry, what?’

But Rook simply smiles and takes the ship down. And every now and then, lighting catches hold of them both, crawling across the windows in a sheet of sparks as it harmlessly diffuses off the sides. It’s beautiful, like the jump of light at the beginning of a Catherine wheel, and yet Ben can’t take his eyes off his partner.
Rook? You’re joking, right? *Rook!*

Rook, Ben reflects later, is not joking. Because Rook, as he has so kindly reminded Ben hours ago, is an alien. And aliens are weird.

Ben stares down as the lake before them. The water is oily and black, dyed into a gleaming blue only by the cracks of lightning that hit and smack outwards against its waves, causing frissons of white to form. And deep below, Ben can see luminescent globes, hairline fractures of violet or blue running over their frame like the crackling lines of brown that smother the human skull in dim reminders of when it was once a blobby mess, still developing in pieces within the womb.

He shivers.

‘Really?’ he asks. ‘Diving? In this weather?’

Are you crazy? he wants to scream. But he doesn’t. Maybe it’s because some part of him is just morbidly curious. Or perhaps it’s because, deep down, he enjoys seeing Rook’s face light up in that same geeky way it does in museums and libraries. And also settled within him, is the thought that if Rook seriously thought that they would be in lethal danger, he would never have brought them here. Even now, some part of Ben’s brain is convinced that Rook is gonna look at him, smile, then yell out ‘psyche’ and transform into Lucy.

But that doesn’t happen. Instead, Rook yanks the transparent covering of Ben’s suit up over his head, his smile widening as Ben pokes his tongue out at him.

‘That’s fifty pew-youns,’ says the sour-faced Kineceleran by their side. She hands over the second suit as soon as Rook drops the coins in her hand and whizzes off to the next customer before he even has a chance to thank her. Rook stares after her for a few moments before shrugging and beginning the herculean task of setting his own gangly limbs inside the see-through suit. It stretches and clings to his limbs like duct-tape, easily wrinkling and then pulling back, as though it has a mind of its own whenever it stretches too thin.

Ben rolls his eyes. They’re not quite the same, but still, the designs of these things reminds a little too much of the suits Fistrick and his cronies used to space-dive off the space-station they blew up, back when Rook was first discovering his craving for meatball subs.

‘We have about twenty minutes of oxygen in these things,’ Rook informs him tartly, breaking into his thoughts with a quick snap of his suit.

‘Oh yeah? I don’t see any tank.’

‘The molecules are pre-packed into the interior lining of the suit,’ Rook explains, ‘They get released gradually over the course of the dive, expelling enough of a chemical reaction to give us a steady supply. Not to worry,’ he adds, motioning to various Kinecelerans stationed at different points around the lake, all of them, Ben notes wryly, looking terribly bored. ‘If we outlast our time, they will come down and find us. They are not as fast underwater as they are on land, but they are fast enough.’

‘Um,’ says Ben, staring back at the water. ‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Rook, but there’s an
awful lot of lightning here. And last time I checked, adding water into the mix wasn’t such a great idea.’

‘The suits are insulated, Ben.’

‘I don’t care how shock-proof they are,’ Ben retorts crisply. ‘You get hit by a bolt, you’re still gonna feel it. Those things are hot.’

‘Which is why we are diving,’ Rook says smoothly. ‘Lightning tends to disperse along the surface area of a conductor. It is why some divers are surprised to reach the surface and discover a storm brewing, since there was no ready sign of it below.’

‘Uh huh,’ Ben mutters. ‘Tends.’

‘Well, yes,’ says Rook, completely unruffled, ‘it is lightning after all. There is never a hundred percent guarantee.’

And with no further ado, he slips off the dock into the waves below, executing a perfect dive as he does so.

Ben stares after him for a few seconds.

‘Right,’ he says. ‘Time for the stranglers to get in line.’

And with considerably less grace, he tumbles off the side. Hey, he’s only got one arm after all. It’s not like he can do the breaststroke or anything.

...which is probably why, a few seconds later, Rook hooks his arm around his waist and drags them both down into the dark.

And Ben freezes at this, his organs churning at the sudden movement. The dark rushes past, silver zig-zagging and dividing the black that wraps around him like a sheet. Idly, he wonders if perhaps the water isn’t unbearably cold because of all the lightning that falls like a splatter of heat against its surface, much in the same way oil rains out from a pan in a hissing, spitting, explosion that screams. That, or the suit he’s wearing really is insulated, in more ways than one.

Despite everything, Ben takes a deep breath, then lets it out slowly. It’s all in aid of the fight not to give into the innate panic that always strikes whenever he’s underwater in a human body. It just feels weird. Though not as weird, perhaps, as the tight warmth around his waist telling him that, this time, he’s not alone.

Down and down they both drift, Ben offering a few powerful kicks of his own next to Rook’s steady strokes. After a few fumbles, and a little teeth grinding, they settle into some warped version of the front crawl, Ben’s right arm extending as Rook’s left draws back, mostly in place of the arm Rook has tucked round his waist. It’s a bungled effort and Rook’s still doing most of the work, but then Ben is still struggling to understand the new balance of his body on land, let alone inside water. So it’s a miracle, he thinks, that he hasn’t started flailing like a fish with a snapped spine down here.

Either way, they end up descending through streams of coral that glow like pearls, watching them spiral up around them in a helix shape. It’s kinda living diving into an IMAX cinema screen, the glistened tuck and weave of these bubbly fronds scattering shattered rainbows against the glassy texture of Ben’s skin, or at least the way it appears under the casing of the protective suit. The tone mixes between pink and purple, shifting into red as a blue spark lights up the water overhead, and one grouped-together cluster drift out from the main branch like some stray seaweed. Ben smiles,
letting a finger trail through the thick gaps they leave behind.

Down here, he thinks, it’s like being in a house with a power-cut, no light except for the intermittent flashes from the surface above. He’s still amazed Rook decided this was a good idea. Still, he has to admit it gets the adrenalin pumping and in that way it’s a little like touring a haunted house or watching a scary movie together, with no way to know what’s gonna jump out from outta the gloom. And when something, like another frond of coral, shifts into his hands a few seconds later, it makes him jump a little and allows Rook to tighten his arm against his ribs. It’s strangely nice.

There’s no real way to tell how long they’ve been down here, (though Ben’s willing to bet Rook’s got some sort of timer programmed to let out a series of warning beeps from inside one of the pockets of his suit) when they stumble across one of the globes.

Ben’s first thought, upon seeing it, is ‘oh cool, a giant jellyfish. ’ The second is, ‘oh man, I’m gonna be so mad if it stings us, and if it does, I’m so gonna kill Rook’. But then his thoughts lie silent. Because, up close, he realises that it isn’t a jellyfish at all. Yes, the crescent shape, and the way its edges ripple out into a series of frills are definitely jellyfish-like. But there are no tentacles, no streamers, floating behind. And it doesn’t rotate or even unfurl, giving no sign of using its billowing ends to propel itself forward. Instead it simply bobs, like some sort of giant floating crystal.

Rook reaches out with a hand to bring it close to his chest. And the fractures that run along its surface instantly light up, a thousand gleams running inside the slide of their hollows like Christmas lights. It reminds Ben of those glass globes in shops, the ones sold next to lava lamps, always reacting to touch and letting electricity frizzle out against the heat of fingertips that rest on the other side. He's brought out of his musings by a tap on his waitline, Rook's fingers drumming out an urgent tune against the space that nurses his hip-bone.

He looks at him to see the Revonnahgander jerking his head upwards, a universal gesture if he ever saw one. So Ben nods back in return, and slowly begins to kick.

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They break the surface and Rook immediately shoves the crystal, or whatever it is, into Ben’s arm, just in time for it to start shrinking upon contact with the air. Ben stares at it as he feels Rook start to tow them back to the shore, watching it dwindle down into the size of your average run-of-the-mill crystal ball.

Okaaaay, he thinks, as Rook heaves them through the waves. It’s not exactly been an unpleasant experience and it’s even been kinda cool in places. And at least nobody has tried to interrupt it with a whole armada at their side. But it’s still the weirdest date he’s ever been on.

The next second, everything is thrown off-kilter by a large force that slams down onto them like a hammer. Then it diffuses, sleeking off the sides of his suit like rainwater. Ben blinks, but the memory, what little of it there should be, is non-existent. There was no sudden flash of light, no explosion of noise, and no slow-motion sequence of electricity scattering through the waves like shards of glass, to remember. No, he is just left feeling as though he’s lost something, a vital second or two, before the waves rise up into unfamiliar positions and break away from the parts of his body that moments ago, had been exposed only to their inky insides. And he wonders if this is
what it had been like for other people whenever he turned into Clockwork, suddenly jumping out into places where he had been invisible moments before.

Then, dimly, he becomes aware of a hum under his skin and a small ringing noise in his head. It’s a little like getting punched in the face, lightly.

The next second, he almost disappears under the waves entirely, water slicing against his suit-encased face as Rook shudders at his side, shoulders dipping beneath the blackness before they straighten. Ben feels himself frowning, his fingers already loosening their hold on the weird crystal thingy so that they can grab hold of Rook – but that’s before his partner manages to shudder again and promptly shoves his arm out, continuing to yank them back towards the shore.

‘You okay, buddy?’

‘Fine,’ Rook grits out.

‘Uh-huh.’ Ben eyes him, his fingers cautiously re-affirming their grip on this weird thing Rook wants him to keep. ‘Well, I guess you were right; the suits are insulated.’

Rook coughs out something that sounds like a laugh, one that shakes on its own notes.

‘Still,’ Ben offers, pleased to find his voice still working. ‘I thought lightning was meant to be hot.’

‘It is,’ Rook mutters, ‘the air it heats on the path it takes to the ground often takes on a temperature five times that of your own sun. But do not forget; the amount of time lightning takes to pass through something is close to a half-millionth of a second, less than that, even. There is no time for internal burns to form the way they do with other electric shocks. Though that does not prevent the skin on the outside from becoming scorched.’

Ben sniffs. ‘I don’t feel scorched.’

‘Yes, that is what the suits are for,’ Rook agrees blithely, his hand accidently striking a piece of wood that rolls out from the flush of foam his fingers shove forwards. Ben follows the quick spike of brown motion it stirs up with his eyes, watching the way it comes to roll down beneath the kick of their feet, their toes now barely stroking the mud-soaked bottom. ‘I have to say that I agree with you. You do not appear at all hot.’

Ben quickly turns his eyes to Rook, mainly because of the upward lilt of innocence his partner uses to stress his last word with.

‘Is that a joke? ‘Cos if you suddenly turn round and call me pretty, we’re gonna have a problem.’

‘You would rather I call you ugly?’

Ben glowers. ‘You’d better be pulling my leg right now-hey!’

For Rook has already turned, both feet now rooted firmly on the bottom of the lake. And then, in one casual move, he swipes Ben’s legs out from under him, water immediately splattering everywhere; but this does not seem to dissuade Rook in the slightest. With each stride, he cleaves through the waves like some colossal titan of Greek myth, his chest jutting out a little too proudly for Ben’s liking. Although that may just be a part of his imagination, spiked furiously by the thought of being carried in the same way he’s seen Rook carry damsels in distress.

‘I apologise, Ben, but I find myself having to pull both your legs free.’
‘Yes,’ Ben grits out, seeing that all too familiar sparkle in his partner’s eye, the one that lets him know he’s having far too good a time at Ben’s expense. ‘Well, guess what? They both work fine now.’

‘Forgive me.’

Ben suddenly finds himself back on his feet, Rook’s hands quickly getting to work on freeing him from his suit. Ben tries to help by clawing at a few plastic-like wrinkles near his neck, but only ends up nearly strangling himself.

‘Urgh!’

‘Hold still!’ Rook scolds. ‘It may be embarrassing, but rest assured, once you have two arms again, you will no longer require aid. So for now, please bear with it.’

Ben sighs and gives in. Dimly, near the curl of his shoe, the crystal ball gleams up at him. And Ben glares back at it. Hard.

‘What even is that thing anyway?’ he asks, letting all the frustration he feels pour out in from his voice in a rush.

Rook, mid-way through freeing his arm, pauses at the tone and then looks at him with a smile. ‘It is a souvenir. I could not win you a prize from a fairground stall, as is earth tradition, so this shall simply have to serve as a substitute. And,’ he adds, something smug taking hold of his smile, ‘it will be indefinitely more useful.’

Ben shoots him a weird look at this, prompting the crystal to roll over with a slight kick of his foot. ‘Sure it’s pretty,’ he says eventually. ‘But it’s just a big...ball. Well, kinda.’

Rook smiles enigmatically. ‘You shall see.’

And despite Ben’s pestering, he refuses to say a word more.

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They stop off on the way home at an space station diner which has a Mr Smoothies self-service section in the corner so Ben’s happy, and an all-you-eat buffet featuring a four star cuisine choice of localised dishes, which is more than enough to lift up Rook’s spirits.

‘What on earth is this?’ Ben asks, pointing at a bunch of red slop that would, on his planet, resemble chilli sauce except that here there are pieces of purple fungus protruding from its centre.

‘Nothing ‘on earth’, I assure you,’ Rook says gamely, accompanying the joke with an exaggerated wink.

Ben groans as Rook takes out a huge spoon and promptly consumes half the slop in a single mouthful.

‘God,’ he says, ‘I’m just glad I can wash this muck out with a rainbow squeezie.’

And at the very least, he tells himself, there is nothing here that even remotely resembles an insect. Or space hopper. Or...anything disgusting, that looks as though it should be flying or crawling on
six legs, instead of roosting on a spit.

Almost dreamily, he looks over onto the table next to them. And promptly sees one of Crash-hopper’s species swallowing down a small alien bird, it’s spider-like legs still wiggling in a purple flummox. Ben then, very neatly, turns his head to the side and fights down his gag relax. He is mostly successful, turning back a few seconds later to see Rook watching him, his own plate empty, although the smile on his face looks in danger of sliding off entirely.

‘...Perhaps we should have stopped somewhere else.’

Ben rolls his eyes. ‘Dude, no offence, but I’m always gonna find alien food disgusting.’ He stops, recalls how much Rook loves Amber Ogia and hastens to add: ‘well, most of it, anyway. Some of it’s...great.’

But the level stare Rook’s giving him, tells him that the other isn’t fooled.

‘You are not going to throw up?’

‘NO!’

Though that’s a point, Ben thinks. He’s thrown up in front of Rook more times than he likes to remember, and the guy still wants to kiss him? Well, he assumes Rook wants to kiss him. And not lick him, or whatever.

Unaware of his current thoughts, Rook gives him an amused look. ‘And you are sure that you can gain enough sustenance from...thirteen smoothies?’

Ben frowns. ‘Hey, these things are pretty filling, you know? And it’s not like they’re just water. They mash up proper ingredients in there, my stomach can tell.’

‘I would never question your stomach.’

Ben’s lips quirk. ‘Just my tastes, huh?’

‘You said it, not I,’ Rook says glibly, rising to his feet and already digging through a grey pocket in search of money. ‘Either way, I assume you are finished?’

Ben takes one, long, final slurp, dragging out the noise for as long as he can, mostly because it’s fun just to see how unimpressed he can make Rook look as a result.

‘Yeah...’ he answers finally, still basking in the way strawberries and blueberries have managed to flood his mind entirely, leaving behind an impression of cool softness. ‘Yeah, I’m good.’

And hey, if Rook’s gonna pay for all this, he’s certainly not complaining.

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So to summarise, it hasn’t been all that bad. Nobody’s tried to kill them or kidnap them and well, it’s been weird no doubt about that, but then again, Rook is Rook so Ben has kinda been prepared for that since the very beginning. And it’s not as though he doesn’t enjoy seeing new planets. Those spinning towers and the launch of lightning between them were way awesome.
Also, thankfully, Rook hasn’t been running round opening doors for him. Ben’s not sure how he would have responded if that had happened.

Except now he has to deal with Rook looking awkward and unsure, his eyes locked onto the steering wheel he keeps tightly clenched within his hands as the shadows roll over his face. Ben watches as the passing streetlights play a freeze-frame montage over his partner, that long mouth curling then crinkling in antsiness, and each time rearranging itself into a deeper slant than before.

‘Did you have a good time?’ Rook finally breaks his silence to ask, just as they pull up beside Ben’s house.

And Ben, seeing the uncertainty at work in the face before him, offers up a smile.

‘I can safely say that it has been a unique experience,’ he says honestly. ‘You should be proud. I don’t really get to say things like that very often. Well, say them and actually mean them, I mean.’

Rook seems to perk up at this. ‘Oh,’ he says. ‘I am glad.’

Ben reaches for the handle of the door, then hesitates. Usually, at this point of a date, isn’t this when people lean in for a...

‘Waiting for something?’

He turns and with no small amount of disbelief sees a very satisfied smile resting on Rook’s lips. In fact, it looks downright smug.

Ben narrows his eyes. ‘No,’ he bites out. ‘I can’t think of anything worth waiting for in here.’

He wretches open the door in a huff and is half-way out of the vehicle when Rook’s hand snags on his sleeve.

‘A moment, if you please.’

Grudgingly, Ben shifts and slides back into his seat, realising with a rush of annoyance that a part of him wishes his new arm would be ready and in place. That way, at least he could maybe cross his arms at Rook, because pouting without such a gesture just doesn’t seem to hold the same stubborn value.

To add to his ire, Rook doesn’t seem to look too fussed over his attempt to leave.

‘Ben,’ he says smoothly, ‘you were about to leave without your present.’

His hand still attached to Ben’s sleeve, he uses his other to fish down around the clatter of the dashboard before it resurfaces with the blue glow of the ball.

‘Keep it with you,’ he says, face unusually grave, ‘and if you have trouble sleeping with a... stomach ache...’ He starts to look nervous and Ben watches, bemused, as sweat starts to dampen the other’s brow. ‘Place it against the offending body part and then you should feel some relief.’

Ben grasps hold of the ball in one hand, before rolling it down his arm so that it comes to rest near the scrunch of coiled material near his elbow. ‘Huh,’ he says, ‘you took me all that way for alternative alien therapy.’

Rook cringes. ‘I-’

And, before he can change his mind, Ben quickly leans across the seat between them, his shadow
dappling across the upholstery and scrawling its way across Rook’s knee. And then, with a quick intake of breath, he presses a kiss to the closest furry cheek he can find. He has just enough time to pull back to see Rook’s eyes widen in astonishment before he can tear himself away, his hand firmly keeping hold of the gift as he slips out of his seat and into the night.

And if there’s a slight jaunt to his step, just before he manages to slide his key into the lock of his front door, well then. It’s probably just the endorphin talking.

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When Ben wakes that night, the pain is a savage tear against his shoulder, an ugly weight that presses down against invisible and intangible nerves, ones that have long since been lost. Ben gasps, and as always, can’t quite manage to tear his head and his eyes away from the space of his sheets, the place where, his nerves are screaming at him, there should be an arm. The sheets, the blankets, they should be giving way to the weight of that limb, decorating it with wrinkles and creases beneath the duvet itself. But there is nothing there to press down upon, nothing to provide shelter between them. Just heat, and a shock of tingling pain that bears fangs.

Ben grimaces, holding back the whimper that wrestles its way out of his throat like a struggling hostage.

No, it’s not as bad now, he tells himself firmly. It’ll go, it’ll go. Just leave it.

And then, on the dresser, a sparkle catches his eye. And he turns his head, gasping as he sees a collection of lights nestling within the opening cracks of Mr Souvenir. They’re like flower buds, tiny twinkles of yellow pods that bustle through the darkness with the same intermittent glow of a lava lamp.

Ben doesn’t even have to think about it. His nails are already digging into the shoulder, ripping open tape and white tuffs of bandages that all of a sudden, feel as delicate as stray wisps of cotton wool. And then his hand reaches out, grabbing for the ball and magically, without any strain or fuss, it rolls into his palm as though it belongs there, fitting beneath the squeeze of his fingers. Sweating, shaking and an all-round mess, Ben huffs and hoists himself further up the bed, twisting until his t-shirt rides up, high enough for the empty sleeve to flop away and leave enough space behind for him to press the cool curve of the ball’s surface to the glimpse of skin that pokes through.

And that’s when the lights dance, threading themselves across onto his body in a spreading twist of movement that resembles the tight coils of flower stems, ones locked together in a chain by the work of human fingers. Ben watches, a little creeped out by all these tiny circuits and the even smaller lantern-like blobs they scatter across his skin, all in eerie imitation of the dot-to-dot patterns you see in children’s colouring books.

But then...oh. Oh. There are tiny pinpricks against his stump, tiny needles of electricity piercing into the place where his limb should be and the pain, that heavy, crushing pain, lifts. It scatters and disperses, as though confused.

Ben breathes in through his nose and watches the light play against his skin. He’s read about stuff like electroshock therapy to help scramble up the way the body perceives pain, knows it as a temporary relief, but oh. What a relief it is. He almost starts crying.
Then he bites his lip, remembering the nervous look on Rook’s face as he had fumbled over his words, lying quickly and badly to replace ‘arm’ with ‘stomach ache’. Ben frowns. Is he really such a bad actor?

But then his vision blurs. And he breathes. All that, he tells himself firmly, all this, can wait until morning. For now, he simply enjoys the tingles racing through his stump. And for a moment, he feels whole.

Chapter End Notes

Remember folks, it’s not a proper alien date unless you’ve gone on some death-defying event together.

On a more serious note: more weakly researched science! Yay! But all I really learnt was that people seem to be very nervous about saying what they think happens to the body when lightning strikes it. There’s a lot of general theorising, rather than absolute fact-making going on, which, fair enough. You can’t exactly ram an actual human being full of electricity in a lab and take notes.

There are some rather chilling accounts from divers though, on how everything underwater can seem calm, but when you resurface into a lightning storm, everything is in chaos. And of course you panic, because the oxygen tank on your back is like a massive lighting rod. One diver who got hit said it was like being slammed by a car, although whether he actually had been run over by car earlier on in life, he neglected to mention. Either way, I guess he was stumbling around for a way to describe the force he felt he was struck with.

Which is also why Rook and Ben are wearing suits and not those type of cylinders. Also, kindly ignore Rook’s explanation about oxygen molecules unfurling from the lining of the suit’s interior. As far as I know, that’s not even remotely possible. Then again, of course, their universe has working teleports, a phone and internet (or extranet) service that encompasses several solar systems, and cars made out of crystal. So...you know...

Originally, this was divided into two chapters, and I have been furiously editing and re-editing certain paragraphs that have leapt up to slap me in the face, in the hope of turning them into something readable. I am still a little unsure of how some elements have turned out, but, urgh, sometimes you have to let go and allow a little time to pass before you can truly say whether something has turned into a disaster.
For an alien you’ll become, in body, in mind,

The next morning Ben almost shoots off a text message. Almost. He’s about to type out something short and snappy, fingers hovering over the keys when he hesitates, remembering the last text message he sent. And the one he received in return.

It just niggles. The idea that Rook has managed to see through him and that all that acting, all that smiling, was for nothing. After all, if Rook can do that, then what’s to stop Grandpa or Gwen or anybody else from noticing?

The thought is horrifying enough for Ben to shove his phone onto the dresser in a show of temper and watch, angrily, as the green cover lets out a satisfying smack of sound against his lamp.

Stupidly enough, this makes him feel better. A lot better, he reflects, than he probably would have felt had he actually succeeded in sending off a waspy little retort to Rook. The dude deserves a better wake-up call than that.

He groans and buries his face into his hand; as much of it as he can anyway. He’s not looking forward to actually talking to the guy. But it has to be done for his own sanity, if nothing else.

First though...Ben glares down at his stump. The next time he goes swimming, he vows, he won’t have to have someone else there to pull him through the water. No, he’ll do it with his own strength, even if part of that strength has to be derived from whatever new limb is attached to his shoulder.

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‘So,’ he says, two hours later, ‘an operation, huh?’

Doctor Bluebell beams and wow, is that a weird look on her. She’s practically vibrating with excitement, enough for the room to feel as though it’s thrumming with energy.

‘Yes!’ she bursts out enthusiastically. ‘Myoelectric prostheses has been around for a few years, even before we had aliens from more advanced civilisations willing to trade with us. Either way, we manage well enough with what we have now. The idea is to create rudimentary sensation through your new limb so you can start to think of it as less of a tool and more of an actual arm. The transition is slightly easier that way. You see-’

And here Ben is thoroughly reminded of Blukic and Driba as she starts to bubble off about the tiny sensors that will be lodged within the robotic fingers and wrist, and all the other important parts that require tiny slides of metal and wire in place of muscle.

‘They will be constantly measuring the force you exert on foreign objects, recalculating weight and warmth and other variables and sending it, in bursts of neural data, up to the cluster of electrodes embedded in your shoulder-’

‘Embedded?’
‘Well, yes, you will require surgery to place them next to the healthy cluster of nerves that weren’t affected by the amputation, in order for the signals to travel up to your brain.’

‘Oh goody.’

‘But,’ she continues determinedly, ‘the brain interprets these bursts as feeling. It won’t be exactly the same but—’

‘But it’ll be near enough for me to hold an actual smoothie without squishing it? Yeah, you’re right. That is pretty amazing.’

Ben looks at her then, properly looks at her, and takes in her joy, seeing the way she is almost quivering in her seat. It’s enough for him to offer her up a real smile, a tired one, and yet for some reason he does not feel the strain of yesterday. The movement of his mouth feels lighter to wear, less a mask and more actual Ben.

‘Wow, Doc,’ he says, feeling the smile quirk slightly, pulling out into something more amused. ‘For all this talk about nerves, you seem to be a veritable cluster of them yourself. Shake any harder, and I might mistake you for a smoothie.’

Her face instantly rearranges itself into a scowl and Ben can’t quite hide his smile, not entirely, at the way she clamps her hands down on her knees as though they can trap the quiver that still runs inside her. Because even if she can still herself entirely, it won’t do a thing to disguise the light in her eyes. And it makes him take it back, what he thought before. This thing, that excitement that sets her nerves alight, it’s not what lives inside Blukic and Driba when they talk (though perhaps, he allows, it might take on the shape of a close cousin). No, it’s what lives inside him, what drives him, or at least drove him on all the days he could go hero, back when he could love it and beat down those who truly deserved it.

‘You know,’ he finds himself saying thoughtfully, ‘I would like to actually be able to hold things properly and to carry more than one thing at a time. Let’s go for it.’

A spasm runs her at that, taking hold of her brow. ‘Yeeah,’ she says hesitantly. ‘About that...are you sure you don’t want to talk to those Plumber scientists in charge of actually making the arm? They’re using my designs, my specifications, but they understand some of the intricacies of the technology better than I do.’ She shrugs with a smile. ‘I tend to be better with crafting legs. Besides most of my patients don’t have a bunch of squabbling grey alien friends running into their surgery to insult their intelligence.’

Ben stares at her, a little horrified.

‘Wait, they actually did that?’

‘There may have been a few comments about the limited size of the human brain, yes.’

Ben groans. It’s not like he expected the whole thing to be Plumber-free or anything but—

‘Sign me up for the surgery,’ he says firmly, ‘but do me a favour? Keep my ‘squabbling alien friends’ away from me during the actual operation.’

The last thing he needs is Blukic and Driba hovering over him with a bunch of surgical knives.

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When he leaves the office, his phone, now with a thin crack dividing the perfect spill of green down its back, buzzes incessantly and with a sigh he fishes it out of his pocket, scrolling down to see a host of text messages from Gwen.

*Ben, tell Rook he’s being childish*, reads one. *Srsly Ben, tell Rook to switch on his phone!* squawks another.

Ben sighs, and instead of sending back something that’s sure to earn her wrath like, *lol, u brght this on urslf*, he dials her number.

‘Hey,’ he says as soon as she picks up, ‘I’m not gonna be your go-between.’

‘Oh, come on, Ben!’ she half-shouts, sounding thoroughly exasperated. ‘Don’t tell me that receiving radio silence from Rook wouldn’t bother you too!’

Ben fidgets. ‘Well, no,’ he mutters after a moment. ‘I guess I can’t tell you that. But what I can tell you is that he’s kinda miffed at you. I’ve even heard him call you Gwen.‘

‘Whoa.’

‘I know, right? You are definitely getting the cold-shoulder treatment. Well, you would be if you were actually talking, so I guess it’s closer to you actually getting the silent treatment.’

‘Jeez,’ says Gwen with a tired huff to her voice. ‘Do you have to make it sound as though we’re dating? I’ve already had Kevin give me the stink eye for complaining too much about a ‘dude’, and I’m quoting here, ‘that I don’t even want to bone.’ Insert a couple of other furry jokes and you get the general picture.’

Ben flushes. Or at least it feels like he does. The hand holding his phone feels red-hot, for example, and the skin on his face feels itchy, nibbled raw as though he’s ducked out under the sun’s rays for too long.

‘Ben?’

‘Tell Kevin he doesn’t have to worry on that front.’ Jeez, is that really his voice? It sounds like he’s croaking. ‘In fact, tell him that he’s worrying about the wrong Tennyson, completely.’

There’s silence. Then Gwen, with an awed timbre to her voice, says, ‘wait, really?’

At this, Ben sees red. ‘Yes, really! Why are you surprised? You’re the one who told me the guy had a thing for me in the first place!’

‘Yeah, but...’ she’s struggling, he can tell. ‘I didn’t think you’d actually go for it. I just wanted you to be patient with him, to understand a little why he couldn’t always be that way with you. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for you, really. I’m just surprised.’

‘Oh.’ The hollow drops out of Ben’s stomach. ‘Oh. Well, tell Kevin not to make too many furry jokes at my expense. Otherwise we’re gonna have a problem.’

‘No promises.’

‘No, really,’ says Ben, making his tone as sweet as possible. ‘I mean I won’t have a problem, not at all. Kevin, though? Well, he might have to find someone else to help fix up his car, since you
know, he’s always complaining that being around me leads to it getting broken. And Rook will be far too busy to help him with it or to go visit auto shows, since, you know, he’s getting some furry action on the side.’

There’s a long silence. Then:

‘Oh no,’ Gwen whispers in mock-horror. ‘What have I helped create?’

Ben grins. ‘And just think! You managed it all without a magic spell.’

They both start cackling at the same time, their laughter blending into static over the receiver and Ben, his shoulders shaking, is reminded of when they were both ten, or maybe eleven, in the rare moments when their senses of humour aligned and everything in the universe was all the funnier for it.

‘Hey,’ he calls, sputtering out a final bout of laughter. ‘It’s okay. I’ll talk to Rook for you.’

He owes her, after all.
He still has access to the plumber base, the familiarity of the green lights that flash and read his DNA feeling no less weird than the last time he stepped in here with both his arms firmly attached. And if he notices people staring at him a little too closely as he walks through the steel-plated corridors, well then, that’s their business. It’s not like he’s really friends with anyone here, though sure, he gets on with some of them when he talks, trading tips over video game levels and other small inconsequential stuff in the same way he offered up meaningless words to people in high school - but at the end of the day, it’s simply not the same.

And just as he’s wondering if he should ask them all to take a photo to make it last longer, Jerry from inhuman resources brushes by his knee, his beady little eyes wide with whatever new emergency the accounting division has rung up for him.

‘Hi Ben!’ he exclaims breathlessly, giving his knee a quick pat. Then, after looking heavily embarrassed at his daring, he simply waves his hand up in Ben’s general direction, sighing to himself as it accidently bangs against Ben’s leg again. ‘Urgh, bye Ben.’

Ben watches him scurry off, amused and feeling at least ten pounds lighter. ‘Bye Jerry,’ he calls after him and continues his search for Rook.

Who...is not in the canteen. Or at the main monitors. Or even in the rooms where all the fiddling with machines and tinkering with blasters take place. And inside the training rooms, a favourite haunt of his, there is simply not a trace.

‘You’re seriously telling me he’s off-duty?’ Ben mutters to himself, before shrugging and beginning the long trek to Rook’s quarters.

‘Hello?’ he calls out, rapping at the door and making a face at all the shiny screws and bolts wedged into its surface. How Rook manages to live somewhere that seems to leech all the colour from the surrounding walls, Ben will never know. ‘C’mon man. Don’t tell me I had to endure all those probing stares from the other plumbers for nothing.’

At this, the door whooshes open and Rook peers out at him, looking particularly blearily-eyed. And also, in only his underwear. Huh, okay, that’s definitely new.

Ben smirks, carefully keeping his eyes on Rook’s face. ‘Now look at who’s all refreshed and raring to go?’ he teases.

Rook groans weakly, rolls his eyes, and turns, abruptly plodding back to his bed where he collapses onto the sheets with a sigh. Ben frowns as he follows him in, waiting for the door to slide shut before he decides to speak. ‘Guess the lightning took a lot out of you, huh?’

‘I may be suffering a bit of a delayed reaction, yes.’ Rook’s voice comes out, muffled by the pillow as he slumps down harder into the sheets. ‘I feel...listless. Magister Tennyson was kind enough to allow me the day off.’

Ben snickers. ‘Dude, you don’t have to refer to him so formally in my presence.’
'Forgive me,' says Rook dryly, rolling over to expose his face to the green light flickering above. The he winces, eyes scrunching shut as though it’s all a little too much for him.

'Um...you have been to the medical bay, right?'

'Of course. I take my health seriously. I am just a little dehydrated and sore, nothing major.’

Ben hums, eyeing the nearly depleted glass of water on the floor, before scooping it up and trudging to the bathroom. ‘The water here’s safe to drink, right?’

‘Yes, Ben. Given the different species inhabiting this station, the water system has a very firm distillation process in place. You would know this if you ever actually bothered to read up on the history of this place.’

Ben smiles, glad to hear the tired fondness seeping through Rook’s tone. Then he sticks his tongue out, attempting to prop the glass up above the latticed spokes of the plughole, jiggling it around until he can wedge it above the stainless steel rim so that the metal flashes out beneath like a supportive coaster. He smiles, satisfied, before he takes his fingers away to turn on the tap. And though the glass shudders a little, buckling under the strain, it still manages to hold firm, the water bubbling up within its sides to tumble out into a makeshift waterfall over its edges.

Ben feels like pumping his fist at the sight, as though he’s achieved a high ranking game score. But he manages to rein the urge back, silently re-entering the bedroom a minute later and bending down just as Rook struggles to sit upright, all so that he can place the glass firmly into that waiting hand.

‘Ah. Thank you.’

Ben watches him gulp down the water hungrily, and then glances round the room to glare at its rather Spartan settings.

‘You know, you could do with a mini-fridge or a freezer in here. That way you could keep a few ice-cubes or a proper ice-pack, or something.’

‘That is...actually a good idea.’

Ben scowls. ‘You don’t need to sound so surprised.’

Rook grins bashfully, before he carefully places the glass on the floor. Ben envies him his long reach sometimes, he really does.

‘You want me to go out and get you a smoothie or something?’

‘I think I can survive without one,’ Rook mutters, though his voice, Ben notices, sounds a little cracked at the seams, the words chipped at their ends by the faint croak that runs through them.

‘Dude,’ he says, frowning again as he settles himself on the edge of the bed. ‘You sound messed up. Seriously.’

Almost unbidden, his hand rises up and stokes through the spikes of black hair that pool out from the stripes Rook usually tries to settle them inside. They poke against his skin, hardened with the caked-over crispness of dried sweat before Ben rubs them between his fingers, half-smiling as they peel apart and emerge into individual strands. Maybe if he works them long enough, they’ll soften down into tuffs instead of spikes.
‘Aww, you’re like a messy lion cub. You ever seen the Lion King? There’s this one scene where Simba’s mom starts...’ Ben trails off at the look in Rook’s eye and quickly removes his hand, smiling sheepishly all the while. ‘Sorry, sorry, I know. You’re only cat-like.’

Rook sighs. ‘No, I do not mind hearing you ramble on about an animated film. Which I have seen by the way. And yes, I do believe I know which scene you are referring to. In which case, I have to say that you are no Sarabi, though your fingers, I would wager, make for a superior substitute than her tongue.’ Then, with a rather mechanical tug of his hand, Rook seizes Ben’s wrist and plonks it on top of his head again. ‘That is my way of asking you to continue,’ he adds, rather unnecessarily, Ben thinks. But he grins and continues to stroke, all the same.

‘Soo...’ he drawls, ‘while I’ve literally got you under my thumb...’

‘Go on.’

‘I wanna ask you something...’

‘Yes?’

‘Can you please, please answer Gwen’s calls?’

This seems to pull up Rook short. Because he frowns and glances off to the side thoughtfully.

‘Come on, I mean I get why you’re mad at her and stuff, I do, it’s just, well, if she hadn’t said anything, we probably wouldn’t be here. I...’ Ben pauses, genuinely not sure where he would be. ‘Maybe I’d still be sulking,’ he concludes.

‘Mmm,’ hums Rook noncommittally. Which isn’t really an agreement as such, but isn’t exactly an outright ‘no Ben, I’m sure you’d have bounced back eventually’ either.

So Ben scowls, his fingers halting in their admittedly gentle assault of Rook’s scalp as he ignores the slight whimper of protest beneath. Only cat-like my foot, he thinks as Rook leans up and practically head-butts his palm.

‘Look Rook, there’s another thing I need to say.’ He takes a breath, ignoring the curiosity in the expression below him. ‘Thank you. For a lot of things, I guess. I mean saying ‘for everything’ doesn’t quite seem to cover it, you know?’

He can feel his hand slipping down, shoved aside by Rook’s sudden movement in his struggle to sit upright, which means Ben only has a few more seconds to get the words out before he’s confronted by that earnest heart-felt stare and whatever sweet thing Rook’s gonna throw out there to make him feel better.

‘So look,’ he says in a rush, ‘I’m gonna pin-point one thing in particular I need to thank you for-’

‘Ben, there is no need-’

‘Let me finish! That weird ball thing, it...it kinda came in handy last night. So yeah. I wanna thank you for that.’

Silence. Then-

‘Ahh.’ It comes out slightly low and unrushed, with a hiss of breath that almost makes Ben flinch. Almost. Instead he gives Rook a level stare in return, his eyes easily meeting the other’s own thanks, in part, to the slight curl in the spine that balances the Revonnahgander’s lower back
against the mattress. But the rest of Rook’s face is rigid, grim, and all too knowing.

‘I thought so. You like to keep the most tiresome things to yourself.’

‘It wasn’t tiresome!’ Ben protests. ‘There was nothing anyone could do about it, except feel guilty
and bad! Stuff like this just happens! And there’s only ways to manage the pain, rather than
outright stopping it, so what good would it have done, telling anyone?’ Then he pauses. Rook’s
angry look is doing nothing to quell the storm of words inside him at all. ‘How did you know,
anyway?’ he asks slowly. ‘I mean, I’m pretty sure I’m not that bad an actor. But if you saw
through it, then I need to know where I slipped up. ‘Cos if you know that, then maybe Grandpa and
Gwen do, and oh man, the media-’

He’s rambling he knows, and in a way he often tries not to, not about this kinda stuff, but this is
Rook he’s talking too and the guy’s face is already creasing in sympathy, the kind that makes Ben’s
gut curl. Not in an angry way or even in a knotted heap of fluttery nerves kinda way. No, just in the
usual, shit, someone actually cares kinda way.

‘Ben. I did research.’

Ben’s brain comes to a halt.

‘I did not know,’ stresses Rook, his thumb coming up to move against the human knuckles that are
now pressed lightly against his chest fur, each of them edging more into the purple territory than
white. Ben stares down at the part where his hand has fallen, feeling the gentle warmth being
inscribed on the bumps of his bones as Rook’s thumb traces out a symbol that could either be a
figure of eight or stand for the symbol for infinity. Or perhaps it’s just some strange loop-the-loop
letter from a Revonnahan alphabet. Ben’s not entirely sure.

‘I just knew there was a possibility of you experiencing some residual pain where your arm used to
be. And, unfortunately, since I also have experience of you withholding information from me when
you are in emotional distress, I chose to assume that you might have been doing the same then. My
gift to you could easily have proven to be worthless. I simply took what you call a ‘leap of faith,’
yes?’

‘Yeah,’ mutters Ben. ‘Sounds about right.’

‘I have heard applying warmth to the affected area can help,’ Rook continues, his voice taking on a
much gentler tone. ‘As can acupuncture. Surely asking for help would have been better than
suffering?’

Ben shakes his head, mute. You don’t understand, he wants to say. How could you? But he bites
his lip, instead. ‘Is that what you did with Gwen?’ he asks. ‘When you told her about, you know,
caring about me? Were you asking for help?’

Rook’s face closes off. And his thumb draws to a halt in between Ben’s second and third knuckles.
‘In a manner of speaking,’ he says stiffly.

‘You know, she’s asking me for help, right now, right? C’mon man, she misses talking to you.’

Rook looks at him warily. ‘Ben,’ he says warningly, but he does not drop his hand, or shove him
away. Which Ben naturally takes as encouragement.

‘Come on,’ he wheedles. ‘You’re nice. You got a date and a kiss out of her ‘help’, right?’

Rook looks at him, stonily-faced. ‘Will I get more? Even if I do not ‘make-up’ with her?’
Ben frowns. ‘I’m not a tease. And I dunno if you know this about me, but I’m not a masochist either. I didn’t go out with you because...’ he pauses, stuck. ‘I wouldn’t go out with you, if I didn’t at least like you, okay?’ he says, at last. ‘But I can’t really promise you anything beyond that.’

Rook shakes his head, the rest of his hand moving round to tighten on Ben’s own. ‘I do not want a promise,’ he says, the sudden fierceness in his voice surprising Ben. ‘I simply desire a possibility. You, of all people, have taught me how strong such a thing can be.’ Then he laughs. ‘But I can be selfish as well. If it will make you more amendable to my desires, more willing to be with me, then yes, I will speak to Gwen.’ Then he pauses. ‘Gwendolyn,’ he amends, smiling a little, as Ben gives him a congratulatory beam in return.

Honestly, Ben thinks, they’re both suckers for each other. Which he is, if he thinks about it, more than a little okay with.

As it happens, Rook is a little too eager to hear all about the stuff they want to plant inside his shoulder. Really, Ben’s about two seconds away from just ringing up Doctor Bluebell and asking if Rook can attend his next appointment in his place.

‘Fascinating,’ breathes Rook, his eyes glued to his tablet, as his fingers cross the screen, flicking through tab after tab of complicated text and diagrams that look as though they’ve been airlifted from the pages of Ben’s old biology textbooks. They even have that same two-tone, grainy illustration feel to them, simple and with no cross-hatching, as though the artist had originally sketched everything out on a chalkboard.

Ben shakes his head and glances down at the glass of water on the floor, amused despite himself. It seems that in his excitement, Rook has forgotten the fact that he’s supposed to be dehydrated.

‘So in theory, and with a little practise, you could perform just as well as any able-bodied person,’ the guy chatters on excitedly and with such animation, that Ben is reminded of his younger brother.

‘Yeah,’ says Ben, ‘that’s the way I understand it. At least then I’ll be able to finally dress myself.’

That seems to drag Rook’s eyes away from his precious tablet long enough for him to rake a critical eye over Ben’s face.

‘Yes, I imagine that must be taxing.’ He hesitates. ‘When is the surgery?’

‘Tomorrow. Figured I’d get it done sooner rather than later. Less time for me to chicken out that way.’

‘Hmm.’ Rook presses his lips together. ‘And they will not only be placing these electrodes in your shoulder, but fitting in this new arm as well? It seems like you are having an excessive amount done in so short a time. Will that not put your body under a lot of strain?’

Ben snorts, leaning close enough to bang his shoulder against Rook’s arm, the one now cradling the tablet protectively against that large white chest.

‘Make up your mind, dude. First you want me to hurry up and get on with things, and now you want me to draw back.’ He waits for Rook’s face to scrunch up a little, for an indignant look to
cross over into the guy’s eyes as that mouth opens, probably to fire off some witty retort, before Ben decides to smoothly cut him off. ‘Isn’t your gadget going to get smudged if you lean it against your chest like that?’

Rook’s eyes instantly widen, the indignation dying out like a doused fire as his hand flips his tablet up in front of his face. ‘Oh Brallada,’ he curses, before turning an annoyed look on Ben. ‘This is what I receive for worrying about you?’

‘What, did you want another kiss instead?’ Ben mocks, before his mouth snaps shut as his words catch up to him. ‘Uh...’

Rook raises an eyebrow and casually slides his tablet off onto a nearby desk, his finger flicking across the ‘off’ option more from muscle memory than anything else. It must be that, for his eyes never leave Ben’s face. And Ben feels himself flush the way he did hours before, back when he had Gwen’s voice battering his ear. Only now it feels worse, like he’s roasting under the sun, his skin burning instead of merely peeling.

‘Uh...’ he says again.

He’s not sure how to feel. He’s the one who started all this, after all. The invitation to a gay club, the let’s-talk-about-our-feelings deal, the suggesting of a date, the kiss on a cheek...all him. All of it. It’s like his brain has been trying to tell him something and he’s been refusing to listen, just content to sit back and enjoy his time with Rook. He hasn’t felt stressed, or pressured, or even desperately tried to cut back on their interactions the way he suspects he would have done had it been Kevin in Rook’s situation. Jeez.

And now, and now, his brain just has to slip up, has to push out that stupid innocuous jab, to remind them both of his own stupid, girlish action. It’s like Gwen has come to roost in his imagination, her glasses perched snidely on the bridge of her nose while she lectures him on Freudian slips.

‘Urgh,’ he finally lets out, tempted to just be done with the whole thing except...except, well, Rook’s looking at him. Holding him hostage with that soft, dewy look in his eyes, the one it’s all too easy to get charmed by.

‘If you want a proper answer to your question, than yes, I believe another kiss would serve as a decent compensation for my inquiry,’ Rook says, looking more amused by the second. ‘But given the obvious regret on your face, I will not hold you to it.’ But he doesn’t seem particularly downhearted by the prospect, in fact, he’s almost jubilant. Add to that the fact that Ben doesn’t think he’s ever seen the guy shove his tablet aside so quickly before, barring emergencies.

But then again, perhaps Rook believes in Freudian slips the same way the Gwen in his imagination does.

Ben stares off into the distance, remembering a time in his life when everything was simpler, back he received kisses on the cheek instead of giving them.

‘Oh man,’ he says, without really thinking, ‘I’m turning into a girl. Kevin’s gonna love this.’

‘You are...what? I do not think that is possible.’

Ben turns to Rook, noting with a faint sense of detachment that the guy’s looking more displeased than actively confused.

‘I take it this is not some strange earth expression either? You are just being...weird.’
‘No, no,’ Ben squawks, flapping his hands as though the action might somehow drag his words back. ‘I meant, I’m acting like your girlfriend. Like a girl. Not a guy. I mean, I’ve got kisses on the cheek all the time, from girls. But I’ve never actually given anyone one...’ he trails off, mostly because Rook is looking distinctly unimpressed.

The Revonnahgander gives a tired sigh, muttering something about ‘trite Earth gender norms,’ which Ben thinks is a little rich, considering the fact that he once called Julie a ‘helpless female,’ but then Rook fixes him an exasperated look.

‘You are not acting like my girlfriend. I should know; I have actually had one of those before. You are simply acting like Ben.’ Rook’s lips twitch slightly. ‘This moment in time, more than proves that actually. A kiss on the cheek, as you should know, signifies gratitude and possible romantic interest. It does not act as a prelude to a change in gender.’ His smile turns a little dopey at the corners and Ben watches warily. ‘Your action last night, felt very like you. If I wanted someone who wasn’t comfortable enough to express themselves in a way that according to you somehow less masculine I would be dating...’ Rook’s expression falls, a slight trace of discomfort on his brow.

Ben smirks. ‘You’re getting uncomfortable just running through a list of possible examples in your head, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

Ben smirk grows wider. ‘Was Fistrick one of them?’

Rook chokes. And Ben bursts out laughing. ‘Aw, man, the look on your face! Sorry, sorry,’ he says, under Rook’s glare. ‘But still, it’s pretty funny.’

‘Glad to be of amusement,’ Rook says dryly. ‘Though the truth is, finding said example is hard work. I am not often attracted to others. There has been Rayona, Isocoles’ – here he shudders, - ‘and you.’

Ben shakes his head. Rook is a weird dude. A funny, endearing dude, but weird, all the same. And oh man, no wonder he didn’t appreciate the invitation to the gay club.

‘I’m flattered,’ he says, trying to gentle his tone as much as possible. ‘But I’m still not sure if I can actually-’

‘Offer me what I want?’ Rook finishes for him, his own tone just as gentle. Then he sighs. ‘Perhaps a bit of experimentation, then? You cannot be sure if you do not try.’ He wedges a finger under Ben’s chin in a timid jab of pressure that tenderly touches the part where the jawbone slides away into flesh. ‘I propose a kiss. One not on the cheek this time.’

Ben swallows. But instead of running for the hills like any sane teenager would, he simply asks, ‘no tongues?’

‘Not unless you offer.’

Ben breathes. ‘Okay.’

‘Okay,’ Rook echoes him and gently angles his mouth down into the closed line of Ben’s own.

And there’s nothing electric about it. Ben can catch a glimpse of the bend of Rook’s neck, remembering the blur of purple even as his eyes become caught up in the white and black of the fur pressed close to his nose, his chin, and his mind gets distracted by the dim flick of wetness
nudging his own lips. Not quite a tongue, but the slight cleft of an opening caught between skin and fur and breathing out into his own furless mouth.

Slowly, almost ponderously, Ben opens his own. And that’s when the electricity catches. Ben lurches forward, a sudden hunger in his movement as his body uncoils, rising slightly from the bed as he presses himself forward into the chest and the arms that he knows will catch him. He ignores the resulting growl that hurts his ears, not caring if it’s meant as a warning or a groan, feeling a soft force envelop his chest as he casts his one remaining arm shakily around Rook’s neck, all the better to steady himself.

It feels. It sings. Like a feather on his tongue.

He almost laughs. He’s making no sense, not even to his own mind. He’s just interested in chasing the heat that’s touching his mouth, his teeth, that’s playing with his muscles. He knows kissing can be intense, even the quick accidental brushes with Kai were nothing compared to his heavier sessions with Julie, filled with emotion, and with actually caring for the person in his arms-

That brings him up short. But Rook is growling and Ben realises that his tongue is poking out of his mouth into Rook’s own. And that the other’s arms are snaked round his waist. He pulls away with a wet slurp that rather hysterically reminds him of a well deserved break at Mr Smoothies.

‘Oh, man, I’m sorry,’ he gasps. ‘I was the one who was all like ‘no tongues’ and then I messed it all up.’

‘Do not apologise,’ Rook murmurs, his fingers sweeping across Ben’s back in an idle stroke. ‘I did say that you could offer.’

Ben stares at him.

‘What time does your surgery finish tomorrow?’ Rook asks suddenly, almost as if they had not fallen into a heavy make-out session. ‘I wish to be there when you wake.’

Ben raises his eyebrows. ‘What? For more experimentation?’

‘No,’ Rook answers simply, his fingers reaching up to yank on Ben’s cheek teasingly. ‘Simply for you, my boyfriend, who does not act like a girlfriend...whatever that distinction may entail.’

There’s really nothing Ben can say to that. Not a protest, not a complaint. He’s been preparing to accept the label of ‘boyfriend’ ever since he had to summon up his courage to address the fact with Gwen over the phone. And even then, the word didn’t crop up in the conversation, not once.

He swallows. Chases down his nerves by flicking Rook in the forehead quickly, before the guy can zone in whatever weird expression his face is currently making.

‘Sap,’ he says, and leaves it at that.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, rude, Ben.
Going into surgery, this time, is a lot less stressful than the last. For one thing, he’s fully conscious of the faces round him and there isn’t that familiar thud of pain to hold him down.

It’s at this point that his Grandpa offers him a hefty clap of the shoulder, and with a shock, Ben realises that perhaps it wasn’t the pain that made him lie still at the time. No, perhaps instead it was the pain that made him rear up; for he can remember, dimly, as though from a dream, the sensation of fingers on his sleeve and the scissors hacking at the bloody cloth wedged inside his armpit, the thin clinks of the metal sounding out the reverberations that become a major landslide against his skin. And how that makes his spine curl, his bones jog, the scream thrown out of his throat at the motion. And then pressure, the arms of several strangers coming down to help cut off that scream at the source, all before the twinkling gleam of a needle invades his arm.

He jerks a little now, at this memory flooding his system. And his Grandpa stares down at him, afraid.

‘It will be okay, Ben. Just like counting sheep, remember?’

‘Yes,’ adds his mother, her hands worrying at the handkerchief she brings up like a bridge between her two fists. ‘Just count backwards like the doctors will tell you to do. I went through the same thing when they had to take out my tonsils.’

Ben offers her a small smile.

‘Does that mean I can get ice cream afterwards?’

She smiles wanly. ‘Only if you’re very, very good.’

It’s at this point that the doctors crowd in round the bed, weaving through the gaps that his Mother and Grandfather step back to create.

‘Breathe,’ they tell Ben, or at least one of them does, fixing a transparent mask upon his face with a simple snap of what feels to be, but probably isn’t, elastic. ‘Breathe and count backwards.’

But will I still be pretty afterwards? Ben wants to snidely ask. But luckily, the gas pouring through the tube connected to his face quickly spills out into his brain, rubbing out all the rebellious thought there with all the thoroughness of an stain.

Both Rook and Grandpa are there when he wakes. Honestly, he doesn’t remember much of it. He’s still blurry from the drugs in his system, blurry enough not to moan when his Grandpa pushes some of his hair away from his fringe. He’s aware of a sense of tightness where there was once space, his nerves melting into molten lead, then transforming to ice when he moves, all before he
shifts and whimpers at the sensation.

‘Hang tight,’ he hears Rook whisper and he really, really hopes he isn’t reliving another traumatic memory. ‘Cos that would suck.

‘You just need some decent food. Not whatever in this hospital canteen passes for mush,’ his Grandpa says, sounding heavily worked-up at the thought.

That almost startles a laugh out of Ben, right before he slips back under into the land of slumber once again.

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When he wakes a second time, Doctor Bluebell is there, smiling wanly.

‘Hello,’ she says, her no-nonsense tone dulled somewhat by the vestige of sympathy running through underneath. ‘Your mother has been hounding me, chasing me through appointment after appointment. She seems to think I can work magic.’

Ben sighs. Sits up. And then receives an unpleasant jerk for his trouble, his spine protesting at the sudden surge of movement. His arms automatically rush out, hands sinking into the mattress to stabilise him as his fingers clutch at sheets, sinking between solid...wait.

Ben flexes both hands. Feels something approaching softness rush through both of them.

‘Oh,’ he says. Then again, louder. ‘Oh. That’s weird.’

It doesn’t...hurt. It feels... well, kinda like how he’d imagine a jam-jar would feel to have its lid re-screwed on again, if, of course, glass could posses a nervous system.

‘Huh,’ he says, flexing, or at least trying to flex, the lower part of the limb that once would have housed the budge of muscle that was supposed to make him feel manlier. Or maybe that only worked for guys like Kevin or Rook, he doesn’t know. ‘It feels weird. Yeah, definitely weird.’

Doctor Bluebell’s lips twitch. ‘You mean to tell me you’ve never changed into an alien with metallic parts before?’

Ben gives her a writhing look. ‘This doesn’t feel very metallic, no. And besides most of my aliens with machine-like parts, well, their whole body was kind of made of the same material so nothing about it really felt unnatural. Not if that’s what you’re getting at.’ Then he hesitates. ‘I mean, I guess guys like Frankenstrike have parts attached that weren’t an actual proper part of them. It felt more like it had been grafted on.’ He nibbles his lip for a moment. ‘Anyway,’ he declares finally, ‘doesn’t matter. It still feels different from this.’

Doctor Bluebell shakes her head. ‘Well then,’ she says softly, ‘it’s time to get used to it.’ Then she raises her arm, indicating the space set between them with the delicate length of her finger. ‘First, see if you can raise it to this sort of angle. We all need a starting point to get us going, so let’s see if we can find yours.’
‘A starting point?’ questions Rook later, his eyes locked onto Ben’s face.

‘Yeah,’ says Ben, wincing as he forces his new elbow to twist; it feels weird without the grind of bone inside to make it real, and without the lean shift of muscle to slide alongside its path it feels kinda like he’s moving cardboard. But the way he can make his fingers move at the end, the way they can strike air and stroke their way round the cup of orange juice his mother had placed in his hands not five minutes ago, makes it seem worth-while.

Ben smiles. ‘It feels cool,’ he murmurs, using his free hand, the flesh-and-blood one to point to the other. ‘Not quite as real as it should. Kinda sloshy. A bit like melted snow, or rain.’

Rook beams. ‘That is wonderful.’

Ben grins and attempts to chuck back the orange juice. Only to have it miss his mouth completely and splatter against the pillows, and for a moment, he and Rook watch the orange liquid creep into the linen, stupefied. Then Ben turns back with a sheepish grin, amused to see the expression on Rook’s face arrange itself into something half-torn between amusement and long-suffering irritation.

‘My bad. Guess I need more practise.’

‘Yes. Perhaps it would be for the best if you reserved food and drink for the hand you are more familiar with.’

Ben scowls. ‘That’s no good, it’ll just encourage me to be lazy and not practise with the one I should be, well, practising with.’

Rook looks like he wants to say so many things to that. But instead he stifles himself, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Ben sighs. ‘C’mon, don’t get grouchy. That’s my job.’

Rook rather pointedly holds out a palm and with another sigh, Ben encourages his new fingers to loosen and drop the paper cup into those furry fingers waiting below. Then, with a scowl, he raises it back up, staring hard at the shiny sheen of this new arm that he can’t quite control. Yet.

He gives it an experimental tilt to his right, grimacing as a particularly bright shard of light plays out across its surface, disappearing with the same fluidity as a wink as he yanks it back. Then, decidedly more cautious, he extends it out past the edge of his bed, letting those shiny fingers, bright as sunbeams, hover as far away from Rook’s face as he can bear to manage.

‘Can I?’ he asks, hesitantly, feeling rather shy all of a sudden. ‘You don’t have to...’

Rook looks very much like he wants to roll his eyes in reply. But instead he leans his head further into Ben’s personal space with nothing more than a huff of air as a complaint.

‘What makes you think I would refuse you?’ he asks, still sounding, to Ben’s ears, a little grouchy.

Well, Ben thinks wryly, maybe it’s because you’re wearing the exact same look of apprehension you always get whenever you play guinea pig to one of Driba and Blukics’s new experiments?
But this thought does not manage to make its way into his mouth. Instead, unbidden, Doctor Bluebell’s words fly out, back into his mind. A starting point, they whisper, echoing like the ghost of a drumbeat. A starting point, Ben thinks, repeats, mulling the words over until they’re ready to sink in. But as a starting point for what?

Perhaps for a new constellation, a new-found map for his fingertips to join onto all the parts of Rook’s face, at least all the parts the other will allow him to touch. And with this flowery image in place, Ben brushes away his embarrassment with one final shake of his head. He can, he tells himself firmly, be brave enough for this.

And so he reaches out, a light shudder of unsteady motion running through the limb that stretches out from his shoulder, forcing it to catch the light and hold within multiple knives of white, much in the same way the hospital equipment does. And he tries to ignores them, knowing he will have to get used to this sight, include it with how he now sees himself. When what he should be focusing on now, is how he can feel for himself.

So he breathes, tracing over the right dark stripe on Rook’s face as his fake fingers run from jaw to eye, hesitating just before Rook feels the instinctive need to blink. Down, then up, then across a little in a side-ways scrub, his fingers cautiously leaking into purple fur.

Because he remember how it used to feel, all syrupy softness beneath his hand, not coarse, not like a dog’s fur, but a little rougher than a cat’s. But duller maybe, more bristly than your average short-haired tom, yet still long and soft enough to bury your fingerprints inside...

All this, Ben knows, recognises on some level from memory, from all the times his other, warmer hand has scraped over that brushed-up barrier coating Rook’s skin. But here the sensation is not the same. His fingers, the fake ones, the ones he should, if he thinks about it, start to call ‘real’ in just the same way his others are, touch and whisper over all these familiar paths. They register warmth, electricity translating the feel of Rook into computer code before it flows back into something his brain can read in a simple neutral impulse.

And they feel, Rook feels, like a cheap cushion, roughly-patched together velvet divided up into petals, rough bubbles of dried dandelions seeds and the softest grass he’s ever touched. And all this, beneath fingertips that have no whorls. Foreign, yet familiar, and not quite the same as it should, it feels...a little like that stupid plant Rook got him weeks ago from his sister.

‘Dude!’ he bursts out, feeling a laugh wedged beneath his voice. ‘This hand thinks you feel like a plant! Kinda like that dangerous-looking one you got me weeks back, remember?’

Rook smiles and leans further into the hand cradling his chin. He makes no remark on how much harder in probably feels in comparison to Ben’s other one.

‘It presented no threat to you, as I told you before,’ he murmurs. ‘Though I will at least admit that I am probably ‘dangerous-looking’ in certain circumstances.’

Ben grins. ‘I’ll teach you how to flirt yet,’ he says confidently, his smile widening as Rook splutters indignantly. Worth it, he thinks, even as Rook gives him a narrow-eyed glare in return.

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He needs to talk to Kevin. He knows he does. So he does what any sane teenager would do. He
texts him.

*Hey,* he types, short and to the point, *got a nw arm. Tell Gwen that its not mutant ninja green.*

But all he gets back in response is, *Imma tell 'Gwen' yu couldn't be bothered to type out Gwendolyn prply.*

Ben stares down at the screen in disbelief. Because, really?

‘Is Kevin being snippy with you?’ Rook questions with no real interest, his fingers flipping through a magazine Ben's mother had left behind for them on her last visit.

Ben turns his stare onto Rook, before quickly drawing his phone up near his face, his hands cupping round it nervously as though to prevent Rook from peeking at the screen.

Rook sighs, his eyes not leaving the pages for a second. ‘You are frowning,’ he explains, as though he is doing nothing remarkable and simply commenting on the weather. ‘You would not frown if you were texting your cousin. Or Julie. Maybe Kai,’ he concludes, his eyebrows temporarily drawn up in thought. ‘But then it is hard to tell how much of your aggressiveness is directed at her specifically, and how much of it is simply your frustration at being unable to deal with your physical attraction to her in a practical manner.’

Ben stares at him some more, then drops his phone with a small 'fump' onto the covers and snatches back the magazine. ‘Gimme that!’ Now it is Rook's turn to frown, he thinks smugly.

Indeed, Rook looks quite annoyed. ‘I was reading that!’

‘Yeah sure,’ Ben mocks, waving the now crumpled magazine like a barrier. ‘You were so engrossed in-’ he pauses to unrumple the magazine pages, shaking it out as though the action could magically smooth out all the creases he had put there. ‘-‘Great and Glorious Sumo Showdown-’ he reads aloud, ‘that you kept checking my face for behavioural cues or whatever. You think I don't notice these things, but I do.’ Rook's not the only detective in town and it gives him no small pleasure to see the guy wilt in his seat and glance over at him with no small amount of embarrassment.

‘Well, I...no, that is besides the point! Really you should speak to Kevin and-’ Rook frowns again, the line pressing down on his eyes weighing down heavily, dipping his expression almost into a scowl. ‘You are not listening, are you?’

‘Nope!’ Ben half-sings, turning the page with a flourish.

Rook grumbles to himself and wrestles his arms into a crossed fold over his chest. And Ben finds his smile faltering.

‘Look, you haven't talked to Gwen yet properly either, have you? One problem at a time.’

Rook's scowl deepens.

Ben sighs and offers him a corner of the magazine, and after a few very weighed seconds, Rook scoots over and takes it carefully in his fingers, holding it gently as though it were the neck of a baby bird.

‘Relax,’ Ben tells him. ‘I don't think you could damage it anymore than I have.’

‘Very true.’
Ben scowls. ‘Look, I can still take this thing back, you know!’

Rook beams at him and then turns his attention back to the colourful spread of two very bulky men wrestling each to the ground. ‘It is in poor taste to withdraw a recent peace offering. Besides, I still do not understand your obsession with this interview. What could be so pressing about a season finale that you feel the need to know what the voice actors have to say about it?’

Ben very firmly counts to five in his head, before letting out his breath in a whoosh of air. And very sternly, he tells himself not to tease Rook about the way he dives headfirst into his research, desperately seeking out every scholar's and scientist's opinion over the facts that he finds the most interesting. ‘I just want to be prepared,’ he says. ‘They keep hinting that there's gonna be a major character death and I'm kinda hoping that they've left enough clues for it to sink into my head, so that I won't be too devastated when it actually happens.’

‘You are very strange, Ben,’ says Rook fondly. ‘But rest assured, if you do find it to be too devastating when it finally airs, you can always come to me and ‘cry in my arms.’” He says this last part in such a jovial way that it takes a few moments for Ben to realise that he is joking.

Even so, it does not prevent him from yanking the magazine away, quickly enough for it to tear and leave a few frayed corners within the Revonnhahgander's grasp. Rook gawps at him, even as Ben rolls the remainder into a coiled tube like a baton and wacks him on the head with it - gently, of course.

‘I really hope you never said anything like that to Rayona,’ he says dryly, and feels triumphant when Rook looks away, a little shame-faced. Because hey, if he gets needled over how he interacts with Kai, it's only fair he returns the favour, right?

‘Besides,’ he adds, 'at least you know my arguing with you isn't because I'm struggling to deal with my 'physical attraction' to you. It's because you're a genuine pain in the butt. Trust me,' he adds, on seeing the hurt expression on Rook's face, 'it's a good thing.'

But he can't quite leave it at that and abruptly, he lets the magazine fall from his fingers, the pages drifting down to cover his phone and billow out over it like the open flaps of a tent. And then his empty fingers reach out, both hands coming up to cup Rook’s chin as those same fingers stretch, thumbs coiling into the fur and putting pressure on the jaw to drop. Maybe too much pressure from his new hand, given the slight strain on Rook's face, so Ben loosens his hold a little, muttering a quick ‘sorry’ as his fingers dab and stroke to soothe any bruises he might have left there, under the coat.

A moment later though, he arcs up like a dolphin to place a careful kiss on the mouth he has successfully dragged down to his level. It's a little sad, but that's probably how it will always be between them. Ben, dragging Rook down, to his level.

Rook chose to be here, he reminds himself, and takes comfort in that, even as his tongue slips into the open mouth in front of him. And the next few moments are anything but quiet. Ben is sure he moans and he's almost certain Rook grunts, joining in the chorus with a low, vibrating growl, that could, in the right circumstances, double up as a purr. Not that he'll ever tell Rook that. No, he'll keep this, this heat, this surge and spike of electricity that rolls through his mouth and joins the tongue he dabs at, duels with, alongside his own, inside his head.

‘Better?’ he rasps, after he pulls away.

And Rook grins. ‘We are all good.’
A light-show splits the sky early on a Tuesday Morning. Red crackles against the bright blue overhead, and really, Ben thinks it would be a lot more impressive if the sky was overcast with black clouds instead. That way the red could bounce out against a suitable background, highlighting folds of that smoke-like structure in the same way lightning casts a spell across a movie crowd whenever it presses wrinkles of light against the clouds.

Instead, today, the red booms out across the blue as though it wants to be eaten, spilling in eddies of light that swamp the streets with a dull purple. And then a small black comet plunges to earth.

It lands with a splat on a sidewalk, and the only reason Ben knows this is because of all the screaming that takes place after a car-alarm goes off. In his experience, the squeal of a car alarm rather than that of the breaks or the sudden loud blare of a horn, means a side-walk encounter instead of a sudden road-block.

Ben growls. Stares down at his empty wrist. And then shoves aside his smoothie and takes off to where the screaming has yet to stop.

It’s weird really. Or maybe not so weird. It’s Bellwood, after all. And really, why wouldn’t Vilgax come here? Well. Vilgax and Malware.

‘Tennyssooon,’ they hiss, their voices combining into some odd synthesised groan, one that would not be out of place droning from a DJ’s boom box.

And then they, the Vilgax-shaped blob of black and red, lunge forward, scattering drops of themselves over a store-front window in the same way Ben’s seen Cousin Lucy lose parts of herself over the street when she’s drunk. Except even in her drunkenness, Lucy knows how to walk. Or in some cases, slither.

But Vilgax, or Malware, or whatever, doesn’t seem to remember how to do this. Instead they thump forwards, lurching from side to side like an animal with both legs caught in a trap, head jerking as the familiar tentacles of Vilgax’s beard collapse into a river of red-lined sludge.

Ben winces. ‘Yikes, man, that’s not a good look for you. Seriously. And here I thought you were ugly before!’

‘Tennysssooon...’

‘Yeah, yeah, you’re like a zombie now, Vil-, I mean, Mal-, I mean...urgh, okay, I’m just gonna call
you Vilware, from now on. You cool with that? I men Malmax sounds too much like this cool movie I watched the other day, and you really don’t deserve to have such awesomeness associated with you—’

Vilware lets out a bellowing snort and both arms plunge down over Ben’s head like waterfall. Ben promptly yelps and leaps backwards, rolling as a few black and red splattered globs fly out of his hair.

‘Eww, ew, ew!’

He almost runs his metal hand through his hair, then thinks better of it; Malware, or what’s left of him, probably still has more of an aptitude for controlling and manipulating machinery than flesh, though given the state of Vilgax’s body he’s not so sure how true that is any more. Malware’s always been a stupidly quick learner though, so better not to to risk it.

‘Just how long have you been in deep space?’ he asks conversationally. ‘All that oxygen deprivation can’t have been good for one of you, at least.’

He leaps back again as a large foot slams down right where one of his knees was and curses as, from out of Vilware’s back, a small rocket propulsion engine suddenly juts, extending like the wing of a plane.

‘Well, I guess I know how you got to Earth now...’

The engine fires up, bright orange glowing from beneath the segregations in its form in much the same way lava glows through the cracks in the Earth. And then, with a small hum of noise, it pushes Vilware forwards with a blast of hot air.

The sudden burst of speed is too much for Ben to dodge and he barely has time to see the deep furrow Vilware’s feet gorge out through the road before they are both suddenly pushed into each other. Instead his face becomes buried in red and black, rivers of it running into his legs, his shirt, his skin, and he fastens his mouth shut, willing himself not to breathe. He’s been through this once before, and it was just as weird the first time, except Vilgax isn’t hollowed out with pulses and sparks of electricity and plasma-like red the way he knows Malware is or was. So-

He shakes himself before he makes contact with a skeleton or whatever body Vilgax has left, and tries to swing a punch. But his right arm lets him down, jerking weakly in the gloop while the other, the new one, reads his intent perfectly, cleaving upwards like a knife and twisting itself free with a wretch of sound. It’s as though the surrounding gloop is no more than a piece of dried-over(602,481),(993,583) mud and the arm then earns itself a muted thump as it makes contact with the face above. But then it does spark, red and black pulsing over its form in a swirl of pattern that resembles a circuit board.

Ben grimaces, but the arm does not falter, does not turn on him like a rabid dog, or at least not yet, and the liquid around him loosens, as though it requires the concentration of the creature above to hold it in place. So Ben kicks out with all his might, wrenching his head free with a gasp, before he falls.

And then someone is catching him, dragging him back.

‘Fourteen hours, you have only had that arm for fourteen hours, and already it resembles a hunk of junk!’

Neat, Ben thinks, Rook rhymes now. He shudders out a gasp and feels Rook clutch him tighter, backing away as the familiar blast of the Proto-tool passes over his head.
Vilware lets out a snorting rumble at this that could be a chuckle, but Ben isn’t willing to place any money on it, so he turns, wincing as he catches sight of the battered shape of his arm. The joints are loosened and he feels...not pain exactly. But small jitters run through the frame and the sensations inside feel snapped-off, reminding him of the way people draw their fingers back from touching something too hot, the searing flash of heat cut-off from memory before enough of it can be retained to cripple the nerves.

But hey, at least the red and black paint-job is starting to run off like water, the circuit-patterned drops splattering onto the pavement like rain.

‘Huh,’ says Ben. ‘Looks like there isn’t much of a brain left in either Vilgax or Malware. Their concentration is too easily broken.’

‘That is good to know,’ Rook replies, his hold loosening slightly as Ben tugs himself free. But he doesn’t add anything else, his mouth drawn together into a tight line as he continues firing. And from around them, the street suddenly becomes flooded with Plumber vehicles, pulling it with screeches and sirens, the glint of the uniforms setting Ben at ease.

‘I almost feel sorry for him,’ he adds, feeling a new unease stir his stomach as Rook refuses to look his way. Then he frowns. ‘Hey isn’t that Plumber van parked a little too close to-’

With a roar, Vilware suddenly surges forward, his arms splattering out into a shield-shaped blast before it rises up like a wave, crashing against the van and diving beneath the bonnet to access the engine.

‘Yeah,’ says Ben. ‘It was definitely too close.’

‘TENNYSON!’

It’s a roar this time, not a hiss.

‘Oh great, now he sounds more coherent.’

‘Ben,’ says Rook from between clenched teeth, ‘leave.’

Ben stares at him. Then glares. ‘What, just because I don’t have the Omint-’

He breaks off to dive down, narrowly missing the tentacles of Vilware’s beard that now sport the headlight of the dismantled van. It flings itself out over him like a whip and the bright flare of light at its end makes him yell, temporarily blinded as Rook seizes him round the waist and runs off into a side-alley.

‘Then get the Omnitrix,’ Rook says firmly, unwinding his long arm from around Ben’s ribs. ‘Your arm is hanging by a literal thread and I cannot focus on this fight the way I should when you present such a visible target for this...abomination to seek out. You are not useless as a human, but you are vulnerable, especially in a situation like this.’

Ben laughs, with a visibly twisted grin appearing on his face at the end. ‘Yeah. Story of my life.’

Rook looks visibly distressed. ‘Ben...’

‘Relax, I get it. The only worthwhile damage I did was with my new arm and there’s nothing remotely human about that.’

‘It was very human to try,’ Rook says quietly. Then he hesitates, torn. Every inch of him that Ben
can see is waiting, vibrating with the urge to get back into the fight. And how can Ben argue with that?

‘Go,’ he hears himself say. ‘Be the hero. I’ll...go and do something actually worthwhile.’

Rook smiles at him tentatively. Then dives back round the corner. While Ben sighs, turns in the opposite direction and runs for home, hating himself all the while.

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Stupid, he tells himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He knows it, knew it, that one day this might happen. He’s simply been living on borrowed time, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Or in this case, to quite literally fall out of the sky.

He bursts through his door, hand still fumbling with the key as it drops from his fingers onto the carpet, and his mother stands wide-eyed in the corridor as he races past, almost banging his knee into the wall, before he turns and launches himself into his room, his head nearly colliding with the door-frame.

‘Ben! At least close the door behind you!’ A few footsteps later, he hears her exasperated sigh. ‘Ben! You dropped your key! You’re a little too old for me to be picking up after you like this.’

‘Can’t talk now, Mum!’ he yells back, throwing clothes aside, before his hands manage to land on the familiar, weathered feel of the shoe-box. ‘Vilgax finally decided to show up.’

There’s a hint of quiet then. And Ben uses it to tug off the lid, chucking it over his shoulder before he bends down, all to allow his fingers to run over the plastic feel of the Omnitrix. It’s not really plastic, he knows, but after all the time it’s spent glued to his wrist, it sometimes becomes a little too easy to believe that it’s made out of similar material to your regular run-of-the-mill timepiece.

There’s a shuffle of slippered feet against the carpet and he turns his head to see his mum staring at him.

‘You’re going out there again,’ she says and it’s like a death sentence coming from her, with no questioning lilt in her voice to soften her tone.

‘I always will,’ Ben tells her. ‘With one arm, or none.’

She sweeps her eyes over his damage in his new arm, shaking her head ruefully as she does so. Then she steps in, hand outstretched. ‘Will you let me...?’

Ben swallows. And without a word, hands her the Omnitrix.

For a moment, Sandra looks as though she would like nothing better than to toss it away, to clench it within her fist and disappear through the doorway before Ben has time to go after her. But instead she holds it out like it’s a crown, watching the way light sprinkles across its surface. Then she slides it up, alongside Ben’s remaining wrist in one quick, no-nonsense movement, almost as though she is simply wrapping a hair-tie round an unruly tendril of hair.

Ben smiles at her. ‘Thanks.’
He brings it up to his face. And narrows his eyes when no welcoming green dial pops up, giving him no cycling selection of aliens for him to squint at.

‘Guess it’s time to see if Azmuth kept his promise,’ Ben murmurs, already stalking his way out the door. And trying, desperately, not to remember the bleak expression on his mother’s face, the one she wore mere seconds after her reassuring smile broke in front of his eyes.

‘Be back later!’ he calls out, then, with his attention focusing solely on the watch, says softly: ‘C’mon Omnitrix, make my day. Give me Feedback.’

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He’s never really asked Azmuth just how intelligent the Omnitrix is. After all, at least one of the Future hims just has to call out an alien’s name in order to transform. But the Omnitrix must recognise when he actually means it, because otherwise he’d be popping in and out of alien transformations whenever he mentioned their names in casual conversation. So there’s gotta be some sort of mental system at work.

But then again, like he’s told Rook, the Omnitrix always seems to know him better than he really knows himself. Stands to reason then, that it’ll understand when he’s not joking around.

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There’s a familiar crackle of energy and the world explodes into white and static and electricity and, and signals and oh boy, oh man, it’s good to be back! Why, oh why, didn’t he do this before?

Ben glances down at his left arm, the one still hanging by, as Rook put it, a thread, and sees how it’s reshaped itself, a stream-lined curve where it had been straight before, iron rings forming at the end of his fingers to serve as aesthetic symmetry for the golden ones on his organic one. It’s still pretty useless though, sparks crackling from the damage Vilware has given it; but if he concentrates, he can feel the broken impulses running beneath its frame and can urge them, gently, into completed circuits. Gingerly, the hand beneath flexes, responding to the way his plug-like antenna stroke against his side and he can feel it, energy running like a snake over his skin- well, over his metal.

Astounded, he begins to laugh. It’s almost like having a mini-battery to feast on.

Promptly, he tries to propel himself off the ground, muscle memory directing him to point both hands towards the road. And that’s where he slips up, because of course only one of them fires off the necessary energy to push him away from anything solid, and he ends up off-balance, launching himself sideways into a wall less than a second later.

Ben groans, and spits out what feels like a chuck of cement. Only to stare, unamused, as a brick falls out of his mouth. But hey, on the upside, at least he’s only destroyed a part of Mr Baumann’s house this time. That’s miles better than watching the whole thing fall to ruin, right?

Either way, looks like that propulsion move’s out. Still, at least he can propel himself quickly to his
left, so that’s something. And Feedback has always been fast, and is still just as strong, especially when he’s got something to snack on. Ben grins, feels the electricity bubble beneath one of his arms and leaps up, next to a satellite dish – also Mr Baumann’s.

‘Chow-time,’ he says and runs his cabled tail into the system.

Chapter End Notes

Ben 10 theme immediately starts playing.

Also Mr Baumann shall never get a break. Never.

Annnd with Vilware now present, I guess this means this fic takes place after the events of the Omniverse series. Maybe. Perhaps I should stick the post-canon tag on it? Hmm.
He forgets sometimes that the Plumbers, despite acting as the occasional canon fodder for the enemy to charge through before he and Rook can get there, are actually trained for stuff like this. One of them is even spraying Vilware with a garden hose, a look of grim determination on his face and Ben feels like he’s gotta at least give the guy props for that.

He grins and launches himself from a billboard splayed over with Billy Billion’s face, his tail slyly slicing through the obnoxious slant of the grin as his foot leaves the glass – and, oops, such a pity, looks like Billy’s gonna have to fork out to re-paper over the obvious new grey gap in his teeth.

‘Mummy, look! It’s Ben Ten!’

Ben has to fight down the small smile he can feel twitching at his mouth; it feels private, the emotion behind it too important for him to want the inevitably waiting cameras to catch. Instead he forces it into a grin, turning to wave with his organic hand because he doesn’t want to freak the kid out with a broken robot arm but the motion jerks off suddenly, turning into a panicked swipe through the air, mostly for balance as he trips onto the oncoming road. He stumbles for a moment, the leaden weight of the metal attached to him still feeling jarring and cumbersome, especially when he has to whirl to avoid an incoming tentacle.

‘Yes, sweetheart, I can see that,’ he hears ‘Mummy’ say. ‘You don’t see landings like that in the movies.’

‘Whatever lady,’ he grunts, jumping back and then ramming a punch onto the headlight-infused tentacle currently reaching for his chest. ‘You know what those actors have that I don’t? Stunt doubles.’

And maybe if I had one of those, he continues snidely within his own head, I wouldn’t have lost my arm. He allows himself a quick chuckle at the thought that he actually feels strong enough to joke about it now, before he rams his head into the splattering dark of Vilware’s own, wincing as he feels more than hears a metallic crunch grinding beneath the mesh of bone inside. He then whirls away, tail tugging out of a nearby fuse box as two black-and-red veined hands extend towards him, van tires rolling out from their knuckles like the sudden spurs of ninja knives.

A few orange blasts from Rook’s Proto-tool quickly dampens this danger somewhat, raining down from Ben’s left and biting into the exposed grooves, managing to take off a few chunks of the oozing rubber as they do so; at this, the metal rims let out an irate clank and twist away from the orange energy, re-forming into sharper, thinner knives, much more in line with the whole ninja-effect. Ben grimaces and punches them before they can fully harden, watching grimly as their fluidity causes them to break apart like melting ice, spraying out into a splatter of angry marks onto the pavement. And then he frowns as these comma-shaped splashes catch the corner of his eye with wiggling movements, as though in imitation of caterpillars. Barely pausing to breathe, his fingers immediately shoot out a crackling surge in response, rendering the upturned curves of their movements into charred drops.

Then he promptly summersaults over Vilware’s head, raining down a last blast of white energy
right into the guy’s vacant eyeballs. He winces at the gurgling scream he hears – he doesn’t like being ruthless, but he’s working with far less manoeuvrability than before and if this transformation is any indication, only one arm from now on is gonna be able to deal out decent alien powers. Which throws out a whole host of concerns, like if he’s gonna be able to make a metal arm intangible when he’s Big Chill or Ghostfreak-

‘Ben!’

Right, right, focusing. He has to be smarter than that. He can do this, right? Be the hero again?

Vilware gurgles, drooling lumps splurging out his back to reform themselves into a familiar and rather wonky-looking cannon. A bright orange light flickers inside and Ben races forward, leaping round to try and face its blast before Vilware can erupt into another burst of dizzying speed. He’s caught in mid-leap when he realises he’s not going to be fast enough to make it.

And then, unbidden, his face breaks out into a grin. Because to 'be the hero?' Against this lump? Of course he can!

His hand sweeps down, arm forcing itself into a rigid diagonal angle towards the pavement. And then he lets the light race down, lets it all explode out into a push that jerks him up to one side. But this time, he’s ready for it, knows how to use it and it shoves him with a force that gets his feet to slam down onto the side of the cannon, and then out his antenna roll, to suck down all that wonderful energy that’s about to stream forth. And stream forth it does, before his uncoiled antenna feeds it back through as though they’re both part of a closed circuit, the re-routed energy outlining the sodden tangle of his enemy’s limbs in a halo of orange and yellow crackles.

Guess, I won’t have to ‘go home’ this time, Ben thinks grimly, all as he sends Vilware into a screaming mess of spasms.

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‘Well done,’ Rook tells him afterwards.

And Ben, now human, passes a critical eye over his...boyfriend’s armour. It’s not cracked and there are no missing panels, so it looks like it’s business as usual.

‘What are we gonna do with Mr Zombie over there?’ he asks, jerking his head towards the groaning lump of Vilware that is now being cushioned somewhat by a crackling blue force field currently being set up by a nearby science team. Driba and Blukic, he notices, are booking distinctly nervous, hands hovering over a small remote that looks suspiciously like a re-modelled playstation controller.

‘Perhaps...we can help Vilgax, or what is left of him,’ Rook offers uneasily. Then he winces as a particularly mournful bellow rumbles out of Vilware’s mouth, the distortion of red and black veined mucus making it echo like the low groan of a whale. ‘...Assuming he is still alive underneath all that...’

Ben shrugs. ‘Couldn’t have happened to a nicer person,’ he says coldly. If it had been any other villain, someone who wasn’t Vilgax or Malware, then he might have felt some residual sympathy. And it’s not as though he doesn’t feel some degree of horror, looking at what his oldest enemy has become. But...well. He’s only human.
Rook looks at him. ‘True, Vilgax was not a nice person,’ he says quietly. ‘But you are.’

And you should show it, seems to be the unspoken sentiment.

But all Ben says, rather breezily, is, ‘yeah, well the guy’s been trying to cut off my arm since I was ten. Oh, and just outright kill me. So I’ve kinda had it up to here with feeling sorry for him.’

Rook doesn’t wince at this, but his eyes do glance down along the ruined line of Ben’s left arm, the one Vilgax had never managed to actually take.

‘Heh, yeah, just another failure he can add to his long list. Looks pretty busted, though.’

A large spark runs through its frame, causing it shiver and clank.

‘Whoa...’

‘Whoa, indeed,’ says Rook, his hand already closing on Ben’s unaffected shoulder. Ben kinda gets the feeling that the guy wants to take both his shoulders under his grip and steer him away straight into a hospital, but the way he’s eyeing Ben’s ruined arm speaks volumes on how bad an idea it might be to try and touch it. ‘We should get you to a hospital.’

Blukic and Driba take a moment to glance over, offended looks on their faces.

‘...And then we will come straight over to Blukic and Driba and see what they have to say about your health,’ finishes Rook smoothly.

They don’t exactly look mollified by this, but it’s enough to make them grunt and turn their attention back to the force field at any rate.

‘Hang on,’ Ben says, shrugging out of Rook’s grip. ‘There’s something I want to try first, before the doctors make everything shiny and new.’

Rook stares at him blankly. But when he speaks, his voice is anything but. ‘Oh no, what?’

Ben frowns. For someone who prides himself on being so polite, Rook sure has no problem being rude sometimes. ‘Just...shut up and watch, okay?’

He takes a breath and then speaks clearly and concisely. ‘Give me Ghostfreak.’

There’s a burst of light and his fingers lengthen, curved into claws, as the rest of him grows taller and he stares down as the light fades, wings curling over his body in a nice shade of blue and black. ‘Well,’ he says wryly in the husky tones of Big Chill. ‘Could have been worse.

Looks like even without a control dial to help it function, the Omnitrix is still going to act out the role of a sulky parent that has already determined the fact that it always, always knows best. At least his little experiment can still work with what it’s given him. So he concentrates and lets the colours bleed out from his skin, the contours of the pavement showing through the now invisible lines of his flesh. And immediately, his prosthetic arm falls down with a heavy thump.

‘Drat,’ says Ben, ‘That’s effectively halved Big Chill’s usefulness. And made Ghostfreak pretty much useless. Oh well. Big Chill’s still pretty cool. At least he can still fly and shoot ice out and stuff.’

Rook meanwhile, is staring at him, eyes as wide as saucers.

‘Oh, don’t give me that look,’ Ben says grumpily. ‘I had to find out sooner or later. And it might as
well be sooner, with my arm all messed up and stuff.’

‘No, no,’ Rook reassures him, his eyes now back to his normal size though he still looks decidedly queasy. ‘I understand your reasoning. In fact I cannot believe I did not even think to consider the possibility that going intangible would result in such a problem for you. But that is besides the point. It is just...as soon as you become tangible again, your nerves will react as though they have been severed. It might be a shock to your system.’

Oh. Oh.

‘Oh,’ says Ben. Now he feels rather queasy.

‘Yes,’ says Rook, ‘oh. Step into my truck, please. I will attempt to get you to the hospital before you time out.’ And then with one smooth movement, he ducks down and sweeps Ben’s broken limb off the ground, attentively checking it over for jumping darts of electricity.

Ben glides past him even when he could, you know, just glide through him, but whatever, that’s just creepy, and he’s already coiled himself up in the space above his usual seat by the time Rook looks up. He feels kinda stupid, all of him looming in the air that would usually hold his weight, the stark lines of the seat showing through his midriff and without so much as a shadow to fall across them, but half a second later, Rook opens the door to join him and makes him feel a lot less awkward, before the guy promptly rolls Ben’s lost limb into the seat Ben’s hovering through, thus making it awkward again.

‘At least I do not have to worry about you fiddling with any of the controls directly in front of you,’ he notes with a detached sense of amusement.

‘Hey!’ Ben protests. ‘I haven’t done that for ages!’

‘Only because we have not been on missions together for a while. And when we were, you ended up breaking the radio.’

‘I was trying to access the fire extinguisher foamy stuff!

‘Foamy stuff?’

‘Yes! That pink bubbly stuff, crushes oxygen, puts out fires?’

Ben has time to feel offended at the way Rook’s face drops open in surprise, his mouth a quiet dark hole at the fact that yes, Ben does in fact know that the quickest way to put out a fire is to rob it off its oxygen.

‘Let’s just go,’ he grumbles.

Rook nods and starts the engine. Thankfully, they’re only a minute or so away from the hospital when the ominous time-out beeping from the Omnitrix makes itself known and Ben flashes back into his usual self before promptly curling over into a scream.

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Ben tries to block out the memory of Rook scooping him up into his arms and dragging him
through the doors as if he were some frail civilian, Ben’s broken arm shoved unceremoniously over
his shoulder like a very stiff towel. He tries even harder to forget the dark lines around Rook’s eyes
collapsing, cutting that amber slant in half as Rook tried to juggle Ben through the various
corridors and doorways that loomed in front of his face, popping up like an unlocked dungeon boss
as Ben’s flailing leg managed to catch a senior doctor in the gut.

‘Sorry,’ Ben breathes out now, when there is nothing but white sheets and green curtains hanging
from a rail to keep them from each other. Rook’s fingers reach up to the drapes in question,
shoving them even further away from the bed before they settle and Ben can feel the tight knot
being made between them, echoed in the pressure of fingers over his own, digging into all the gaps
he opens up as he spreads out his hand. His body feels loose, pliant, a soupy mix of dullness and
apathy in contrast to his feelings, tricked into compliancy by the morphine flooding his system.

‘This is an occupational hazard with you,’ Rook says quietly. ‘I feel as though I am sometimes
waiting for the ticking of a bomb to go off when I am with you.’

Ben tries to pull his hand away, even if he can read the futility of the gesture by the way his pulse
jerks in his wrist, his muscles making his hand flop listlessly under Rook’s hold.

‘You don’t have to stay,’ he mutters. ‘You could go be with someone who wouldn’t get themselves
‘blown up.’”

Rayona’s name is on the tip of his tongue, but he can’t bring himself to press it out into the air.

‘Ah,’ tuts Rook. ‘I said ‘sometimes’, not ‘always.’ Besides a ‘bomb’ went off in my heart long ago.
And I am still dealing with the fallout, even now.’

He grins, looking extremely pleased with himself at what he presumably feels to be a pun. Only to
look a little put out when Ben starts to laugh rather helplessly, the jitters running all the way down
to the hand he has enclosed within his own.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I don't actually know if a suddenly severed prosthetic limb would have the same
painful effect in real life, but then again, none of them have probably been separated
from the people they are attached to by having the body suddenly become intangible -
that's gotta mess up the machinery like whoa.

Though honestly, I'm starting to re-think the title of this fic. It should be named
something like 'How many times can the author send Ben back to the hospital
AGAIN.'
The trouble with being famous is that there is always a camera ready to catch hold of him somewhere, with the ones held inside smartphones making it even easier for the customary six-second vines to infect the internet. So it is with a certain air of expectation that Ben finds himself watching as one such video plays in front of him on Rook’s tablet, grimacing as his arm drops down from his intangible Big Chill form much like the loose limb of an action figure, the sound remaining muted until the exact second the severed limb makes contact with the ground. And then, all of a sudden, the small *boom* of a mike-drop rings out.

There are others of course, all with variating sound effects, but personally he thinks the one crooning out the ‘now I’m only falling apart’ line from Bonnie Taylor’s ‘Total Eclipse of the Heart’ is particularly clever.

Rook sighs as this latest video comes to an end, Ben being shoved forwards a little by the outwards jut of motion that shakes out the strong chest he is propped up against. ‘Are you seeking to torture yourself?’

Ben grimaces again instead of replying and snuggles further in the offered pillow of fur behind him. It’s not as soft as a stranger might expect since Rook is all muscle beneath the coat, but to Ben it’s like relaxing into a bean-bag cushion. Well, a little bit. Okay, not at all. Rook’s warm for one thing, and all solid beneath Ben’s spine with none of those loose little grains of polystyrene waiting to trickle out and make Ben feel insecure.

No, Rook is far more annoying in all the other living ways. Like when he breathes so that his fur presses up against the soft skin of Ben’s neck, just enough to tickle. And when his arms steadily loop round Ben’s waist, tightening as though in reprimand against his partner’s silence. Ben glances down to see how this movement creases the sheets hanging over both of their laps, smiling a little as the taunt lines form pathways that glide over the shape of their legs, all as Rook’s encases Ben’s own like a cage.

‘Ben...’

Ben gives up and slides the tablet down onto his knees, careful not to leave any smudges against its screen. Rook would probably have a heart attack if he did, or maybe just squeeze him a little more tightly in retaliation.

‘I’m not torturing myself; I’m just keeping myself informed. Don’t want to get caught out not knowing about a meme of me and look like an idiot when a fan points it out.’

‘There are other things surely, that would be more worthwhile to learn about—’

‘You don’t get it.’

‘Obviously not.’

Ben sighs at the forced coolness of Rook’s tone. ‘Ok, celebrities don’t *have* to know every single thing someone writes or makes up about them on the internet, but it’s helpful to keep up to date on
the general stuff or sometimes even the niche stuff. Besides, at least they’re doing something funny with it, rather than just being generally mean.’

Rook’s hands unclasp from one another, one of them still rubbing small lines into Ben’s stomach as the other lifts the tablet into view. ‘Yes,’ he acknowledges, ‘and it also helps that some of the people here are genuinely outraged on your behalf.’

Ben perks up. ‘Wait really?’

He doesn’t even have to turn round to know that Rook is pinning the back of his head with an unimpressed gaze.

‘Yes. Do not tell me that you did not even read the comments?’

‘Glanced over them. Figured most of them would be trolls.’

‘A fitting description for some of these people, I will admit. Some of the things they say beg disbelief. But look...’

Rook’s hand stops stroking at Ben’s stomach to lift away and point at a thin line of text on the screen. And Ben blinks as the username ‘EchoEchoRoxOut’ flares out at him.

‘Have you no shame!’ the comment beneath reads. ‘The guy lost his arm and you put this out on display like he’s a marionette with his strings chopped short! Haven’t you ever seen Pinocchio? Screwed up things happened when you treat a ‘real boy’ like a hunk of wood.’

Rook grins as he watches Ben read; Ben can feel it in the way the chest behind him deflates slightly, as though to help push the smile up onto the face above. ‘They have even attempted to use proper grammar,’ his boyfriend says, suitably impressed. ‘A rare feat indeed on the internet.’

Ben glances down eagerly. ‘Oooh, here’s another one! ‘How’d you’ll like it if your arm got chopped off and your new one fell off?’ And another! ‘You fuc...’ oh. Yeeah. It’s a bit more dramatic, but at least it’s well-meant.’

Rook nods sagely. ‘The internet is a gift as well as a curse.’

‘Geez,’ Ben mutters. ‘Which fortune cookie did you yank that one out of?’

But Rook chooses not to respond, instead pressing his chin firmly down on top of Ben’s head.

‘Ow,’ Ben jokes, ‘don’t crush me! Your chin could take up half a moon.’

‘Your examples are as hyperbolic as usual,’ Rook says loftily. ‘But I have to admit, it is nice, being lazy like this. I intend to make the most of it, now that they are busy crafting you a new arm. And given that they already have the specifications sorted out, it will not take too long for it to reach completion. In fact, Blukic specifically told me that they started work on it at the when they had mostly completed your first one. They thought it might be logical to have a spare one on standby at some point.’

‘Huh,’ says Ben. ‘That was thoughtful of them.’

‘Yes,’ says Rook dryly. ‘I am sure it is no way a reflection on their steady belief in your self-destructive tendencies.’

Ben whirs his head round in a flash. ‘Keep that up,’ he says, equally as dry, ‘and you’ll never get
past second base.’

But to his surprise, Rook doesn’t the slightest abashed. Instead the fucker smirks. ‘All things in
good time. Besides, I am confident that I could find a way to change your mind.’ He leans forward
and gently presses a small kiss to Ben’s temple.

Ben shivers at the air it stirs up beneath his fringe, and the way it feels as though his heart thumps
under his skin, directly beneath the press of Rook’s mouth.

‘Is this what you did to the girls on Revonnah?’

‘A gentleman does not kiss and tell,’ Rook says primly, ‘but he does show, in the right
circumstances.’ And then, at Ben’s smirk, he hastily adds: ‘and these are not the right ones!’

Ben sniggers. It’s good to know that Rook is not always as cool as a cucumber in settings like
these. ‘Just have patience, huh? Alright, I can do that.’

‘We shall see.’

Ben grins. ‘We shall, shall we?’ he asks, deliberately affecting a posh accent, something a little
British-sounding. But Rook must think he’s trying to imitate him, because the guy scowls and Ben
laughs, wriggling himself round within the tight boundary of Rook’s arms so he can lean up and
kiss it away.

Because truthfully, it doesn’t bother him anymore, this feeling of fur beneath his lips, and
sometimes, if he’s not careful, even against his teeth. It may not bubble with the same thriving
warmth direct contact with human skin would provide, but it does feel light and airy, like he’s
smothering hair beneath his touch. And well, humans sometimes kiss others on the hair, right?
What he’s doing isn’t that weird, surely.

He pulls away after he feels the quick furrow of Rook’s brow dip down beneath his lips, taking
pleasure in the way the initial harness of the muscle falls away and softens under his breath. It’s a
little like smoothing out a landscape, gentling it like a benevolent god instead of wrecking
destruction.

‘Wow,’ he teases, looping his own arm round Rook’s neck to keep his balance and also, well,
because he actually enjoys touching the guy. ‘You’re easy.’

Rook frowns again and Ben immediately ducks down to draw his mouth against the newly-
scrunched up muscles, pulling away only when they start to loosen beneath the heat he hastily
presses there. And he laughs a little to see the slightly moist patches he’s left behind as he moves
back, feeling Rook’s hands clamber up his spine and press down against the fabric of his shirt like
drapery. Honestly, it’s like he’s giving the guy a small grooming session.

‘See?’ he says again, laughter in his voice when Rook shoots him an exasperated look. ‘You,
Mister, are definitely easy.’

Rook looks at him stoutly, then takes his hands away before he pushes one of them up beneath
Ben’s T-shirt with an air of confidence. Ben immediately yelps and Rook, looking a little too
pleased with himself, begins to stroke Ben’s spine, his palm spreading itself out against the back of
Ben’s ribs in a flutter of warmth.

‘Are you sure you want to play this game with me, Ben?’ he asks lowly, though his tone, Ben is
relieved to note, still has the element of a gentle tease running through it. ‘I have a number of ideas
of my own that might make you more pliant. And yes, all of them would be very ‘easy’ to do.’
Ben narrows his eyes. ‘I’m calling your bluff,’ he says, fighting to keep his voice steady. ‘You are way too prim and proper to pull anything rated R-18 in a hospital.’

Rook tilts his head to the side, his smile growing wider and therefore much more smug.

‘I went against my father’s wishes and unsettled a great many of my own kind when I left my world to train and become a Plumber,’ he says. ‘At that time, I ran the great risk of alienating myself and was accused on multiple occasions of abandoning my culture. And while their concerns have died down, there are probably still a few who share the same views as Kundo. So what, on your Earth, makes you think I am unable to shuck conventions here and there, in order to claim a little ‘face time’ with my boyfriend?’

Wow. Ben didn’t think of it like that. And oh dear. Because Rook’s hand is already pressing down on the small of his back and that big, smug, furry face is diving up to meet his own and-

Fire crackles in his veins. Because he is Ben Tennyson and just because his male friends tend to be more broad shouldered and imposing than him, with a body structure of which his boyfriend just happens to take the cake, well, it doesn’t mean he can’t even out the playing-field. By a mile.

So he wraps his hand round the right side of Rook’s face, thumb smudging harshly into the black line that drop along the Revonnahgander’s cheek and opens his mouth as the other’s tongue dives in, all to show he isn’t afraid. And then it’s all-out-war between them. Rook’s tongue is large and he likes to curl it, to overlap the quick pokes Ben tends to favour with his own, which makes Ben breathe in harshly through his nose and snap his neck to the side, dragging Rook’s face in at an angle.

He ignores the rise of smugness he feels at the muffled protest that echoes into his own mouth and curls his tongue into Rook’s, before bypassing its side a little to try and stroke one of the bottom teeth nearby. They’re sharper than human teeth and that sets his pulse racing a little, an icy spike of danger embedding itself in his gut as Rook’s free hand quickly buries itself in his neck, adjusting their angle so that Ben’s tongue skates past a pointed tip. The guy makes another muffled sound, something that sounds like a cross ‘nergh,’ which Ben takes to mean ‘no, I don’t like you doing that’ and chastened, he draws his tongue back a little. And with a pleased hum, Rook’s larger one instantly races back to catch it.

Maybe we should talk about how sharp those teeth of yours actually are, Ben muses. He isn’t blind; he’s seen Rook eyeing the side of his neck more than a few times now, and honestly, if he is going to end up bleeding at some point in the future because of it, he wants to set down a few ground rules.

But then the thought is promptly chased away as Rook’s tongue manages to wrestle his own down into a flattened twist and Ben ignores the thrill of a spark at the contact, preparing to regroup because-

‘Oh my-’

‘Eww, Ewwwww-’

‘GOD, I did not need to see-’

‘Brain bleach, brain bleach, where’s the-’

‘-my cousin, macking on- okay, sorry Rook, if it was anyone else, I would have left quietly...’

‘-brain bleach, ding, ding, I want my gay innocence back please.’
Rook and Ben have already ripped themselves apart, turning to stare in horror at the sputtering wreck that is Gwen, and the now gagging and theatrically dry-heaving actor that is Kevin.

It takes a few seconds, but Gwen manages to pull herself together, straightening abruptly, and then much like a military cadet preparing for war, she takes a breath and steps into the room, dragging a still-pretending-to-throw-up Kevin behind her. The door swings shut behind them with a soft bang like a starting pistol, and at it’s noise, Rook’s hand swiftly slides down off Ben’s back and drops out of his T-shirt.

Immediately, a delighted grin springs onto Kevin’s face and he points at it as though it were a Christmas present.

‘Wow, I have to say, I never thought I would see a real-life metaphor for a flagging erection-’

‘KEVIN!’

‘Oh come on Gwen, I know you’ve done a media studies class, enough to pick up on symbolism and stuff. And that, right there in real life, was 101 symbolism.’

‘I don’t see it, personally,’ says Gwen dryly. ‘But whatever makes you happy, dear.’

Kevin continues cackling and then abruptly stops when he sees the look on her face. ‘Oh crap,’ he whispers softly.

Gwen smiles sweetly.

‘I just realised,’ he continues, sounding genuinely mortified, ‘that you, well, you’re an expert at making-

‘-That symbolism become a part of real life? On you?’ she chirps still wearing her sweet butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-her-mouth smile. ‘Oh yes, you betcha.’

Ben, who at this point has stayed chock-still, frozen, suddenly springs to life. ‘La, la, la,’ he sings, clamping his hands over his ears. ‘I can’t hear you! Seriously guys, this is gross.’

Kevin snorts. ‘Hey, even I have enough class not to make out in a hospital. You know, a place full of sick people?’

‘I am not sick,’ says Rook quietly, sounding a little wounded and Ben throws him a hapless grin before patting him on the shoulder. ‘Do not ‘there, there, me,’” the Revonnahgander adds a little crossly, before shrugging off Ben’s hand.

Kevin laughs lowly. ‘Trouble in paradise?’

Ben stares at him, at the cocky smirk that adorns the face of one of his closest friends. ‘Everybody gets touchy when they get caught mid-kiss,’ he says, surprised to hear the uncertain waver in his own voice.

And Kevin must catch it too, because the smirk suddenly twists into a frown. ‘Hey, no hard feelings, man,’ he says, aiming his scowl into the side of the wall. ‘So you wanna kiss a dude, so
what? Your choice if you wanna get razor burn from all that fur.’

Ben feels Rook puff up indignantly at his side and quickly shoots out his hand to restrain him. ‘Okay, I don’t think that counts as a furry joke,’ he says. ‘But still, try not to go overboard, okay?’

Kevin just smirks. ‘Yeah, good luck, preventing Rook from going to the next motor show, even if I do.’

Oh, Ben thinks, guess Gwen relayed the message in full. He flushes slightly as he feels Rook’s eyes on him. ‘Oh?’ his boyfriend says, a wheedling sort of curiosity now present in his voice. ‘What is this? Are you trying to exercise some sort of power-play without my permission? It will not go well for you, Ben, if you are. I love my truck very much.’

Ben tilts his head over his shoulder, twisting to give Rook an awkward smile. Might as well go for broke, he thinks, and then fluttering his eyelashes as outlandishly as he can, says, ‘aw, you love it more than you love me? Thanks, it’s nice to know where your priorities stand.’

‘It does help one to focus, yes,’ Rook says, looking very unimpressed as Kevin chokes in the background and Gwen fights to keep her smile down. ‘But that does not mean I cannot arrange a suitable punishment for Kevin myself if he takes too many verbal jabs at the fact that I am a being coated with fur.’

This time Gwen has to actually stifle a laugh into her palm as Kevin tilts his head to the side, actively pondering this. ‘Nah,’ he says finally. ‘You’re still too polite to scare me.’

‘But not too polite to prevent myself making out in a hospital full of sick people, apparently,’ says Rook dryly. ‘You should be careful, Kevin. I may have hidden depths you will not wish to stir.’

‘No, I can pretty much attest to that,’ Ben agrees cheerfully. ‘Rook’s no fun when he’s testy.’

Kevin shakes his head. ‘Okay, well, before Rook goes dark side- (‘I will not,’ Rook mutters crossly) – we should talk about what went down.’ He looks at Ben, his face deathly serious for a few seconds, just enough to get Ben to squirm, before he breaks out in a grin and strides forwards to roughly ruffle Ben’s hair with his knuckles. ‘Way to go, Benny. Finally got your head in the game, huh? Cos even if that last arm-dropping bit at the end was uncool, I got the rest of it on TV. And it was pretty awesome.’

‘Urgh,’ says Ben, grinning as he feels a quick jab of relief in his gut. ‘Don’t call me that. But thanks.’

They stare at each other for a moment and laugh.

‘So,’ Ben offers, ‘We’re cool?’

‘Dude,’ Kevin says, ‘when are we ever not?’

‘Weeell,’ says Ben slyly, ‘I can think of a few ‘gotta-waste-Ben’ moments in the past that would say otherwise-’

Kevin groans.

‘But yeah,’ Ben says flippantly, ‘you’re right. When are we ever not cool?’
Gwen sighs. ‘You guys make it look so easy,’ she complains. ‘Honestly, how? No, really, you didn’t even mention the word ‘sorry’ to each other. How are you all better?’

Kevin and Ben stare at her for a moment.

‘We just...don’t need to?’ Ben offers hopelessly, while Kevin shrugs.

‘Things get said in the heat of the moment, babe,’ he says. ‘But that’s all it is: a moment. And if Ben and I held grudges over stuff like that, we’d never get on. Besides,’ he adds more darkly. ‘I’ve learnt from experience that holding onto grudges leads to dark places. And I’ve got no desire to ever go back to that.’

There’s an awkward silence at that and Gwen gently slides her fingers along her boyfriend wrist, pinching her fore-finger and thumb together at the part of his hand that branches out into his fingers.

Kevin smiles at her. ‘I guess it’s kinda like how you always get me, babe. In a different, much sexier way obviously.’

‘Oh yuck,’ says Ben. ‘Please tell me you two aren’t gonna start kissing now. I get it, it’s prime revenge material, but please, please, don’t.’

Gwen smiles and shakes her head fondly, leaning into Kevin’s side as she loops her fingers through his. ‘Ben, come on. We’re not ‘sick’, remember?’ Then she frowns. ‘Urgh, I just realised the awful connotation that might have, given that you two are clearly less than straight. Sorry.’

‘Do not fret,’ Rook tells her snidely, ‘for it was a poorly-thought-out joke, which should come as no surprise given that it was designed by Kevin. Clearly this complexity escaped his notice entirely.’ He grins smugly, completely unafraid in the face of Kevin’s glower.

‘Starting to see what Ben meant about the ‘no fun’ part,’ he mutters.

‘Whatever,’ Gwen says tensely, ‘look, Rook, I’m sorry, okay? Which you would know, if you’d bothered to read any of the texts I sent you. But I don’t think I was entirely wrong to do what I did. Something needed to change. And you weren’t doing anything. Passively waiting doesn’t do any good, I should know.’

‘You broke my trust,’ says Rook stoutly, his jaw set firmly in an expression Ben has recognised on himself in the mirror a few times.

But Gwen doesn’t seem to take offense at the mulish pout that has stubbornly taken hold of Rook’s face, and drops her own head in acknowledgement of his point. ‘I know, I know I did, and I’m sorry. But given where this might have led you to, I can’t say that I wouldn’t do the same again.’

Rook inclines his head. ‘That sounds fair.’ Then his jaw softens, the line of his mouth above rising into a smile. ‘Apology accepted, Gwendolyn.’

The room seems to brighten then; perhaps it’s the look of relief that spreads across Gwen’s face or the slight eye-roll Kevin gives Ben as if to say now aren’t you glad we’re not like that? But either way, the atmosphere clears into something a little more relaxed and Ben takes his cue from it, un-tensing the line of his back against the sheltering brush of Rook’s fur.

And this seems to open up the way for other signs of affection, because a touched look springs to life in Gwen’s eyes as Kevin rubs her shoulders with a hushed, ‘see babe, everything’s coming up roses,’drifting out under his breath, and Rook’s hand, softly lying on the sheets above their laps,
comes up to touch Ben’s elbow, stroking its way carefully into the dip below his hand. It’s as if he doesn’t want to be outdone by Kevin.

Ben grins. Because it's like he’s back to square one, lying in a hospital bed with his loved ones attached to his personal space, refusing to leave him alone, even with his left arm nowhere in sight. Except of course, there are several things different between then and now. Now he knows he can fight. Awkwardly and with a lot of practise needed, but yeah, he’s still got the moves.

And also apparently, he’s kinda a furry. Maybe. Well, okay, only for one guy. But a guy that matters.

Ben smiles and snuggles even further back into Rook’s chest, giving Kevin a snide look as he does so. ‘Okay, let’s see what you got,’ he says, letting his confidence project into his voice with that same arrogant drawl that makes the other groan. ‘You’re bound to run out of furry jokes eventually.’

For he knows from experience that’s it’s less fun to poke and prod someone when they play along with whatever role you try to tease them with. And since Kevin is looking slightly startled as Ben sighs as though he’s stuck inside a particularly warm bath and runs a hand through the fur behind him, there’s probably some merit buried within his theory.

Rook sighs too, but there’s a trace of annoyance behind it, which means that he’s probably cottoning on to what Ben’s doing. But he doesn’t stop stroking Ben’s arm either.

‘I do not care how much it will annoy Kevin,’ he murmurs, pressing his mouth, and therefore his voice, down near Ben’s ear. ‘I will not hand feed you when the nurses come bearing trays.’

‘Not even if I pay you?’ Ben murmurs back, trying not to jump as Rook’s breath slides out to stir his hair, almost like a heat-seeking missile. ‘C’mon it’s better than this other idea I had of putting fake blue hair on the pillowcases and telling him you moult.’

Rook’s hand freezes, hovering mid-stroke over Ben’s wrist. Ben can feel his pulse stir there, a steady thump, thump that clashes against the tense space between them. And then it rushes, transforming into something more as Rook brings his hand down softly to actually touch him, bringing with it a faint rustle of blood that speeds beneath the contact. It draws out a feeling that snaps out like a spark into his chest and Ben inhales sharply. God, he is so gay now.

‘You are making it very easy to be irritated by you,’ he informally but crisply. ‘It makes me want to...’ he hesitates, some part of him not quite brave enough to inject a threat.

‘Makes you want to what? Discipline me? Bite me?’ Ben teases, knowing he’s hit the mark when Rook’s hand tightens against his skin, forming a vice around his wrist. ‘Damn, Revonnahganders are kinky. Or is this just a weird Rook thing?’

And despite how much he lowers his voice, how much he hastens it into a fierce whisper, Gwen ends up staring back at him in obvious horror.

‘We are still here!!!’ she grits out. ‘And we can hear enough to make out the gist of what you’re saying!’

‘Also,’ says Kevin glibly, though he does look, Ben is pleased to note, a little green around the gills. ‘It’s no fun picking on you if you two end up teaming up. And I gotta tell you, watching gay-make-outs of which it looks like this hospital room is shortly going to become a theatre for, isn’t really my thing. No offence.’
Ben shrugs. ‘It’s cool. I don’t particularly like watching people kiss either. It’s boring unless I’m the one taking part.’

‘Perhaps we should change the subject?’ Rook offers, though there is now embarrassment in his tone which Ben gleefully takes note of. When dealing with someone as smart as Rook, you sometimes need all the ammunition you can get.

‘Kay,’ says Kevin brightly, and launches into an uncharacteristically bright monologue about some innovative tune-ups he’s been doing to his car’s engine. Rook brightens as well, his chest eagerly pressing out against Ben’s back just at the sound of the overly long names Kevin casually dumps into the one-sided conversation. It’s at this point though that it becomes decidedly less one-sided as the Revonnahgander starts to chip in with his own recommendations and Ben is forced to exchange a long-suffering look with Gwen.

‘Guess we’re going to be mere spectators here for the next hour,’ he says loftily and flinches as Rook squeezes his wrist again in a gentle warning.

But Gwen shakes her head and smiles before she obligingly leans forward, pulling a pen out from the pocket of her coat in one smooth movement. Ben grins at her, reading her intention and remembers the few afternoons in the Rust Bucket when Grandpa had confiscated her laptop and forced her to actually interact with him, the only scoreboard allowed being the pink of their palms.

‘Oooh, ohh, I wanna be crosses!’ Then he narrows his eyes at her. ‘That better not be permanent marker though.’

But she just smiles enigmatically. And then proceeds to win every single game with her fiery little noughts.

Chapter End Notes

Humans are jerks, guys. Or at least it's easier to be one when you have the internet to hide behind.

Also, in case anybody's wondering the 'God, he is so gay now' line of thought that Ben experiences, isn't really a serious reflection on his state of mind, so much as it's a colloquial-kinda impulse, the same way that you see social media posts go 'wow, I'm gay for so-and-so.' I figured most of you would get it, but occasionally some readers will ask or impose a meaning into a solitary line of text that I didn't intend. And there's also the fact that on fanfiction sites some authors change the character's sexuality to suit the story they're telling and sort of gloss over the romantic relationships they've had in canon. There's nothing wrong with that, but I don't intend to magically re-write Ben's prior attraction to people like Julie or Ester.

Plus, I often feel like that at it's root, there's a tendency to do this in order to downplay the significance of the female characters in general. And that's not something...well, let's just say that, in general, I'm more comfortable acknowledging their impact on Ben, rather than automatically hand-waving it away.
So that you may go on, have fun in exchange

The news drifts down through the Plumber grapevine, relayed faithfully through Rook: the arm will be ready in a matter of days, rather than weeks, which is not that surprising, considering the fact that apparently everyone was readying a spare, just waiting with bated breath for Ben to wreck his first one. At least, that’s according to Rook. And he’s biased.

‘The surgery can be performed quickly as well, thankfully,’ he tells Ben eagerly, no trace of that same bias in his voice now. In fact he’s leaning forward, poised like some attentive relative as he grasps Ben’s hand in his excitement. ‘It seems simply seeing you in action has made people, or at least the surgeons available, incredibly receptive to the idea of rehabilitating you as soon as possible.’

‘But still. Surgery, urgh,’ Ben says with a spit of breath. ‘That’s gonna be fun.’

‘Not in the slightest,’ says Rook, rubbing his fingers along the faded ovals and crosses that now run rampant over Ben’s hand - all casualties of Gwen's penmanship. ‘But if it will make you happy, I will allow you to trace the lines of my face once again with your new limb.’

Ben looks down. ‘You know it actually will. Thanks!’

Rook tugs at his fingers in response, no trace of self-awareness on his face as he beams down at him warmly. ‘You are very welcome.’

And Ben braves a glance back at him, feeling a little shy. ‘Soooo,’ he says eventually, ‘what do you want to do after this?’

Rook frowns. ‘Do?’

‘Yeah, I mean,’ Ben makes a gesture with his hands that is meant to indicate them both, but gives up half-way through and allows them to slump into his lap. ‘I’m not really a has-been hero anymore. I can still do stuff. I might need a bit of practise though...’

Rook raises his eyebrows. ‘Might?’

‘Okay, a lot. Either way, I guess that means I’m gonna end up back inside the roster and get to go on patrol with you again.’ Ben looks him straight in the eyes. ‘You know, this is probably gonna sound kinda weird, but you know, a lot of the things I’ve done with you, like going to Sumo Slammer events and watching movies, it’s all date-like stuff, right? And I’m not saying I wouldn’t do that stuff with other people,’ he says hurriedly on seeing that familiar frown of confusion pushing down to rest on Rook’s brows, ‘but...I dunno. Does dating actually work for us? I mean you date someone to get to know them, right? And well, we know each other pretty well by now.’

‘Maybe so, but none of those date-like activities you have described have involved me getting to kiss you or express any other kind of romantic intention towards you,’ Rook says shortly, his tone sounding a little waspish to Ben’s ears. ‘Besides, married couples frequently arrange to spend time alone with each in order to pursue bonding activities in a structure reminiscent of a date.’ He pauses. ‘What is the real issue here, Ben?’ he asks more gently, seemingly mindful of the way Ben cringes at the soft fall of his voice. ‘It is not as though we will suddenly start making out with each other as soon as the doors of the Proto-truck close.’
Ben jumps a little guiltily at the image that floods his mind at this: Rook leaning over to fill the space between them, his wide body folding over Ben’s as his long arms carefully tangle into the upholstery of the seat. Shadows will fall and fingers will clench, but as careful as Rook might be to position his hands when cupping Ben's neck, inadvertently, he'll peel strands of his hair away, pinning it back against the head-rest. And they'll be no stretched-out kisses because of this, no swan-neck curves of tongue because a muttered apology will come to break and bear in Rook's voice, to spoil the moment as Ben finches and snaps out at him to be careful...

Ben shakes it off, disturbed at how well his imagination can cock-block him. ‘I dunno,’ he mutters, drawing his attention back to the real Rook's face. ‘You sure weren’t complaining about the location of the kiss at the end of our last date.’

Also their first. But who’s counting?

Rook’s eyes widen at this. ‘It...would have been improper of you to drag me out of the truck merely to give me a kiss, and then leave,’ he stresses, looking a little sour as Ben begins to laugh. ‘Dude, I don’t think there’s anything ‘proper’ about us. Definitely not about me anyway.’ He pauses and when he next speaks all mirth has fled his voice. ‘I know you’re not exactly a poster boy for Revonnahgander tradition anymore,’ he says slowly, eyes mindful of the slight tenseness developing in Rook’s shoulder and the way Rook’s hand gingerly draws back from Ben’s own at the turn of the conversation. ‘But even so, this whole ‘dating a human thing’ has gotta chaff against your Dad’s principles.’

And maybe just your people in general, Ben thinks but doesn’t say.

Rook looks quietly off to the side. ‘You are not wrong,’ he says. ‘In truth, and though you may not believe it, my family is actually more relaxed about Revonnahgander tradition than many other households. But even they would balk at the thought of my attachment to you being anything more than an illicit fling.’

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa,’ Ben says, all of him leaning forward and now keenly attuned to this new development. ‘You mean they’re actually okay with you doing the dirty with an outsider, a guy to boot, and not...I dunno performing a cleansing ceremony? Or casting you out of the house with a dramatic speech?’

Rook looks at him and, yes, there’s a definite twitch to his lips now. ‘I often wonder what it is like inside your head, Ben,’ he says, shoulder un-tensing slightly. ‘You come out with such outlandish ideas. They sprawl from your mouth as though they are living entities, desperate to escape.’

Ben’s brow twitches. He didn’t join this discussion so that Rook could play the part of an amateur theatre student.

‘I don’t think it’s such a great leap to make, given how irritable your Dad used to be at the mere thought of you not wanting to dig up Amber Ogia for the rest of your life,’ he says tightly. ‘Besides, how many Revonnahganders do you know with alien girlfriends? Or, err, I guess alien boyfriends?’

‘None,’ says Rook flippantly. ‘Very few of us ever leave the surface of Revonnah, as you well know. But I suppose I can understand your fear. My parents will be disappointed if I am officially together with someone who is neither female or Revonnahgander. Same-sex relations and other dalliances are usually forgiven if they are not heard about. It is only when something is brought out into the open that there is trouble. But no ’cleansing ceremony’, the very mention of which shows your abundant lack of knowledge of my culture.’
Ben sighs. ‘Okay,’ he says firmly, reaching out to grasp Rook’s hovering hand to show he means business. ‘No more dancing around the subject. How much trouble would you be in if you one day turned up at your family’s doorsteps and said, ‘Hey Mum, hey Dad, I’m with that guy who burnt down a silo and destroyed some of your crops the first time he was here?’’

‘Well,’ says Rook grandly, allowing Ben to knot his fingers within the open gaps between his own. ‘For a start, I would not open the conversation with a ‘hey.’ I would broach the subject with a ‘hello.’ And I would not address them with the labels of ‘Mum’ and ‘Dad’ but rather ‘Mother’ and ‘Father.’

Ben cuts him off with a wry groan, launching his head back against the pillow. It’s not always easy to tell with Rook, but there’s definitely a sarcastic undertone to this conversation that is now present and threatening to tail-gate the entire subject. ‘Stop being so pedantic,’ he demands, ‘Sheesh, even I can tell that that’s a really bad defence mechanism to have.’

‘It could be,’ Rook allows, ‘or perhaps I simply like to see how many wrinkles I can place within that frown of yours.’ He leans over to prod Ben on the forehead with his free hand, grinning in delight as the motion causes the very skin to bunch up beneath his questing finger. Ben growls, a little irate that he can’t shove off the intrusive touch without breaking his grip with Rook’s other hand.

‘C’mon!’ he demands, almost with a shout; either way his voice comes out loud enough to startle Rook into dropping his hand. ‘Take this seriously! Aren’t you supposed to be the mature one out of the two of us?’

Rook sighs. ‘I...am sorry,’ he begins haltingly. ‘Truthfully, I have not wanted to think about it. I love my family,’ he continues, looking beseechingly at Ben, ‘and have no wish to wound them. But my desire for you will, no matter how much I plan to lessen the blow. The elders will have a metaphorical heart attack and it will cast my family’s reputation into doubt, although in truth, they have no way of finding out. Revonnahganders as a whole, do not pay much attention to media outlets, much less the trashy by-lines of idle gossip features. But if I wish us to be long-term,’ he pauses, just to clench Ben’s hand tighter. ‘...Then you are right to try and force me to address the issue.’

‘Hey, I get it,’ Ben says gently, gentling his own grip in return, just so he can make his flesh more passive in the face of the groves Rook is busy cutting into his skin. Because - ow. ‘I’m the master of avoiding unpleasant thoughts. You’ve seen me do it plenty of times. I don’t want to be a barrier between you and your family. I just want things to be as good as they can be. Look, I’m not demanding you march up and tell them right away, heck, if you think it’s gonna be that bad, you never have to tell them - I can’t really judge the situation the way you can. But they’re gonna have questions. And one day they’ll ask the inevitable ‘why aren’t you finding some nice Revonnahgander girl to settle down with’ and then you’ll have some thinking to do. I guess I just want to know where I should stand and if I need to duck for cover.’

Rook smiles and brings up Ben’s caught hand to his mouth, brushing the furless knuckles against the warm breath that filters out of his mouth. And it’s done in such a gentlemanly way that it makes Ben’s heart clench. He’s not a girl and the movement, the quasi-kiss, doesn’t light up his dreams the way it would for someone like Julie or Gwen, but it still leaves the backs of his fingers tingling.

‘Err,’ he says eloquently.

For once, Rook doesn’t dare to roll his eyes or smile snidely. ‘You do not need to do anything yet,’ he says, ‘except perhaps go on another date with me?’
At this Ben finds both his grin and his voice. ‘Uh-uh,’ he says, taking a snide joy in the Rook’s eyes widen in that classic *oh no, what have I done* look. ‘It’s my turn now. You took me to another planet and that’s a hard act to follow. But rest assured’ – he leans forward to bury his grin into the back of Rook’s hand, to leave it just as warm and hopefully coursing with tingles the way Rook’s done to his – ‘Ben Ten’s gonna deliver.’

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He says that, means that, but still, there’s a cold clutch of panic nestling inside his guts that lasts throughout the next few days, even as by the end of them, his new arm rests at his side, heavy and gleaming. Okay, not heavy, though it’s definitely still gleaming. Just...it feels alien.

He rotates it in its socket and puts it through a few gentle paces, miming the front-crawl through the air before he takes the time to breath, relieved the surgery went ahead unencumbered by the ghosts of last time. No images of doctors to haunt him, to twist the furrow of their brows into his nightmares and work the smile-like folds of their surgical masks deep within his psyche. No, this time he could tell himself they were working to mend him, far away from the team that stemmed the blood flow and fully divorced his nerves from the fleeting gristle that Rook’s proto-tool couldn’t hack away cleanly enough.

Hey, maybe he isn’t a lost cause, after all.

‘I’m great,’ he declares as though to reinforce this, rounding his new fingers down into a fist, but yet, despite this triumph, all the while his mind is running through an itinerary of *noo, can’t take him to a movie, I did that with Ester, can’t do video games, we do that all the time, and if I take him to a motor show, there’ll be a hold-up or something, one day I’m gonna learn to think before I make promises...*

Rook smiles at him and leans forward to let those new fingers work their magic against his chin. And Ben takes his time, letting the relaxing lightness that comes from touching Rook’s fur play out beneath these new jolts of electricity that run up under his palm, past the millions of complicated sensors that rig the metal with all the fury Driba and Blukic can pour into them. And well. It still kinda feels like a plant. But it’s as equally breathtaking as the first time he wove his fingers against his boyfriend’s face.

‘Any good?’ he asks, even though the blessed-out expression on Rook’s face is all the answer he requires.

Rook doesn’t say anything, just gives a helpless half-shrug and relaxes completely into the touch as though he wishes there were no bones under there to hoist up his skin.

And Ben grins. Because suddenly, he’s been struck with the *greatest* idea.

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‘T-t-that’s a ter-r-rrible idea,’ says Gwen bluntly, or rather *stammers*, the next time he sees her. They’re both in the Plumber’s space-station and her fingers seem to be hooked, not only against a
green keyboard, but inside the woolen lining of the gloves tautly pressed around their sides. She’s also trapped under what looks to be three layers and a blue duffel coat, a purple scarf completing the bundled look by wrapping firmly round her throat to form a carefully-tied knot for her chin to rest against, rather like a shelf.

Usually Ben would be all indignant at such a harsh response, but right now, seeing her shiver just enough for her breath to rise up and cause fog to creep against her glasses, he simply shakes his head and brings the watch up to his mouth. ‘Heatblast,’ he intones and watches with no small satisfaction as Gwen’s eyes widen.

‘B-ben!’ she hisses, or at least tries to, but the stammer catches hold of her lips and makes them twist, her voice escaping as something shaky and afraid. Ben reads the annoyance in her eyes though, as soon as the green light of his transformation fades and he can’t help but grin at her.

‘Aw, don’t be like that,’ he says and holds up a handful of flames so he can watch, grin widening, as she leans forward a little, the bulky space of her coat drifting into the warmth they provide. ‘I’m not the one dressed up like an Eskimo. You look way more embarrassing than I do.’

Gwen sighs, but he can see her concede the point. She relaxes at the roll of heat that escapes the flickering shape of his body, or at least most of it anyway, yanking her scarf down a little so it no longer props up her chin up like a shelf. ‘I still think transforming into Swampfire would have been better. You don’t have to worry about accidently burning anyone that way. Or me.’

‘No one’s stupid enough to brush against a guy made of flames,’ Ben argues, though he does take a small step back, eyes narrowing as a stray lock of his cousin’s hair escapes from behind her ear to fall dangerously close to the small bonfire in his palm. ‘And if they are; well, how the heck did they pass the Plumber’s exams and end up here anyway?’

‘People cheat, Ben,’ Gwen says tiredly. ‘If they can manage it at my college, where we have several underground magical cults to help the process, I’m sure it can be managed here.’

Ben’s not sure he can agree (although a part of him traitorously wishes Rook were here, just to see what he would have to say about the subject) when he notices Gwen’s eyes tracking the only part of his anatomy that’s relatively still. His left arm, while rounded into the same basic proportions as his right, shines with a crystalline touch, looking much leaner in comparison to the darting flecks of orange that curl and twitch to erupt at his shoulder joint. They lick at the metal but it resists stubbornly and Ben feels a flicker of irrational pride at that.

‘Huh,’ he hears Gwen say. ‘Must have a high melting point. What’s it turned into, tungsten?’

‘No idea,’ Ben answers flippantly. ‘Who cares? As long as it gets the job done, I’m good to go.’

Gwen sighs irritably, and he looks at her.

‘Now,’ he says, in a much calmer tone, ‘why is my idea such a bad one?’

‘Err, maybe because he’ll think you’re making fun of him?’ Gwen says, looking at him as though she thinks he’s particularly thick. Then she sighs and reverts her attention to the screen in front of her. ‘Look, I just think you’d be better off taking him to a movie, or a museum or somewhere you know for a fact he’d like to go. I’ve seen you do stuff you don’t like for dates before.’

‘Julie and Ester never took me to an alien planet and...’ Ben trails off, uncomfortable with revealing the extent of thought Rook had ended up putting into the whole venture. Because while that strange jellyfish crystal is currently taking up space beneath his bed, it’s existence still feels
private, like the tattered corner of a well-loved box or the scratches present on a video game disc he’s popped in the play station a few too many times. Embarrassing, and not something you want the world to see.

‘...Well, it was really cool and I kinda feel the need to return the favour?’ he mutters finally, scratching the back of his head and letting flames part flames, his fingers becoming one with his scalp for the merest flicker of a second.

But Gwen has suddenly straightened, as if a thought just struck her. Then she mutters, bringing up a separate web page with a few taps from her wool-encased fingers.

‘There’s one in London,’ she says with a wry twist to her lips. ‘Perfect.’

Ben blinks at her. ‘I’m sorry? A minute ago, you were all like, ‘Ben, no, stop, it’s a terrible idea.’ And now you think it’s good?’

Gwen turns round with a grin. ‘No, I still think it’s stupid. But if you’re going to do this, there might as well be a point to it. And taking him to the same city where you reunited with Kai for the first time since we were kids...trust me, Rook’s smart enough to make the connection.’

Ben stares at her, eyes wide. ‘Err...’ Honestly, he’s not sure what to think.

But Gwen softens and smiles. ‘Trust me.’

He does, God help him, he does.

‘You’re sure you’re alright?’ he asks finally, in lieu of anything else. ‘You...this Eskimo thing obviously isn’t a fashion choice.’

Gwen looks down, a little sad. ‘Charmcaster tried to play me,’ she says quietly. ‘I was worried, because I hadn’t heard her screeching up at me from the bag for a while. Hex sends her there for time-outs and yeah, I was worried that she’d tried a spell to get out and something had gone wrong. So I ended up shrinking myself to get in there and well, I’m still not quite sure how she managed it, but there was basically a frozen tundra in there, instead of barrel-sized lipsticks. But it was like it was alive and it got under my skin and even now that I’ve got out, it still feels like the air’s biting me.’

Ben shakes his head, the fire flaring out to cast a halo of orange over her down-cast face. He’s never understood this, Gwen’s urge to befriend Charmcaster, to help her clamber up into some semblance of a happy life and offer her hope in exchange. Perhaps she just has a thing for troubled souls – Kevin used to be one, after all, and in his darker moments, still is.

So Ben can’t bring himself to say he’s sorry. Or to offer a much more accurate representation of his feelings by sighing and telling her not to put so much of herself on the line for someone who will probably never be able to appreciate it.

‘Maybe you should go home and sit on a radiator,’ he tells her instead, his tone sounding a lot more idle than he really feels.

But she shakes her head, sets her lips into a mulish pout, and fixes her attention to the screen. There’s something she’s not telling him, but it’ll have to wait. He’s got a date to get to.
‘You know,’ says Ben, his lips now a mirror of Gwen’s earlier obstinate pout; ‘you could have let me drive.’

‘In my truck? No.’

Ben stares at him outraged. ‘You’ve trusted me to drive it before!’

‘It was a choice between you and a bunch of Gourmand soldiers whose attention wandered every time you muttered the name of an item of food,’ Rook stated. ‘I would have been a fool to put one of them behind the wheel.’

Ben sighs and glances down over the whips of light that catch on the ocean’s waves beneath them. He wonders if Rook’s managed to catch the similar sense of deja vu that’s creeping up on him right now.

‘Whatever. Just...no peeking at the address, alright?’

Ben’s not an idiot. The truck’s like an overgrown teddy bear for Rook sometimes and the guy’s always been a bit territorial over who gets to drive it. Which is why he’s asked the Plumber’s navigational software to pick the largest public park to the place there’s going to, so the Proto-truck can safely nestle under the shade of some tree. There's no real law against space-craft parking yet (at least not in England) so they should be safe.

And it’s not fifteen minutes later that they do just that, before Ben’s anxiously peering round street corners and jotting down their names within his memory to match them up to the route he remembers from all those inky green lines Google drew up for him.

‘Why can you not be this prepared for missions?’ Rook asks in fond exasperation as Ben gives a self-congratulatory smile and leads them over a zebra crossing.

‘Because Google can’t draw up maps of alien terrain?’

Rook scowls. ‘It would not kill you to glance over the paper briefings.’

‘No,’ Ben allows. ‘But it would still be really boring. I’m more of a learn-on-the-job kinda guy. I don’t pick up the same stuff from those things that you do.’

‘Yes, because you do not bother to look at the-’

‘We’re here!’ Ben announces before Rook can embark on another futile, but still utterly annoying rant about his lack of organisational skills. He spreads his arms wide in front of a store-front window that Rook had been about to casually brush past, only to blink and wince at the way the glass is painted over with snowflakes, the artist rearranging their strand-like ends into tips that resemble dandelion-seeds. They wind-mill off into no discernible pattern, while illustrations of cats uncoil into the foreground, chasing the tip of the tail before them until they do form a pattern, a shell-like curve, with the last reaching for the skirt of a fairy.
Ben cringes. Gwen was right, so, so right. Already, peering inside, he can see circular tables set up as though they’re on a small garden patio, cutey wooden furniture engraved into the background. This is a cafe for people like Rayona or Julie, who find such things utterly adorable. Not Rook, whose interests lie inside places where the furniture tends to be sparse and a secondary feature to whatever museum exhibit or new piece of machinery is the main attraction. Indeed, peering over his shoulder, Ben can see Rook gazing up at the sign that swings overhead with a less than impressed look on his face.

‘Lady Dinah’s Cat Emporium,’ he reads out-loud, his voice containing all of the snit Ben’s always known Rook been capable of producing and yet somehow, never really registered until now. And then, with a sharp turn of his head, Rook is suddenly looking at Ben as though he’s the alien.

‘I...’ Ben is blushing now, he can feel it. ’Shut up!’ He starts to shove Rook towards the door, drawing curious looks from inside as he does so. ‘You’re always encouraging me to try new stuff, c’mon...’

Rook sighs. ‘Very well,’ he says in a tone that indicates that he is being pushed into a dunking tank rather than a simple cat cafe. ‘You are paying, after all.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ Ben says in a strangled tone. And then they’re inside and everyone is staring at them. Well, staring more at Rook than at Ben, but hey, go figure.

Ben gives them a wide smile, as friendly as he can manage and links his arm with Rook’s, practically hanging off his elbow. ‘Hi! And yes, before you ask, he is an alien.’

But he also looks enough like a cat for everybody here, who obviously love the animals, to settle down in their seats and develop rather admiring glances. Hopefully none of them will turn excessively creepy otherwise Rook will probably never forgive him.

‘I do not purr,’ Rook informs an elderly lady nearby, one who has yet to return her cup of tea to her saucer. Her eyes almost pop out from under her shawl as he speaks. ‘I bear some similarities with your earth cats, yes, but that does not mean...’ he trails off as a tabby peers up at him under her table, head weaving up and then down in the cat equivalent to ‘you’re not like the other humans here and I want to sniff you.’

Ben sighs and breaks off the weird staring contest that’s starting to develop between the two of them by pushing Rook towards the nearest empty table. A black and white cat is already lounging on one of the seats there, paws draped over the curve that falls off into space, so Rook rather pointedly takes the seat that juts off towards the cafe counter, leaving Ben to carefully brush his flesh-and-blood hand over the cat’s side in a weak encouragement for it to move. And it does. By about two centimetres. So Ben gives up and very carefully, with his prosthetic one as support, lifts the lazy thing up and into his lap.

He can’t quite help but roll a cautious finger under its chin, measuring the feel of its fur against Rook’s. It’s softer, though not by much, like the underside of an apple-mint leaf, all wispy and slipstream sensation in comparison to the more solid feel of a proper tree leaf. Which makes sense in a way. Rook’s chin is much larger than an earth cat’s after all, and the jawbone inside is heavier, stronger, landing into Ben’s palm with the weight of a china cup rather than the slam of a teaspoon. Which yeah, that black and white cat is starting to do right now, dunking its head so that it’s chin scraps against his fingers with a similar thrust of motion.

It’s weird because Ben’s never really been a cat person. Or a pet person really either, although his family owned a dog when he was younger. But that doesn’t seem to prevent the cat from getting its daily massage routine worked in.
‘Would you like a menu?’

‘Hmm?’ Ben asks. ‘Oh yeah, thanks.’

He reaches for the menu, his eyes glancing over a list of tea and fancy red velvet cake slices, stuff he doesn’t really care for, when he sees Rook’s eyes narrow in a glare over the top. Even his arms are crossed.

‘What?’ Ben asks. ‘You want a turn?’ He offers the black and white cat up like a present. ‘I’m sure they’ve got plenty more if you don’t want to share. How many have you got?’ he asks in a whispered aside to the waitress.

‘Nine. The rest of them are downstairs right now, playing with the yoga mats. You can go down if you like.’

‘See? Nine.’

Rook bunches in on himself, his glare becoming worse.

‘Look, I get it, you probably think it’s demeaning. But have you ever actually stroked one of these critters?’

Ben re-adjusts his grip on the cat that is attempting to roll into a ball in his lap and shuffles forward, all so he can direct his voice furtively across the table to Rook’s ears. ‘Look, it feels nice when I stroke you, right? Don’t you ever want to experience it from the other side? I figure it’ll make a nice change of pace.’

For it is this sentiment, more than anything else, that had reached out to strike him with a flash of inspiration yesterday afternoon, inspiration that is perhaps now backfiring. Or maybe not, at least if the sudden widening in Rook’s eyes is anything to go by.

Rook stares thoughtfully at the cat pressed under Ben’s thumbs for a moment. And then he reaches out over the table, allowing a large hand to scrape its way carefully over the sparse clumps of fur that litter the space between the cat’s ears. His fingers draw up to fondle said ears, watching them roll and bend like paper under his touch, before the cat closes its eyes in bliss.

‘It is not that I do not derive pleasure from touching another furred being,’ he says carefully. ‘Oxytocins are released throughout my body in a similar manner to humans, though I believe to a much lesser extent. It might be different if the fur was that of a fellow Revonnahgander, but here...no, it is a thoroughly different experience to feeling you stroking me.’

Ben flushes and lowers his head behind the menu. Rook’s voice is clear and thoughtful, losing much of the tenseness that infused it minutes ago. But even so, within the pleasant atmosphere of this cafe, it still feels very, very loud.

Perhaps that is why the elderly woman next to them chooses to settle her teacup back into its saucer with a delicate clang that speaks volumes.

‘Well,’ she says, not a second after the sound has died down. ‘If I can live through my son getting married to a conservative pencil-pusher, I can definitely survive hearing about someone giving a hand-job to an alien.’

It must be revenge for the way Rook spoke to her earlier, Ben thinks, even as he sees Rook sputter and hasten to address the fact that no, no, it is a misunderstanding, I was not making a reference to sexual congress, at all. Because she doesn’t fool Ben, no, not one bit, not with that sly smile
developing between the wrinkles that perch on either side of her mouth, ones that abruptly lift them from their sagging folds into a fan of skin that ripples outwards. Laughter lines, and they brush out like clouds, telling Ben all he needs to know about just how much fun she is having setting that desperate look on his boyfriend’s face.

‘I’ll have the banoffee cupcake,’ he tells the hovering waitress, her own face looking as though Christmas has come early for her. ‘And for him...get the chocolate mandarin loaf.’

It’s not really that much of a risk to take, given that Rook likes anything that contains so much as a hint of orange within. Because while it may not taste that much like Amber Ogia to Ben, Rook always insists it does whenever he closes his eyes to ‘savour the taste.’

Meanwhile the old lady is cackling and Rook has stopped uttering apologies, starting to look rather sore in the face as he does so.

‘Man,’ says Ben with a low whistle, ‘if you have that much trouble with her, I can’t wait until you meet my Grandma. She’ll run circles round you. Or, heh, float.’

‘She can be nowhere near as bad as you,’ mutters Rook, though the rigid certainty is slipping from his face by the second.

The old lady narrows her eyes at them, her guffaws falling into low sputtering chunks of sound. And Rook narrows his eyes back, looking torn over whether to exercise caution against her or chip in with a deceptively polite remark.

‘I know you humans say that laughter makes the best medicine, but you also say that one can have too much of a good thing as well. And I believe the latter applies in your case, madam.’

Ah. Well, maybe not that polite then.

The old lady narrows her eyes at them, her guffaws falling into low sputtering chunks of sound. And Rook narrows his eyes back, looking torn over whether to exercise caution against her or chip in with a deceptively polite remark.

‘Dude, I’m not going to sit here and watch you get into a fight with an elderly woman. Look, here comes cake, okay?’

And like a benediction, the waitress quickly slips two small plates before them, the ends ringed with a floral motif.

Ben grins, and strokes the small pebble-like folds of Rook’s fingers, now flattened beneath his own one last time, before his hand dives back across the table to seize a spoon. He doesn’t care what they use in England or anywhere else for that matter; he likes to eat his cake with as large a spoon as he can manage. Even when it’s just a cupcake.

‘You should use a fork,’ Rook tells him mock-sternly as though to reinforce the point.

‘And you should eat your cake,’ Ben retorts almost as firmly. ‘I’m the one paying for it, remember? It would be oh-so-rude to leave it.’

Rook smirks and is just about to lift up his fork and use it to shovel out a shelf of crumbs from his loaf when-

‘Ahh, young love.’
It drifts out into the air across their table like a curse. And Ben freezes, his mouth full of the sweet stickiness of banana as it melts into the welcome crumble of toffee. And then abruptly he swallows, remembering the feel of Kai’s shoulders and the muscles in her arms, the whole soft glide of them, as he clutched at her on the top of Big Ben. And then the sneer of the Sir Chadwick ruining it all and saying those exact same words. It’s like a trigger and suddenly he feels stuck, caught once again in the trap of people expecting something from him, of deciding they can read him after a few seconds of just seeing him.

He looks at the old lady who uttered that reminder, dragging him back in time to another possible lover within this same city. And then he traces the shape of her eyes and watches the stray grey lines of her hair escape her shawl, something prickling at his memory. Maybe it’s the slight curve, the simple wave within the follicles that float free. Or perhaps it’s the sharp cut of her eyes, teasing with a glint he remembers all too well. Either way, within his imagination, he rapidly subtracts a few of her wrinkles and is left reeling with the picture it leaves behind.

Rook stares at him, looking confused, and no wonder, Ben decides, because the guy wasn’t there for that taunt the Chadwick threw at him and Kai about the fact that they just happened to be a boy and girl sharing the same area of space. So Ben scowls and throws his spoon down onto the table in a huff.

‘Wow. Gwen was right, this was a terrible idea. Sorry Rook, I should have just taken you out to a museum or something.’

‘You would not have enjoyed it,’ says Rook slowly, looking even more confused.

The old lady is actually looking sorta sorry now. But it’s too little, too late for Ben and he scowls at her. ‘Float away,’ he tells her a little rudely, ‘I’m on a date – a terrible one, he thinks – ‘and you’re not invited.’

He thinks he sees a little pink flare up inside her iris for a moment, but then she nods stiffly and rises to her feet.

Rook looks thoroughly perturbed and Ben feels awful, a total heel, so, he determinedly spears part of Rook’s uneaten cake with his unused fork and lifts it, rising up onto his feet for leverage. The cat, its spine already curling in preparation for a leap, hits the floor a beat later, as Ben coaxes Rook’s mouth open with a simple kiss, his back forming a bridge that cuts across the table and rakes shadows over their crumb-filled plate. Then he slips back, pulling away, tongue flicking away like a lizard’s as he quickly slips his chocolate-and-mandarin loaded fork inside Rook’s mouth, just as the guy leans forward in protest at the kiss ending.

Rook stiffens.

‘Chew,’ Ben instructs, forcing down a snort at just how teenage they are being.

Because making out across a table and feeding each other in public? Three weeks ago he could never have imagined doing such a thing. But they’re in London, the place where Rook first met Kai and maybe Gwen’s wrong or maybe she isn’t, but Ben feels as though he has to prove something just by being here.

Rook chews moodily but then pauses, the rolling of his jaw becoming slower as he digests the taste filing his mouth. Then he swallows, gladly. ‘Mmmm, that is good.’

There is a quiet, soft swish, a rustle of fabric as Verdona flows away into some ether of space. But Ben does not turn to watch her go.
Half an hour later, after managing to successfully feed *themselves*, Ben and Rook migrate downstairs and Rook becomes covered with cats as he attempts to do the sort of stretch that Ben is reasonably sure he could never attain, not in a million years.

Rook just grins at him smugly.

‘I feel the need to burn off the calories you have so generously paid for me to ingest,’ he informs Ben bossily.

But Ben just looks at him, and then with a laser pointer encourages a ginger tom to swat Rook directly on the foot.

Chapter End Notes

Never to be updated this quickly again, probably.

Also, I have never entered Diniah’s Cat Emporium in my life, though my sister has. All info and description involving the place has been gleaned from her and the most up-to-date photos I can find of it; which in this case came from frozen screenshots of a youtube video since google image search gave me photos back from 2014. I apologise for any inaccuracies I have depicted here and would ask anyone who does visit a cat cafe for the first time to not expect any of the cats there to be as friendly or as inquisitive as they are in this fic. Cat as a rule, generally take a while to warm up to people, which is why repeat visitors tend to receive more attention. Also, I believe Lady Dinah’s possess some rescue cats amongst their numbers, so they tend to be a bit nery towards humans in general.

Also, I'm taking great liberties with London's network of streets and general...largeness. As will be evident, if not in this chapter, but the next.
Ben is determined not to wonder why Verdon was there, spying on him in a cat cafe. He’s often seen her as the adventurous sort, the kind of woman to hang out at raves and float through parades, but spying on her grandson just doesn’t seem like her MO. Spying on Gwen, on the other hand...

Ben resolves to phone Gwen later, to ask if she’s alright and to urge her to check out any particularly suspicious women following her about. She can handle herself and though he doesn’t know Verdon that well, he has a reasonable amount of faith that she wouldn’t act against Gwen's wishes again. He can’t picture his Grandpa building a life and having children with someone who’s needlessly cruel after all.

Taking a breath, he pushes the door open and steps out onto the street, the long glide of Rook’s arm stretching its shadow over his shoulder as the hand attached comes up to glide through the ends of his curls like the quick brush of a scarf.

‘Night has fallen,’ Rook remarks, ‘and you have not brought a coat, despite the fact that the climate here is several degrees cooler than Bellwood’s.’ He sounds vaguely disapproving the way he always does, but not, Ben notices, unduly surprised.

So he shivers in response, more for show than anything else and brings his hand up to link it with the furry one glancing off his neck, forcing it down between them with a single unkempt thrust. Smiling at the fiddly knot of fingers and thumbs they then arrange between them, he feels his grin widen as the shadows of their arms become a singular line that stretches out to join them both under the glancing yellow glow of the streetlights overhead. It’s as though it’s trying to blot out the fact that they are two people instead of one, and while it’s a stupid illusion, a childish one, Ben hangs onto it tightly with a pleased glance at the dark shapes below.

And while it would probably feel better if he was holding Rook’s hand with his right one, the one able to register each ruff of fur with the nerves that have stretched out over his bones since birth, he can still feel the curves of Rook’s fingers and all the gaps that fall between them with his prosthetic one. They feel as plant-soft as ever and really, that’s more than some people get.

He doubts Vilgax ever got the same privilege. Which isn’t a pleasant thought, and this time he shivers for real.

‘You are cold!’ Rook declares, his tone coloured with that strange unspoken flourish of an ah-ha! Ben has heard countless cartoon characters say, and how ridiculous is that, that Rook behaves like someone fictional instead of a proper teenager, how is he even real – but then he’s jogged from his thoughts by Rook shaking their hands loose, his arm coming up to hook round Ben’s waist instead to drag him into his side.

‘Oh? You gonna warm me up?’ Ben teases.

‘I can try,’ Rook mumbles, looking a little embarrassed – though that may be because of the queer looks they’re getting from a few late-night shoppers. Ben likes to think it’s because of the whole Rook being an alien thing, rather than because of the whole hand-holding and settling into a
huddled less-than-straight crabwalk. ‘This way at least, you are not wrecking a street by transforming into Way Big instead of Heatblast.’

Ben glares. ‘That was one time! And we were in an abandoned one, far, far away from any populated areas.’

‘Yes,’ replies Rook, ‘but as you like to keep reminding me, luck is often not on your side when you are trying to get an alien for a trivial reason.’

Ben thinks that’s a little unfair, given that Rook’s clearly concerned about this particular ‘trivial’ reason, but he can’t be bothered to argue. The next few minutes pass by with a comfortable silence that stretches between them, broken only by the soft thuds of their shoes meeting the pavement which rears up into stronger clips of noise when they cross roads and travel over tarmac. Which happens. A lot. Mostly because there are multiple roadwork signs blocking off the usual haunts of cement and raised stone they could normally walk across, little landslides of broken pipes and upturned drain spokes poking through the pavements to weave across store-fronts in order to deter them. Ben blinks as one of them almost seems to shimmer in his sight like fairy-dust and he blinks again before it returns to normal. Huh. Weird. Maybe he hasn’t been eating enough.

‘Do you have any particular plan for us now?’ Rook mumbles eventually. But the clear amusement blossoming in his tone demonstrates the fact that he knows the answer.

‘No,’ Ben murmurs, feeling not a flicker of annoyance as Rook’s smile twists into a faint smirk at the word. ‘Things often just...happen’ to me. And every time I plan a date something usually goes wrong. Did I ever tell you what happened to me on my first date with Julie? Or the many many other times things went wrong when we tried to do something together?’

‘Gwen may have offered a few illuminating stories, yes.’

Ben scowls. ‘Unfair. I never tell you about the really weird stuff that happened between her and Kevin.’

‘That is because it disgusts you, not because you are acting out of any sense of respect for her privacy.’

Ben raises his eyebrow. ‘Alright,’ he says cuttingly, ‘how about I tell you about the time-’

They turn round a corner just as Ben’s mouth falls open to land on the word ‘they,’ but instead his teeth are forced together with a quick click. Because in front of them, bathed with the light of the city, is the Thames, squares of reflected gold windows wobbling within the flicker of its waves. But more importantly is the silhouette in front of the gold-veined water, the lean black line of a girl rigged head to toe in diver’s gear.

And then, with a twist of her wrist, the mysterious diver removes her googles, causing her ponytail to fall like a rope ladder from her neck.

‘Wow,’ says Kai Green brusquely. ‘Took you long enough.’

Wow, Ben repeats within his mind as Rook’s arm falls from his waist. Things really do just ‘happen’ to me.
There’s a lot of confusion in his mind. It’s probably what makes him stutter when he points a gobsmacked finger at her and exclaims, ‘What are you doing here?’

She raises an eyebrow in return and takes a quick glance at him, her eyes cataloguing all of him in a series of rapid blinks, head, arm, waist and shoe, as though he’s made up of labels that she needs to take a full inventory of. As a result, Ben is left feeling a little like one of those artefacts she so adores and he fidgets as she stops to stare at his new arm, her sight raking across all the joints and folds with just a tremor of surprise falling into those light brown eyes that he has, once or twice, felt the urge to stare into. Honestly, he’s just grateful to know that she’s not completely unshakable when it comes to him.

‘I don’t need your permission to be here, you know,’ she says finally. ‘Look, I only bothered waiting around for you because Gwen said you’d be in town—'

Ben’s fists clench.

‘-and yeah, I don’t really approve of you giving out my number like that, so don’t think we’re not gonna have a talk about that later—'

‘I didn’t!’ he bursts out indignantly, because even now, after they’ve finally learnt to be a little nicer to each other, she still knows how to push his buttons like no one else can. ‘Our Grandpas are friends, remember? Gwen probably got it from one of them.’

‘Whatever. It doesn’t change the fact that as annoying as you sometimes are, it’s not like we don’t have fun with this sort of thing together. And I don’t particularly want to drown, so I figure you could be useful this one time.’

‘This one time? I’ve been useful whenever we’ve met! I’ve saved your life tones of times!’

Kai holds up four fingers with a bored look on her face. ‘Four. Four times. I counted.’

‘C’mon, it’s gotta be more than that—’

‘So sorry to interrupt,’ breaks in Rook coldly, crossing his arms. ‘But I believe I could be of assistance as well this ‘one time.’ And so long as we are both of use to you, that is all that counts.’

Kai gives him a perturbed look and Ben can’t exactly blame her. While Rook’s never been excessively friendly to her, he’s always been polite and respectful of her feelings. So this new icy chill his voice has developed must come as something of a shock.

Which means...oh no. This is gonna be like that time at the museum, isn’t it?

‘Um,’ says Kai, breaking him out of the panicked spiral his thoughts are about to delve down inside. ‘Yes? You and Ben always seem to come together as a package deal? I never really expected you to sit on the sidelines.’

Rook nods. ‘Good,’ he says firmly, reaching up to flick his finger against the Proto-tool, in a strange half-aborted motion that makes it look as though he can’t quite decide whether to re-adjust the thing or take it out of it’s holster.

Kai eyes him strangely and then turns to Ben. ‘Anyway, now that you’re here—’

‘Whoa, whoa, wait a minute, slow down,’ Ben breaks in, holding up his hands to halt her words.
‘We had no idea you would be here. Gwen never told us anything about this.’

Kai blinks. ‘She said you’d be here.’

Ben grits his teeth. What was it? A spell? Verdona? He can’t think why Gwen would sell him out like this, or how she’d be so certain he would come here, to this spot where Kai was, unless she were tracking him. Unless...Ben slaps his forehead.

‘Well,’ he says crossly, ‘there were an awful lot of roadwork signs blocking our way. Almost like someone wanted us to come here.’

Rook’s eyes widen. ‘I...do not think it is illegal to cast illusionary spells in public, despite the great deal of inconvenience it causes. Even so, it does not seem like a stunt Gwendolyn would pull.’

‘No, but Grandma Verdona totally would,’ Ben mutters.

Kai’s face screws up. ‘Who?’

Ben stares at her. He’s not sure he can be bothered to trot out the whole ‘my Grandma’s an alien’ thing again. ‘Doesn’t matter. What matters is whatever you need us for.’

Kai actually has the grace to look a little embarrassed at this, and scuffs one of her black flippers against the pavement as though in search for a stone to kick it against. ‘Don’t laugh,’ she warns, ‘but remember how we just left Excalibur underground when everything flooded? Well, I managed to grab hold of it at one point and it...moved.’

Ben crosses his arms and stares.

‘It did!’ she insists.

‘Really,’ he says dryly. ‘The legendary sword in the stone, which even Humungousaur couldn’t budge, just ‘moved’. Because you touched it? Ego much.’

Kai taps the side of her ear with an annoyed expression. ‘You are listening to yourself speak, right? Is it so out of the realm of possibility that maybe, just maybe, I could find something that’s special for me in the same way the Omnitrix was special for you?’

Ben scowls. ‘The Omnitrix could have latched onto anybody. I just happened to get lucky, that’s all. What you’re talking about is more along the lines of fate. Which is, last time I checked, something you don’t believe in.’

Kai shrugs. ‘Maybe it only responds to people with certain genetic markers in their DNA. Nothing fated about that, just luck, like with you and the Omnitrix.’

Ben makes a sound of deep frustration and clutches at his hair. And she? She smirks.

Rook coughs. ‘I am sure what Ben means to say, is that maybe with all the adrenalin coursing through your system, you simply imagined the sword moving. And there was an awful lot of water at the time, which always serves to distort depth perception. Perhaps your hand merely slipped while it was clutching the sword and with that movement you thought it was the sword moving instead.’

‘Urch!’ Kai glares at them both. ‘You know what? Fine! I’ll do it myself. It’s what I’ve done for most of my career, after all.’ Grumbling to herself, she readjusts the goggles on her face. ‘The pipe we came out of is just down there,’ she mumbles, hoisting the oxygen cylinder onto her back with a
movement so light and easy that Ben blinks, harshly reminded of the fact that she’s right, and that she’s been doing this sort of thing for most of her life, all while relying on tools far less sophisticated than the alien tech they’re used to dealing with.

‘Wait,’ he says, stepping forward, ‘we’re here, so we might as well come too.’ He halts, jolted by the familiarity of those words, remembers how something similar happened the first time they had met up in London. Kai had been fiercely independent then as well, and he spares a glance at Rook. ‘That’s okay, right?’

Rook stares at him evenly. ‘It would not be sporting to allow Miss Green to drown herself,’ he agrees, though his tone is still coolly professional.

Kai snorts. ‘Sanks for za tone of confidence,’ she says, syllables now muffled by the mouthpiece she shoves into her face. But Ben isn’t terribly surprised when Rook pulls out his breathing mask as though in competition all the same. He sighs and brings his watch up to his face.

‘Ripjaws,’ he breathes, feeling the word leave him in a flutter of breath, and then he’s growing, green light fading as his new muscles burst through, wrapping round his bones and forcing elongated teeth out from the ribbons of flesh that weave over his gums. He pauses and rolls his shoulders, admiring the heftier shape of his prosthetic arm as it produces the same power he would expect from before, sharpened claws hanging off the end in a steel-like shimmer.

Kai gives him a wide-eyed look from behind her mask and he shrugs. ‘It’s new,’ he offers and then charges forward in a lope, feeling a lot more well balanced than he’s ever been before. He leaps into the upturned end of the pipe and waits for them, pausing to help give Kai a hand (or, he sniggers, in this case a claw) up, while Rook leaps up to balance on the very edge of the rim.

‘We might have a bit of an uphill climb, or swim rather,’ Ben says, his voice emerging as a water-tight growl. ‘So you guys should probably hang onto me. No one can muscle through an opposing current like Ripjaws can.’

‘Actually Ben,’ says Rook, each word pushing a cloud of mist up from inside his mask, ‘the water is spilling out through the pipe due to the effect of gravity. It is that which will make our initial ascent hard.’

Ben stares at him. ‘Are you kidding me right now?’ he demands, but Rook simply gives him an airy smile, silver scattering across his face as he puffs out a pleased breath.

Kai mumbles something, probably an insult knowing her, and tightens her arms round Ben’s waist. Ben feels a pleasant hum at the contact despite the fact that he’s not wearing human skin at the moment, and that the feel of Kai is terribly muted through her rubber suit. Still it clings to her shape and leaves very, very little to the imagination. On second thought, perhaps it’s good that he’s not simply ‘Ben’ for the moment. His attraction to other people is easier to manage when he’s a different species, especially one far enough removed from other mammals to see them as simply an odd assortment of warm shapes and hot blood, more along the line of living stuffed animals than potential mating material.

God. That’s the one thing other people will never get about the Omnitrix. How it can distort or re-shape your own perception of the world so thoroughly, even if just for a few minutes, that you almost become a stranger.

Still. It’s Kai. And she’s hot. And that’s one thing he’s never been able to lose sight of no matter how he changes on the outside. It’s like she breaks the mould on all his expectations, no matter what new shape he tries to hide inside.
He glances at Rook. And while the guy’s no Ester, he can still see the slender black hood surrounding his boyfriend’s right eye rise slightly, forcing the rest of his face into an awkward grimace. He shrugs in return. ‘We’re not letting her drown, remember?’ he says and hops up into the churning stream of water, powerful legs raking out steps through the force of the flow, steps that will seconds later, become powerful kicks. But before that, before he needs to swim, he stretches out his hand behind him. And feels Rook grasp it in return.

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Meanwhile, Verdona floats above the pipe outside. ‘Oh my,’ she says softly. ‘The things I do for family.’

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As Ripjaws the going is easy, even with a girl clinging to his side when the current, the one not controlled by gravity, thank-you-very-much, gets too tough. Rook manages pretty well himself, though he’s quick to burrow himself into Ben’s emptier side when the current yanks at them all a little too harshly. All in all, it’s not too bad and they’re soon emerging from the dark and dusty contours of the pipe and into the wide room where they left Excalibur.

Ben’s eyes are drawn to it immediately, to the hilt that taunts him as it pokes out of the stone like a dark cross, rotted by the many shadows passing overhead and spreading blue and green hues against things that should look far more grey and pale under the light.

There’s a slight shift then, a shadow passing over and away from his flank as Kai releases her tight hold of him to drift down to the stone, carefully wrapping her fingers round the hilt as she does so. She hesitates, hair drifting around her like a halo, mimicking a spurt of ink despite the restriction of her ponytail, and then with a small rotation of her shoulder, she gives a decisive yank. And the sword slides out like butter.

Ben’s mouth drops open.

Kai spins round to give him a smirk and a look that very clearly spells out a ‘see?’ before it dwindles and her face quickly takes on a look of fear. Rook has already launched himself from his side before Ben has time to realise that the darker pallor taking over the hue of Kai’s skin is thanks to a large, heavy shadow that drapes itself over her form, before the thing making it decides to crash into her.

It’s one of Charmcaster’s rock monsters, dropping down from apparently nowhere, pink running along its veined indents and setting the water aglow like a ghoulish anglerfish. And with such an effect, Ben can’t see where it’s managed to hide itself, but then there’s a fizzle of pink and another one sparks out into existence, bubbles issuing from its movements as it struggles to cleave his face in two. Ben gives it a dull look and then slams into it with his jaws, ripping through the rock and causing the new-born creature to shiver down into chunks of soil. He spits out the few soft, brown slabs that escape his teeth and then jets forward, rapidly overtaking Rook with a one heavy swing of his tail.
Kai meanwhile, is squirming as rock monster Number One seizes her with hands more boulder than flesh, but she manages to wriggle her shoulders above the brown ridges of its fingers and rather desperately, jerks Excalibur over her head before she thrusts it back down. And though the motion is slowed by the surrounding water, the metal bites through the stone armour with ease, allowing Excalibur to dig into a chest with no ribs or heart or blood. Kai struggles to yank the blade back out again, while Ben, pointedly not thinking about how disgusting this would be if she were jabbing any other creature, opens his mouth and rams his teeth straight into one of the arms holding her, feeling more than hearing the stone crack beneath his jaws. And one of the hands holding Kai loosens, muddy fragments splitting off the cracked fingers.

Rook meanwhile, manages to catch up, wrenching himself round to her other side and extending the Proto-tool into a pole to use as leverage. Gritting his teeth, he pries it between the small black ridge that dives down into an assortment of shadows between Kai’s ribs and the rock monster’s other palm, the girl sucking in her chest to make it easier for him. And Ben, deciding that it would be a bad idea to leave a magic sword stuck inside something else that’s less than scientific, reaches out to wrap his metallic hand around Excalibur’s hilt. And what do you know? Pulling it out of a guy made of rock turns out to be far, far easier than pulling it free from a hunk of actual rock.

Rook shoves the Proto-tool down a little more forcefully, enough for the stone to crumble slightly, and that’s all it takes for Kai to kick her way free, the water acting as a buffer against the remains of the trembling, half-crumbled hand the creature attempts to shove against her side more thoroughly.

It’s at this point that two more rock monsters pop into view, but given how they’re sinking, even as they try to swim and clamber their way towards them, Ben’s not too worried. Kai seems to have the same trail of thought as she rises up gracefully, all to float closer to the face of their guy and bash him in the skull with Excalibur’s hilt. Ben’s a little confused until he remembers that Kai knows judo, not medieval sword-fighting techniques.

Either way, he takes a little too much vicious joy in swinging his jaws into the form in front of him, a cluster of tiny minnows darting away from his oncoming teeth and escaping into the light pouring from the pink eye-socket as it flickers out for good.

Rook of course, takes this moment to turn and fire a few blasts into an approaching rock creature’s face while Kai whirls Excalibur round so that the blade carves into the slight curve of neck peaking between the bumpy shoulders in another. The head doesn’t separate from the body completely, but the force still causes it to rattle out towards the floor like a bunch of loose dice, so with a subtle swipe of his metal claws, Ben ducks forward to finish the job. Kai’s good, but she’s still primarily an explorer and archaeologist and Ben sees no reason why she should have to taint her hands with something so messy.

Excalibur seems to think she’s worthy enough to wield it, after all.

‘So,’ breathes out Kai afterwards, as they spread themselves out across the pavement by the Thames. ‘That was a whole thing.’

Then she laughs and the sound is infectious in its joy. She holds out Excalibur before her like a prize, admiring the long, lean gleam of it and though it’s dusty, brown, and dulled with Thames-
mud, it still contains something, a tranquil aura that commands respect. And some of it must infect Kai because she actually smiles at Ben, teeth gleaming between her lips so that when her hair drips, it is with a wet thrall that attracts him in a pull as magnetic as the moon against the waves.

Kai laughs again, loud and hard. ‘Oh Ben, thank you, thank you!’ Then she crashes into him, arms wrapping tightly round his neck as her sword clanks heavily against his back. And despite the heavy ‘omph’ the motion forces out of him, the sheer dizzy thrill of her joy manages to lick its way through him like a fire, yanking at him with that familiar unsettling urge to make her look at him and acknowledge him somehow. And as though reading his thoughts, Kai leans back to stare at him a little, eyes wide and alight, before her mouth darts forwards to melt swiftly into his own.

Something tightens in Ben’s chest at that, at this, but before the sparks have time to race down into his veins, his hands find Kai’s shoulders and he wrenches her back – though not too hard.

‘Kai!’ he protests, though it comes out shrill and weak, the word faltering thanks to the tingles still coursing through his lips. He resists the urge to lick them, to smooth over her taste with his tongue. ‘What the-! You said-’

She shrugs, looking sheepish. ‘I know, I guess I kinda got caught up in the moment! C’mon, it’s just a kiss. I know you like them.’

‘No, I-’ Ben sputters then shakes his head. Man, girls are difficult. And he can’t lie to her. He does like kissing her, it feels good - but then so does kissing Rook. ‘It’s not that,’ he says, his grip tightening on her shoulders briefly as he feels Rook’s eyes digging into them both. ‘It’s just that I’m with someone now. I can’t go around kissing other people and you can’t go around kissing me.’ He smiles to lighten the blow, letting his hands drop away from her shoulders as he does so.

And yet it feels like the blades of her bones are still wedged there under his fingers, like he’s supposed to still have them there, a means of contact with her slippery wet warmth. And maybe it’s because fate does exist and it’s pushing them together for some obscure reason, or maybe it’s just that he’s running away from something big, universe big, that’s looming up from a future where he’s supposed to be awesome and in love with his wife. But either way, there’s something massive welling up inside him and makes him feel ill, like he’s lost something he’s never really had.

And Kai shivers suddenly, as though she feels it too. ‘Oh.’ Her eyes are big, fawn-wide, lost in their own confusion. ‘Oh! Are you back with Ester? That’s cool, though I can’t help but feel a little sorry for her, having to deal with you.’

Ben rolls his eyes. ‘No.’ Then he swallows, squares his shoulders. And pokes his thumb towards Rook. ‘I’m with this guy, here. Mr tall and fuzzy.’

Her eyes go even wider and he braces himself for the oncoming furry jokes. Probably something involving Blitzwolfer.

‘Oh!’ she says again. Then she tilts her head to one side. ‘Huh, didn’t know you played for the other team as well. You were always such a jerk around me that I figured you were just a typical straight white guy.’

‘Well,’ says Ben blankly, ‘it’s a good job I don’t text like one. You’re definitely the kind of person who would post it online in order to humiliate me.’

Kai laughs, though it’s a little quieter than before. ‘Yeah. Probably.’

Ben finally chances a look at Rook properly. The guy looks thoroughly lost at their conversation.
But he also looks happy. Relieved. And Ben feels something clutch at his heart at that because he hasn’t managed to mess up yet. Not like he did with Ester.

‘Soo...’ he says, crossing his arms and carefully keeping his eyes on the ground. ‘Need a lift back to...wherever it is you were hailing from?’

Kai chuckles, but now that his eyes aren’t on her and he can’t be distracted by the oval shape of her face and well, her hotness in general, he can hear the strain in it. It quivers slightly, like a loose vibration in her throat could shake it apart. And suddenly, he doesn’t want to see her face at all.

‘Nah, I still know how to get inside an airoplane without setting off any alarms.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?!?’

‘Oh nothing. Just that I don’t have a magic watch that can turn me into a security threat by accident.’

‘Not. Magic.’ Ben grits it out and then, because he can’t just take that lying down, he jerks his head up to stare her resolutely in the eye. ‘Now don’t you have a boarding gate to crash? Oh, and security people to meet? You’re the one who’s going to be dragging a giant magic sword through customs. And you don’t even have the title of ‘universe’s greatest hero’ to hide behind and smooth things over with.’

Kai frowns. ‘S’not magic,’ she mutters sullenly. Then she brightens. ‘Still, I guess it was good to catch up for old times sake.’ She steps forward, then hesitates. And steps back again, casting an assessing eye at Rook. ‘Dealing with a guy who has a girlfriend, that I can handle; I know how to keep my distance,’ she mutters. ‘But a guy I have a weird ‘thing’ with and his boyfriend? This needs some revision.’

‘I would prefer that the revision not include a cheek kiss, no,’ says Rook calmly. But his arms, Ben quickly notices, are very firmly folded in a pattern not dissimilar to his own.

Kai raises an eyebrow. ‘Noted,’ she says, equally as calmly. Then, with a slight snigger, she turns and waltzes away, casting a casual wave over her shoulder. The effect is marred only by the squelch of her flippers curling and flattening against the pavement in repeated strikes. ‘Don’t lose my number, okay? Who knows if I’ll need you again.’

‘What am I, her dog?’ Ben mutters. But he’s smiling slightly as he says it. And though he’s not sure how happy Rook will be to hear it, he can’t bring himself to wish her out of his life entirely. Far from it.

Chapter End Notes

Being in a relationship doesn’t mean you can’t still have crushes on other people. They still develop, can still be intense and overpowering, but the onus is on the person in the relationship to deal with that and shut it down. It’s hard and can be tempting to be drawn into because of that thrill of attraction, that spark that ignites the honeymoon phase (which is probably how quite a few affairs start) but even so, they can be dealt with. Instead of played into.
Also I guess I wanted to try and illustrate the idea of fate as an active force in their universe; the banana peel being there the exact moment that Kai dismisses the idea of fate in the gameshow episode before it decides to show her up, seems to indicate this. And it’s working here through their biological attraction to each other, making it a little harder to let go of each other. Or at least the way I see it.

Also Kai would probably rather have a magic sword than a boyfriend??
And out-run and beat back the tired old cliché

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mysteriously, all the road blocks and diversions with signs depicting little men digging into clod-heaps have magically disappeared. Ben’s going to have to have a word with Gwen about that since it’s not like he has Grandma Verdona on speed-dial. And preferably before Rook gets to her first. He hates it when they chat about him and then all the finer details of his ten-to-eleven-year-old adventures crop up from a grinning Rook’s mouth later - but they do, he has to admit, have a nice geeky friendship thing going and he’d hate to see it spoiled.

With this in mind, he risks taking a peek over at Rook, only to see the guy frowning. Yikes. Maybe he’s on damage control already.

‘So, how about I take a shot at Gwen first, okay?’ He loops his arms round one of Rook’s own, grinning slightly as the Revonnahgander glances back at him and slows down accordingly before Ben’s weight does it for him. Though honestly, Ben suspects that it wouldn’t put too much of a strain against his boyfriend’s stride, having seen him lift far heavier things in the past.

‘I confess, I am a little alarmed at how she steered us both into Kai’s path,’ Rook murmurs in reply, eyes now fixed firmly on the road in front of them. He gives out a fond little sigh as they travel over the zebra crossing and Ben hopes from one white line to the next, careful not to let the grey tarmac in-between stain his step. ‘I cannot tell what she is thinking.’

Ben frowns. ‘She was looking kinda peaky, when I left her,’ he admits. ‘All wrapped up like she was getting ready to take on the Arctic or something. And she did say it was Charmcaster’s fault.’

‘The same Charmcaster who is known for flinging rock monsters out of the ether to attack us, monsters that are in fact the same as the ones that attacked us as we retrieved Excalibur?’ Rook asks in his why-the-hell-didn’t-you-tell-me-sooner tone.

Ben winces. ‘Yep.’ He digs through his pocket, fumbling for his phone before drawing it out.

‘Gwen?’ he asks, once he’s done fiddling with the screen. ‘Come on, pick up, pick up…’

‘Yeah, what?’

He blinks at how grumpy she sounds before venturing cautiously: ‘Hey! So you’ll never guess who I ran into in London?’

‘Kai, right?’ she bites out in sullen chunks. ‘Sorry. I think Grandma may have been tracking you too. She popped in on me, all worri-achoo!’

Ben winces, then exchanges a look with Rook. ‘Anything you’d like to tell us?’

She sniffs, sounding very sorry for herself. ‘Not really, no. It’s just...complicated. And urgh, it has to do with Charmcaster, of course, and this stupid Excalibur sword sending out pulses of mana like it’s some whiny attention seeking child…it’s stopped now so I’m assuming you got it out of the sword or someone claimed it or something.’

‘Yeah, Kai did.’
‘Really?’ her voice perks up, now conveying a tone of clear interest. ‘Huh. Well, I suppose I should give her the benefit of the doubt. She’s probably changed since she was ten.’

That’s right, Ben realises with a start. Gwen hasn’t seen Kai since they were kids and their last encounter had been unfavourable to say the least.

‘Anyway, I gotta go. I’ll explain everything later, I promise.’ And then she hangs up.

Ben draws his phone from his ear. ‘Still think I’m the rudest Tennyson of the lot?’ he asks with a teasing tone.

Rook smirks down at him. ‘Definitely. You may not have hung up on me, but I have seen you do it to Jimmy Jones.’

‘That sooo doesn’t count...’

They clamber into the darker shadows that the trees nearby throw out, steps falling into a blackness that hinders even the lines that haunt the cracks between paving stones and drain spokes. Ben watches as the branches dog the iron spires of the fence they drape themselves over before, with a quick turn, he and Rook spill inside the gap of the park gateway, quickly re-tracing their path to the Proto-truck.

A few seconds later, Ben finds himself pressed back against the seat inside, reliving the fantasy he’d experienced not two days earlier. Only Rook’s body is slung over his rather than breaking into a gentle fold, his hand tangling against Ben’s neck, his hair, in an unrespectable way that doesn’t pin them to the headrest. No, the strands are caught, held between the clamp of fingers and thumb, wedged up into the creases and folds of fur and skin that refuse to open and Ben whines, protests with half-formed noises as Rook’s mouth leaves his, the flash of wet heat and glimmer of tongue disappearing as quickly as they came. And then Rook’s hands get firmer, scraping his hair up off his neck and pushing the skin, tilting the bones inside gently, like he’s trying to pour out a drink. And Ben finds his head turned to the side, his eyes staring into the green leaves outside while Rook’s teeth close harshly into his skin.

He freezes, caught between the surprise of the moment and the flicker of moon-lit bark outside, the grooves exposed into blurry ridges before they suddenly spring out, made clear and concise rather than fragmented, by the hot pain in his neck.

‘Hey!’ his hand flails at Rook’s own neck. ‘Ow, ow, ow!’ he grimaces and taps sharply against the thread of tendons beneath with his prosthetic hand, the one that’s a little stronger. ‘Don’t make me go all kung-fu on your ass.’

Rook leans away from his warning tap, his teeth firmly detaching themselves with a gentle click. Then his tongue darts out, to scrap up the blood that’s no doubt forming there with a quick glancing brush, before he straightens a little, though his chest remains close enough to Ben’s to form a slight cocoon of warmth.

‘I have wanted to do that for a while,’ he says carefully enunciating each syllable, even with a slightly smear of red under his nose.

Ben makes a face, a little disturbed that he hasn’t received as much as an apology, before he reaches up to run a thumb against the vestige of his blood on Rook’s fur. Honestly, the white stuff’s better than a hanky.

‘I figured,’ he says, trying to keep his voice low and steady. ‘As much as I love you, I’m not blind
to the way you’ve been eyeing up my neck like it’s red steak or something.’

Slowly, like light shining on a jewel, a smile catches on Rook’s mouth and spreads, becoming wide and glimmering in it’s joy.

‘You love me?’

Even the words are higher-pitched than normal, their ends caught and twisted by the lilt that can’t quite hide as Rook struggles to control his smile, his mouth seeming to catch on the corners spreading upwards.

And Ben freezes, feeling pierced on the awe in the eyes in front of him.

‘Um...’

But Rook laughs. ‘Relax. I do not want to trick you into admitting something you are not comfortable with.’ But he still sounds pretty thrilled. ‘It will mean more when you are not too embarrassed to say it.’

‘Well, it’s definitely not gonna happen if you keep biting me!’

Rook seems to quieten at that, thumbs stroking alongside the curves that fall away from Ben’s neck like curtain drapes. ‘Forgive me. I was overcome and acted in the heat of the moment. You were right to protest. I was...’ he hesitates, inwardly fumbling for the right explanation.

But Ben grins, his hands coming up to run fingers over the ruffed knuckles resting on his neck, slowing their strokes to a gentle stop. ‘You were jealous.’ He pronounces it as though it were a crime, a crime he caught respectable Plumber Rook Blonko doing.

Rook stiffens. ‘I have said all that needs to be said.’

Ben laughs, tangling his fingers even deeper within Rook’s fur. ‘Oh no. We’re gonna lay some ground rules, Mr Vampire.’

‘I am far from *tha-*’

‘And you’re gonna keep them. Even if Kai’s standing less than a foot away from me.’

Rook takes one glance at him, reads the firmness in his face and then deflates with a slight sigh. ‘That is fair,’ he concedes grudgingly. ‘But I reserve the right to feel angry. She kissed you.’

‘Yes, she kissed me, not the other way around,’ Ben agrees glibly. ‘*So don’t take it out on me!’*

Rook’s outer lip juts slightly at an odd angle and Ben leans closer, realising that this is probably as close as he is going to get to seeing Rook pout.

‘I still do not like it.’

‘You would be the weirdest boyfriend ever, if you did,’ Ben mutters. ‘And that’s saying something. You’re a pretty weird dude.’

Rook arches a brow. ‘I am not sure how comfortable I am hearing that from *you.*’

Ben pushes lightly at his chest. ‘Should keep your distance then. I might rub off on you.’

‘Aw.’ Rook leans forward with a sly grin. ‘I am sure I will find a way to manage.’ And then,
finally, his mouth rekindles with Ben’s own.

There’s only so much time you can waste making out in the back of a truck, even if you are a horny teenage. Part of it is probably Ben’s fault. Despite what the media may say about him and his dalliances with people like Jenifer Nocturne, he’s never been thoroughly invested in one-night stands or other quick-acting sexual exploits. And while a cynical part of him wonders how much of that is due to his paranoia over the image he has to portray to the world (kids idealise him for Christ’s sake) the softer, more certain part of him, the part that first fell for Julie when she treated him like he was a sweet ordinary boy, reminds him that it took weeks for him to work up the nerve to kiss her, and months to stroke lines of flesh beyond and below the curves of her hands.

And while there’s not quite so much of a time-delay in tracing the areas of Rook’s body the other is willing to open up for him, Ben still feels a surge of alarm at how hot and heavy they’re getting, as if the room around the seats is shrinking and the temperature under his clothes, against the skin Rook’s hands are busy exploring, is rising.

He clings to Rook’s back, the armour stupidly stable under his grip and gasps as Rook does something extraordinary with his tongue, some weird curl and then flick along his neck that leaves the skin wet and sensitive to the air.

‘Ro-ok,’ he whispers, feeling a little scared at the way his voice breaks open on the word.

Rook growls and Ben almost freaks out as the other’s hips brush against his own, the armour letting out a long hard scrape of sound that feels too purposeful to be a mindless rut. Durable that thing may be, but still, Ben’s not sure he’s ready to find out if it has enough give to give shape to an erection.

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa,’ he hisses out furiously, fastening his hands into the short tuffs of fur that extend from the back of Rook’s neck, ‘hey!’ he yanks, hard and fast in his panic and then softens, lets his thumbs glide soft and loose around the curves of Rook’s ears when the other lets out a quiet hiss from between his teeth and glares at him balefully. ‘Sorry,’ Ben whispers, kneading the very blue tips between his fingers, ‘you were...’ he trails off, making a face as he realises he was about to trot out the ‘moving too fast for me’ line. That’s something a girl would say.

And never has he been so thankful that Rook possesses such a limited grasp of Earth expressions.

Rook for his part is softening beneath Ben’s apologetic strokes, tilting his head to lean his chin into the gradual curve Ben’s fingers and palms slip down inside.

‘Was I going too fast for you?’ he asks, earnest concern vibrating in every word.

...Damnit!

‘Where did you learn that?’ Ben asks, disgust leaking into his tone.

But Rook simply frowns at him. ‘I assume you mean the expression and not the licking of your neck,’ he states, smirking slightly as Ben averts his eyes. ‘And I have learnt it from a variety of resources: relationship articles, relationship forums, what you call ‘trashy teens movies’...the list is rather long I’m afraid, and even without you looking at me, I can see your eyes beginning to glaze
over with boredom.’

Ben’s eyes swing back to Rook’s face at this rather snarky reproach and he struggles not to blush. ‘I just...’ he tries to say, the words getting caught in his throat. Then he lets out a frustrated breath from between his teeth. ‘I’m not sure if I’m ready to see you whip out your dick,’ he finally settles on, deciding that quick and brutal is the way to go, especially with a guy who often enough, is quite literal-minded.

And to his credit, he does get a reaction. For Rook’s mouth draws down, the white glide of his teeth becoming clearly visible in the dark. And Ben stares into the muted red of his tongue, sees the root of it lie purple deeper down within the gullet.

Rook’s mouth works silently for a moment before the words come pouring out. ‘That is incredibly forward of you! I think, that is to say, I would never suggest...’ He sighs, frowns and then shrugging down further into Ben’s grasp of his chin, says, ‘as pleasant as the thought of sexual intimacy would be with you, neither of us is clearly ready for it.’ He looks at Ben’s neck, his eyes tracing a pattern of tooth-marks that Ben is going to need a mirror in order to be able to follow and then grimaces. ‘I am behaving like a male in the first streak of heat’

Oh boy, thinks Ben, I better not be about to get a lecture involving all the facets of Revonnahgander sex that I really don’t need to know about.

‘-and I must learn to control myself.’

Phew, thinks Ben. Not that Revonnahgander sex couldn’t be interesting, given his clear interest in one of the species, but Rook does have a tendency to drone on and on about a subject when any other sane person’s interest would have dried up hours ago.

‘You say that like I couldn’t kick your ass if I needed to,’ he mutters.

Rook smiles. ‘I do not doubt your ability to defend yourself. But you will not need to. I shall endeavour to make certain of it.’

Which is the weirdest way a romantic partner has ever told Ben they wouldn’t hurt him, but whatever. He can’t exactly hold Rook to the same social standards as a human, so he considers it a lost cause and shrugs.

‘Well this date did not turn out to be anything like I expected,’ he says tiredly, raking a hand through his hair and trying not to feel too flattered when Rook’s eyes follow the movement. ‘I mean, you’d think I would be used to it by now.’

Rook grins. ‘It had its moments.’

Ben smiles. Rook sounds smug, practically bursting with happiness and his arms, now placed either side of Ben’s body are jiggling slightly, like an excited child. Well, Ben thinks, perhaps he’s entitled to it. So he reaches up to slide a palm over the fur of Rook’s face one last time before giving that long, lean cheek a final pat.

‘Come on, Blonko,’ he says, tasting the name on his tongue for what feels like the first time. ‘Take me home. If I drive, we’ll definitely end up crashing.’

Rook stares at him for a moment. And then crashes into him again.
Ben feels rather giggly by the time they make it back to Bellwood. The nerves under his skin, even the ones covered by his clothes, are singing loud and clear, electric sparks drifting and popping up beneath each rising prickle of hair. He can’t help but wonder how bad the sensation is for someone like Rook, who has no real gap between each strand of fur, at least not in the way a human does and risks a glance over to the driver’s seat.

Rook is sitting very, very still, attention firmly fixed on the road in front of him and though his fingers grip round the contours of the wheel in a rather grim fashion, every so often his lips quirk, as though struggling against the inevitable break out into a goofy smile.

Ben smothers a laugh at the sight and runs a hand bashfully over the side of his neck, his fingers skimming just above the collar of his hood. He’s a little unnerved by the slight dips and bumps he can feel against his skin and inside he’s cringing at the angry rise of red he knows he’ll see there come morning. But honestly, there’s also a feeling of power rising through him, hot and heavy, at the thought of how he can make Blonko come undone at just the sound of his name.

‘No blood,’ he had gasped as Rook’s mouth pulled away from his, to brush the large, heavy splash of its breath against his neck again. ‘Remember, nothing too deep, and put it where I won’t have a soccer mom freak out when a kid, uuuuh, comes up to show her his new photo with Ben Ten...’

Rook hadn’t even paused to say he’d understood, which should have made Ben’s pulse jump in alarm, but instead, it simply rushed out into a river, completely escaping the usual beat that it comprised of when Rook’s lips pulled back and the smooth glide of his teeth pressed down. There was the hot spill of his tongue too, of course, to soften everything, or perhaps to make everything press out more firmly into the silence, but it hadn’t hurt, when Rook sucked and bit. Okay, maybe a little, but it wasn’t the kind of pain Ben associated with battle, or with the angry swipe of a stray. No, it was more like the mock-play of a young animal.

Canines or incisors swiping against the thin streaks of muscles wrapped over his bones, sharply digging in one second, then pulling away for the tongue to take its turn, the next. It was oddly as soothing as it was exciting and Ben shivered and shivered, caught a little at how different this was from all his make-out sessions with Julie.

‘Hey,’ he mumbled, and Rook’s left hand came up to pull fingers over his cheek, to delve firmly into his hair.

‘Hush,’ his boyfriend took a moment to say and the word floated out into the truck, a soft command that made Ben want to obey, simply because there was a soft kindness behind it. Which contrasted against the sharp nip Rook gave him a moment later and he wriggled slightly, his hand coming up to wrap over Rook’s shoulder as he wondered if he had finally turned crazy.

It’s not like he wants to suck on my blood, he had told himself firmly. And then proceeded to shut his eyes as Rook let out a small growl and mouthed along the tendon that cropped up into the swell of his teeth. Ben sighed and leant back slightly.

Ben laughs to remember. It isn’t like him to be passive. Or is it? It isn’t like he couldn’t be lazy at times. And he likes it when Rook’s happy.

He glances again at Rook and feels an urge to wrap his arms round the one nearest to him, to stick his head coyly above the crease in that elbow. Not that he will, of course. Ben’s a risk taker, but he
doesn’t go out of his way to smash a driver’s concentration on the road, unless there’s a bad guy getting away.

His phone beeps and he jumps.

‘Trouble?’ Rook asks, though his eyes are still on the road.

Ben frowns. ‘Nope,’ he states, his mouth popping slightly on the ‘p’ sound. ‘Gwen wants us to come round to her parents’ house.’

Rook raises an eyebrow but swerves the truck down the next avenue accordingly. And Ben tries hard not to notice the way the guy’s mouth curls slightly, deliberately smug, as the orange eyes above flicker to the rear-view mirror to see Ben hastily adjust the line of his collar.

Chapter End Notes

A little epilogue for the chapter before, because the next one's gonna be a long one.
For as the coin spins and you watch it land

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gwen is still wrapped up like snow and sleet has blocked out the sun, the next time Ben sees her. Which is merely ten minutes later. She shivers under his glare and reaches up to re-adjust her scarf, yanking it up so it wraps round the end of her hair like a wiggly hood. And Kevin glares back at Ben in return, yanking his girlfriend more firmly under his arm as they sit on her bed.

It’s weird to be back in her room, the one inside her parent’s house; the shelves, while most of them are empty, are also for once lined with dust. Ben doesn’t think he’s ever seen such a sight, not in all the years he’s been here, and it irks him to see the slight shimmer of white resting on the wood like a thin layer of ice. It’s both pretty and a little sad. But not as sad as the sight of Gwen shivering her heart out, wrapped under the warm weight of multiple clothes and the swell of Kevin’s hard muscles.

Rook eyes her with obvious concern. ‘I hear drinking lemon tea will help,’ he offers.

She gives him an incredulous look and to her side, looking more pissed off by the second, Kevin grouses, ‘maybe if she had an actual cold. And not like a magic-related malady.’

Rook thinks about this for a moment. ‘Maybe add some magic herbs in with the tea?’

Ben turns his head to hide the smile flitting across his face. ‘Okay,’ he says, turning back once the mirth has sunk back down into his stomach where it belongs. ‘So now that we’re all here and there are no more surprises –’ he ducks his head round but nope, Kai hasn’t suddenly materialised within the corner of Gwen’s bedroom, phew – ‘maybe now we can talk about what’s going on?’

Gwen sighs in a forlorn manner. ‘Wh-h-here do I begin?’ she mutters.

‘How about with Charmcaster?’ her boyfriend suggests in a bitter, grating tone that suggests that it isn’t a question so much as it’s a demand.

Gwen sighs again. ‘It’s not ac-actually her f-f-fault,’ she says crossly and yeah, Ben’s calling bullshit on that one. ‘H-h-humans were never really meant to live in Led-ledger Domain for e-e-xtended periods of t-t-time and she was actually born there, so she’s more s-s-susceptible to it’s influence than...’ Gwen trails off and looks down at the mittoned hands she has crossed within her lap. She squeezes them as though the motion could thrust more warmth into her, but all it does is cause more creases to bunch up above her knee, forcing tiny craters to appear between each ripple and roll of material that pushes out from her thermal tights. ‘W-w-ell,’ she concludes with a wry twist of her mouth, ‘it makes her more s-s-susceptible than probably any other person in the cos-cosmos.’

‘Anyway, what you really need to know is that Gwen’s constructed this sort of magic monitor that’s connected to Ledger Domain,’ Kevin breaks in, looking exceptionally bored. ‘We figured it’s the one place Charmcaster’s bound to go back to now that’s she’s sprung herself loose.’

‘Yeah!’ Gwen bursts out with. ‘I combined several tracking spells for C-ch-harmcaster’s unique m-m-mana signature and threaded it through the ma-a-ana-field Anodites use to communicate with each other. Then I-I-I focused the range of the sp-sp-ell on where the biggest surges of m-a-a-ana
come from, where they s-s-seemingly erupt from nothingness. I m-m-mean, all m-m-mana comes from Ledger domain so it stands to reason that there’s where all the previously untraced mana comes from!’

‘Fastinating,’ drawls Ben, crossing his arms. ‘And what does this all have to do with us, exactly?’

Gwen scowls. ‘C-c’mon Ben! Ex-ex-excalibur goes haywire, sends out this flare of mana like a beacon, and Charmcaster’s monsters show up? She’s up to something and I want her safe.’ She takes a break to purse her lips and sigh. ‘Everything’s kinda a mess.’

Yes. Yes, it is.

Ben leans back and lets his eyes flicker over the blue lightshade still pinned to Gwen’s ceiling. He remembers breaking it when he was eleven, throwing a football up too high so that the rim bent easily under the force, a mud-stain appearing on its side a second later in time to the chiming shatter of the light-bulb beneath. He can remember turning into Grey-Matter to try and pick up the pieces too small for Gwen to see, the suction-like grasp of his froggy fingers easily picking out the fine shards that were trying their best to blend against the fog-like threads of the carpet. Even now, from his vantage point, he can see the dim indent in the light-shade where the bounce of his soccer-ball pressed in; after all these years Gwen’s never once tried to replace it.

He chews his lip. Gwen likes the broken, disfigured things in life, a little too much, he’d say. She falls in love with them too easily, attaches sentiment where Ben thinks she may be better off finding new things to love. But it’s not up to him to decide that.

And he can already guess, just by looking back at her shaking form, that he doesn’t have the vetoing power to prevent their next field trip.

‘Charmcaster’s t-t-there,’ Gwen pronounces firmly. ‘My s-spell said she’s been there for an h-hour now.’

Yup. It’s field-trip time.

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Ledger Domain is just as bleak and depressing as when Ben saw it last, if a lot zanier. Gone are the skies of rich, turbulent pink and the surrounding craggy rocks that form impossible bridges and trailing pathways with one another. No, now there are actual god-to-honest yellow brick roads, making loop-the-loop patterns out of a sky that twists between turquoise and black, the two colours swirling together like the insides of a marble. And above their heads float giant eyeballs, and what look to be cratered moons, rocky tendrils arcing out of some of the holes like the roots or branches of some giant tree, turnip-like wrinkles buried into their folds.

‘Huh,’ says Ben. ‘Looks like Charmcaster’s done some re-modelling.’

Gwen sighs and her shoulders slump slightly, Ben can see it, even beneath all her layers. ‘Ledgerdomain takes on ‘aspects’ from the mind of whoever last handled the Alpha Rune,’ she says sadly. ‘Sort of like a visual representation of their psyche.’ She kicks away a small spinning top toy that has appeared out of nowhere and Ben flinches as its garish red and yellow colours swirl away into the gloom. Because yikes. None of this speaks well for Charmcaster at all.
‘Can’t say I’m surprised,’ he murmurs. ‘All of this looks right up her alley.’ He frowns hard at one of the eyeballs, feeling a little disconcerted when it blinks back at him sleepily. He’s half a mind to see if he can get a bird’s eye view of the situation, and transform into something that can fly but he figures that if he does, it’ll just end up being a repeat of last time and then he’ll be stuck soaring above ground that won’t come back to him, no matter how much he plunges downwards. Urgh, he **hates** this place. And so does Rook, if the shiver running through his fur is anything to go by.

‘Charmcaster does indeed possess a strange perception of the world,’ the Revonnahgander agrees, sounding rather gruff as he does so; though that could be because all the shivering is causing parts of his fur to clump up, casting little furrows between the ridge-like strands; they spread out like shadows, like the ones dappled between trees. ‘Though it is not just the visual sense that is affected to reflect this, but the olfactory one as well.’ He wrinkles his nose and sticks out his tongue in plaintive disgust. ‘It tastes as though the fog of winter has blended in with the dredge of summer pollen overnight. A most unpleasant combination.’

Ben slowly cocks an eyebrow. ‘The air has...taste?’

‘Everything does,’ Rook says. ‘The air in your room for instance-‘

‘Whoah, whoah, whoah,’ interrupts Kevin holding up both palms as though he can ward off the approaching conversation. ‘Too much information. What Ben does in his room is, well, none of our business.’

Rook gives him a very stiff look and Ben gets the impression that he’s very firmly looking down his nose at Kevin. ‘I was going to say it smells like the section of a library devoted to children,’ he states. ‘Ben has accumulated so many first and second edition Sumo Slammer comics that their scent takes over a majority of the room for those willing to pay attention.’

Kevin laughs guiltily, appeased, but Gwen brightens, her head swinging round to stare at Rook, even from beneath her assortment of polo-necks and scarfs.

‘Really? You can smell stuff like that? I don’t really think we’ve ever discussed the nasal capacity for gathering and detecting scents, at least not in your species...’

‘Well, no,’ says Rook, looking rather put out. ‘I am not Wildmutt. My sense of smell is not that much greater than that of a human.’

That’s...actually kind of a relief. Ben’s certainly more open to the idea of having an intimate relationship with an alien than he once was, but he’s not sure if he would have ever been comfortable with one that could detect every new scent of blood or sweat arising from his skin the way he knows some of them can.

‘Oh.’ Oh great, Gwen actually **does** look put out by this. ‘Sorry for assuming, I guess.’ She shivers slightly as she takes another step.

Ben frowns. ‘Sure you don’t want me to turn into an alien?’

She shakes her head resolutely. ‘No. Y-you’ll probably t-time out at the wr-wrong moment later on, if y-you do.’ Then she stiffens. And like a shot, her hair suddenly whips out from beneath her scarf in a short, flaming surge of white, the rest of her skin rushing into a bruised hue of purple. The next second, powerful pink squares leap up from under her boots, and she jumps and lands on the next one to form, her feet barely letting out a sound as she bounces and soars, up and up, to greet...
Charmcaster. Who is floating down, through a bend in the rock ahead. But the look in her eyes is
dazed, unfocused, darting from one of Gwen’s newly formed pink platforms to the next, like a
child waiting for a bubble to pop.

‘Wow,’ she says, and her voice sounds wistful, not sharp and scornful like it should. ‘I never saw
how pretty forcing mana into existence could be. Not till now.’

Gwen pauses, her knees bending slightly as though that could make her and her glowing anodite
eyes any less threatening. ‘Ch-ch-charmcaster,’ she says, her voice purposefully gentle. ‘Can you
h-hear me? I’m here to help. I can tell, j-j-just by the way the mana is enfolded around you that
you aren’t...you aren’t doing whatever it is that you think you’re doing. Not really.’

She’s right, Ben realises with a start. Even to his untrained human eyes, he can make out surges of
what looks to be pink glitter swirling round Charmcaster’s limbs, curving over her wrists and throat
like gently-stirring eddies in a current. Or perhaps more accurately, like a shark circling in for the
strike.

Charmcaster laughs. ‘Is that hope in your voice?’ she asks Gwen, but she doesn’t sound
particularly bitter. No, only dreamy, like she’s caught between the middle of waking up and
slumbering on. ‘Ah, I remember hope. I had so much of it once...my Father wanted that for me you
know,’ she continues in a much more conversational air. ‘Hope. He made a big present of the
word, gave it to me a very long time ago...’

Gwen’s voice catches. ‘Is-is that your name?’ she asks, something like awe tingling her tone,
though it’s mixed it with a little pity. To his side, Ben sees Kevin start suddenly, like he’s had an
awful thought. ‘Charmcaster, you would never g-g-give your name to
me, of all p-p-people! Snap
out of it!’

But Charmcaster doesn’t listen, her fingers dangling down instead of shooting up to aim a spell
between Gwen’s eyes. But her palms are gently curved as though they’re resting, perched on the
air as though its solid, instead of finding their usual support on her hips or round her staff.

‘Snap out of what? I have to make hope, have to force it to form like your blobs of mana,’ she
mutters grudgingly. Her head swings round and then her eyes focus on Ben, her pupils widening
and the surrounding blue iris sharpening into a richer hue. ‘You are making a tiny part of that
difficult.’

‘Um...sorry?’ Ben ventures.

The entirety of Charmcaster’s body shakes. ‘No, no, no,’ she chants, her voice arranging into a
shifting, shaking intonation like the rise and fall of an uttered spell rather than the rising shriek it
would be in any other situation. ‘You’re not supposed to be sorry, you’re supposed to be happy!’

Before anyone can stop her, Gwen darts forward, yelling something, a cluster of words that makes
Charmcaster shake slightly, enough for Gwen’s hands to fold round those shaking fingers and force
them to lie still against her sides. Much more cautiously, Kevin approaches with Rook’s strides
brushing within inches of his own, that blue hand Ben’s so familiar with smoothly raising the
Proto-tool so that the aim falls directly in line with the look on Charmcaster’s dull and
unresponsive face. Ben raises an eyebrow at this, but feels a little approval all the same.

Charmcaster is far from trustworthy.

‘C’mon, Hope,’ Gwen mutters finally, ‘I know you got more life in you than this.’ Her hands fall
so that her arms can box Charmcaster in, close her off inside a hug the way Ben suspects Gwen’s
wanted to do for quite a while. But no sooner than the first squeeze, Charmcaster jerks like she’s
being electrocuted.

‘Latin words?’ says her mouth, the query sharp and unpleasant and sounding decades older, the way Verdonna sometimes does. ‘Dear me, princess, you’re so outta your depth, it’s not even funny.’

Her eyes shine a fierce, sharp white and Gwen gasps as though she’s been cut by an invisible knife, a great heaving shudder tearing through her form before she flops back, the mana beneath her feet abruptly crumbling like shattered panes of glass. Kevin rushes forward to catch her, an angry snarl on his face, and Ben automatically brings his wrist up to his mouth to shout at the watch. Rook’s shots, he is unsurprised to note, seem to do absolutely nothing, failing even to launch Charmcaster back a few metres.

‘Lachesis!’ Gwen half-shouts, half-coughs, all of her twisting and turning blue, despite the fact that she’s not in her human skin. Even her hair, still shinning with the florescence of a firework, now glimmers within the shattered hue of cerulean.’ ‘In her name, I bend your own, by the length of your life, your fate, I compel you to reveal your design!’ Charmcaster shudders, but nothing else happens. ‘You’re an Anodite, aren’t you? I can feel it!’

Charmcaster’s face twists in hate. ‘Oooh, very good princess. But invoking your lame-o Earth gods is pre-school stuff. Only babies rely on spells. Real power? Is raw mana. And unlike you, I can make it bend to my will without even a hint of a spell.’

She spreads her arms and there’s not a smile on her lips, not a trace of cockiness in her glare as she plays the part of conductor to the warping of the local landscape, watching it bend around them all with a teenage glee. Nothing descends from her fingers, not a disc or a shield, but mana still floats and sprouts from the air into small explosions of pink, drifting like a cluster of explosive dandelion seeds until it reaches the ground. And then giant trees rip out from where each speck lands, the roots bursting up from under the rocky ground to twist and grab at Gwen’s legs.

Kevin immediately sets himself to work, slicing with arms that curl into blades, the notches on the wood he forms becoming rapidly joined by the black burns of power Rook’s Proto-tool leaves behind. For half a second, Ben is tempted to turn into Swampfire, to see if he can influence the wood to turn on their creator; but then the eyeballs still floating in the air begin to churn, morphing briefly into balls of twisted flesh before they suddenly unwrap, plastering themselves back into existence, but this time without the watery sheen of a biological camera added to their mix. No, now the wrinkles that held their eyelids open and surrounded their skin have become smaller folds, tucking themselves into creases that mar the surface of the black lips they have now become. And then these black lips open, wider and wider, even darker holes revealed in their centres, concealing giant grey teeth that snap in an odd assortment of both human and Revonnahgander.

Ben’s mouth open, his own humour long since vanished, and he speaks a word, a name that he hates uttering, even as one of those strange mouths zooms in and attempts to take a chunk out of Rook’s legs. But it’s too late to reach out and grab hold of a different choice of alien, because he’s already changing, warping into the one creature that would make sense when dealing with an exceptionally powerful Anodite, one who warps reality like it’s a toy.

Sorry buddy, he thinks, even as he’s plunging down into darkness. Hang tight.

And then, from out of the resulting gloom, comes something else that floats, not eyeballs or mouths, but masks, whole faces. Ben sighs and rearranges a smile on his face, waving glibly.

‘Hi!’

But Serena and Bellacious both stare at him, stonily unmoved.
And he cringes, remembering the last time he were here.

‘You have to!’ Ben demands, half-cries, when Azumuth comes to hover over him in the hospital. ‘I get that you need to make modifications, or whatever, or that you probably want to teach me that actions have consequences, but please, at least let me try!’

Azumuth stares at him, the limp form of the Omnitrix dangling from his fingers. It doesn’t look that bad, Ben thinks; maybe a little cracked and dented in a few places, and the symbol definitely pokes out from under the frame that encloses it at odd, sharp angles, like bent-over metal...but that doesn’t matter because Alien X can definitely fix it. He can fix everything.

‘You’re looking for a quick fix when there isn’t one, Ben.’ Azumuth seems to read his mind as his mouth twists unpleasantly; but when he looks at Ben again, something hard seems to bleed away from his eyes and he wilts slightly, all of him stooping over and suddenly looking much older. ‘But I am probably not the best person to tell you this.’

And gingerly, with a lot more care than Ben has seen him use before, the Galvan slips the Omnitrix down over Ben’s remaining wrist. The boy stares down at it for a moment, feeling the wrist strap prick and dig in when before it had only jostled against the skin like fabric, before he swallows heavily.

‘Thank you,’ he whispers, hating how watery and young his voice sounds, and Azumuth sighs, looking very, very sad.

‘Save your gratitude for when I deserve it,’ he grumbles, but Ben isn’t listening, glancing down eagerly as Azumuth’s fingers delicately flick through the selection cycle for him to and press down on the head of Alien X.

And then, just as they will three weeks later, Bellacious and Serena are hovering over him in a blanket of black.

‘Oh you poor thing,’ Serena coos, thrusting herself forward so that her lips hover out to portray a pouty, kissy face. ‘It must hurt! Bellacious can’t we-’

‘No,’ says her partner, his brows drawn down into their characteristic frown.

Ben feels something in his stomach sink. He opens his mouth, perhaps to deliver a protest, but Bellacious cuts in again.

‘No, we can’t go fixing up every single little creature whenever it receives a mere flesh wound. If we did that, then we would have to replace every single lost limb in the universe. Think, boy. Can you imagine it? All the crowds we’re having, milling round our – or your-’ and here he nods towards Ben ‘- feet. It would be a nightmare. They would see you re-grow an arm and want the same privilege extended to the rest of them. We’d never get anything done.’

‘You hardly get anything done as it is, now!’ Ben snaps out. Only to regret it as a muscle in the mask-like structure of Bellacious’ jaw twitches.

‘Motion, denied,’ he thunders.
And Ben cringes as Serena turns a sad look on him.

‘I’m sorry, Benjamin,’ she says and her voice, soft as it is, seems to fall through Ben’s ears like a guillotine. ‘But Bellacious, for once, raises a good point. We have to consider the universe at large, and they way our selfishness could result in preventing us from aiding the greater good.’

‘Selfish?’ Ben spits, and he thrusts out his one remaining arm in a gesture that could have turned very rude, very quickly. And despite the fact that there are no children watching, no cameras to catch him nearby, some small twinge of awareness, muscle memory maybe, keeps him from raising his finger. ‘Wanting my arm back is selfish? Well then, I guess, arguing amongst individual aspects of myself and barely achieving anything most of the time, is the height of generosity!’

And then everything is rushing away, the black springing back into the white of hospital sheets and the pale green-gray of the walls. Ben blinks, swallows and raises his wrist before bumping it down against the sheets in a careless gesture, his fingers twisting inside the linen to create a whirlpool of creases. ‘Please,’ he murmurs, his voice somehow sounding far-away and not nearly as sharp as he felt. ‘Just...take it away.’

There is a moment. And then the slim thread-like feel of Azumuth’s fingers close over his wrist, looping themselves around the battered segments of the Omnitrix.

‘I will make adjustments,’ the scientist says, and though there is no gentleness to his tone, there is no real anger either. ‘I will re-model the Omnitrix so that you can activate the aliens you’ve unlocked with just your voice; we’ll have to figure out a new system for the ones you’ve yet to uncover. Hmm...maybe I can spare some time out on a by-yearly basis, for you to come up and then we’ll push you into some new forms you’ve never had the chance to be before. See, which you like and add their names to the rooster. But for now...’

There is a pause and then Ben starts as he feels the tiny bends of Azumuth’s finger press against his knuckles in a single pat of solidarity. ‘Call me, or have Max call me, when you feel ready to wear my Omnitrix again.’

Ben does, a mere six days later and if there is a slight lie to his voice, a small twist in his words that he is surprised Azumuth doesn’t catch hold of and choose to rake him over the coals with, well it’s his funeral. But for whatever reason, the inventor chooses to hold his tongue. Maybe, Ben thinks, he just doesn’t care. But the thought rings hollow, ill-meant and empty, and he can’t quite make himself believe it. Either way, the Omnitrix is promptly delivered back to him and Ben ends up thrusting it back into the cardboard dullness of the shoebox at home as soon as he’s able.

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But not now. No, now he wears it back on his wrist. Not that it does much good when he’s stuck floating before these two bozos.

‘Really?’ he asks, raising an eyebrow. ‘You’re gonna take offence at the way I lost my temper last time?’

Serena puffs out her cheeks. It’s the closest Ben ever seen her get to blowing out a raspberry. ‘You were awfully rude the last time we met,’ she tells him sourly.

Ben rolls his eyes. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘Celestialsapiens trump Anodites when it comes to
manipulating reality, so let’s not beat around the bush. I mean I’m kinda taking a gamble just calling you guys into action, but if I’ve made a mistake, feel free to let me go and change into something else.’

Bellacious snorts. ‘Do you really think you can play mind-games with us within our shared mind?’

‘Uh, duh,’ says Ben, shrugging with a sly smirk, ‘it’s all we ever seem to do in here. It’s out there that I’m worried about.’ He jerks his thumb behind his shoulder, towards the never ending blackness and is gratified when a window pulls open into a simple rectangle that glares out into Ledger domain. It’s always felt weird, when Alien X does something. It’s more like he relies on Bellacious and Serena to put a lot of the power into action, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s still there, every step of the way, in every battle decision they’ve consciously made together, making snide suggestions and sighing in exasperation when Serena rather worriedly wonders if they should make such a grand hand gesture when bringing something into reality. And quite a few times now, he’s had to veto Bellacious’ eagerly voiced motion to punch at times when it just makes no sense to do so. Guy’s got a lot of pent-up rage. ...which probably says something unpleasant about him, given that Bellacious and Serena are supposed to be aspects of himself made real. It’s a little messed up, given how he’s looked them both in the eye a few times and found them wanting.

‘Out there...’ Bellacious mumbles and he scowls fiercely as Serena floats closer to the screen, her face tucked into a bunch of worried wrinkles.

‘Oh,’ she gasps as Rook goes flying back several metres, barely rolling up onto his feet. ‘Poor lamb.’

‘Lamb’ is far from a word Ben would ever use to describe Rook, but the way Serena gnaws on her lip and lets her frown ride deeper into her face, all when Rook stumbles and barely deflects a set of floating teeth that reach out for his head, well, it helps to impress upon Ben that she really is a part of him. Even more so when she lets out an appreciative hum as the Proto-tool swipes round in a dizzy blur, extending out into an orange pole which Rook then uses to bat away an oncoming mouth. The resulting click of its teeth as it grinds down against the material makes Ben cringe, but Rook simply frowns before his fingers dance through a strange, twisting flexibility that enables the pole to spin round like a windmill. And the teeth loosen, the surrounding mouth slipping and sliding away as it’s shaken loose.

He turns back to stare at Bellacious, but the guy isn’t giving away anything.

‘Look,’ says Ben, turning back and wincing as he spots Kevin and the curved puddles of green and brown that mesh together horribly over the engraved lines of his clothes. The guy’s arms are working like jackhammers, pushing out into curved blades that do nothing but slightly blunt the oncoming storm of snapping jaws and wiggling roots, and Rook’s not having much more luck.

And Gwen? She’s huddling in on herself, teeth chattering as she fires off weak blasts of lilac from her palms. Not a good look for her at all. Though, Ben’s glad to note, her blasts do seem to have managed to cut through the roots busy climbing over her ankles.

‘Look,’ he tries again impatiently. ‘These little creatures, as you might want to call them are kinda important to me. And if any of them die, I’m making sure Azumuth takes out whatever strand of Celestialsapien DNA he’s managed to wrangle for the Omnitrix, permanently.’

Serena whirls to face him, jaw dropping in astonishment. ‘An ultimatum? Benjamin!’

But Bellacious is looking vaguely approving. ‘That’s not really a trick you can yank out whenever
it’s convenient for you,’ he tells Ben, though he still sounds rather moody. ‘Serena and I aren’t here to be bullied by threats.’

‘I know,’ Ben says hurriedly, wincing as a set of jaws chomps down where a second ago, Gwen’s head had been. ‘But hey, this lady taking over Charmcaster gives me the creeps.’

‘Mmm.’ Now it’s Serena’s turn to sound thoughtful and it takes every ounce of willpower for Ben not to hang his head in his hands. ‘Yes, she is...strange. And just as young as you. Though oddly enough, far more immature. And...’ She frowns, and something, a churning ink-black roll of liquid, runs out over the line of her mouth to rub out the corner of her mask, the part where her chin connects to her jaw. Ben watches as this wave of darkness temporarily swipes it away into nothingness and in horror, realises that this is probably the closest Serena will ever get to sticking out her tongue. For whatever it is that boils up from inside her, it darts out with the same inquisitive motion Rook uses to pull ice-cream into his mouth.

‘She’s got traces of her mana rotting inside your very psyche,’ Serena says finally, frowning in a way Ben has never really seen her do since Paradox stumbled within their mindscape that one time. ‘I can taste it.’

Jeez, Ben thinks, what is it with him being surrounded by people who can just taste stuff in the air today?

But Bellacious simply growls. ‘An insult,’ he says heavily. ‘To infect the sacred space of our thoughts...she must pay.’

Serena gives him a considering look. ‘It is not our thoughts she infects,’ she says chidingly, and Ben sees her face swivel to give him a considering look.

‘Even so,’ rumbles Bellacious. ‘We are more than simple bystanders, cursed to watch her play out her little...’ he hesitates.

‘Match-making program?’ Serena offers up gently. But her face is torn, wrinkled in both disgust and a heavy contrast to her careful tone.

Okay, Ben is officially freaked out now.

‘What do you mean?’

Serena purses her lips. ‘Perhaps,’ she says grandly, ‘you should ask her.’ She nods back towards the window, where Charmcaster is floating, her skin running into an unhealthy shade of purple, as though she’s been doused in paint.

Ben snorts. ‘Yes,’ he says grimly, ‘lets.’

As one, Bellacious and Serena turn to face the window. ‘Motion carried!’ they pronounce, their voices rising into a chorused shout that never fails to make something twist up all the way from Ben’s toes to his head. In his better moments he thinks it might be awe. But on days like today, he thinks it’s just his stomach disagreeing with him, this time over the banoffee cupcake he had earlier.

But regardless, the power of Alien X moves through him and he twists, his bulky black right arm twinkling with the glint of miniature stars bursting and burning within the veins inside, slipstreams of tiny galaxies coiling through his system all as his elbow bends. His left arm comes up to join it in a suitably dramatic fashion seconds later, glinting with silver instead of starlight, each chiselled muscle looking like a dead-on replica for the marble gleam of Greek and Roman statues and the
impressive gentleness of their curves. It feels clunky, wrong, like it’s not gelling with the rest of the system, and with a start Ben realises that on some level, he and Serena and Bellacious are moving it through sheer force of will, with telekinetic energy, because the wires inside can’t connect and make sense of the sheer universe inside Alien X. How can it possibly register the system of metaphysical nerves inside when they’re spread over such a distance of galaxies tinier than anything they’re known? Where there are streaks of nothingness, dead space and dark matter instead of blood and electricity. Strangely enough, it takes effort to move, more effort than warping reality, perhaps because it’s actively trying to meld with Alien X in the same way the Galvans have designed it to meld with all his other alien forms – and well, it’s always harder to change yourself than anything else.

Ben shakes his head and turns most of his head to the task on hand. And in comparison it’s stupidly easy. It takes less than a thought to make all the mouths stop snapping, to make their teeth fall out from the lips like miniature tombstones and shatter on the ground to burst into tiny bubbles of mana. Even less to thrust the trees back down into the coiling mess of energy they were before, to loosen the rope-like roots from Gwen’s limbs and make them disperse like ripped threads into the flow of the ether around them. It’s weird. He’s not really sensing or connecting to the mana the way he thinks Gwen or this Anodite would; he’s just thinking about severing stuff from reality and then having it happen and suddenly the knowledge of what’s taking place is flowing into his brain.

And then Charmcaster is screaming, because he’s simply thinking again and with one easy thought, he forces the purple and black form of the interloper to pour out of her body, white exploding out from behind her and swirling into her hair in coils of ropey steam. And with a burst of gleaming fluorescence, an Anodite unfurls.

Alien X brushes out his right arm again and Gwen immediately gasps, her skin twisting back into the healthier lilac of her Anodite form with her hair settling, with a shimmer, into that familiar white that sparkles in a way that Charmcaster’s physical strands can never hope to match. She staggers to her feet and brushes aside both Kevin’s and Rook’s waiting hands impatiently as Charmcaster, the real, a hundred percent version of her, jerks like a flailing puppet and drops out of the sky. Gwen immediately charges past the makeshift cradle of Kevin’s arms, before she braces herself, half-falling as she manages to crush Charmcaster’s head into her chest. With a short ‘omph’, the other young woman’s legs twist out like sticks to rake across the dirt, becoming hopelessly tangled with Gwen’s knees and making them both go down.

‘I swear I saw the opening of a...film happen like this once,’ Kevin mutters.

Gwen twists round to give him an unimpressed look.

‘What sort of genre was it?’ Rook inquired, his eyes darting between them both, noting the narrowed glare of Gwen’s eyes and the awkward way Kevin shuffles his gaze away.

Meanwhile within Alien X’s shared mindscape, Serena is preoccupied with an even more awkward proposal.

‘Do you think we should give them a friendly wave to reassure them?’ she questions and pouts when Ben and Bellacious both pointedly say, ‘NO.’

‘You manage to agree on something, and it’s about being anti-social and impolite!’ she huffs, clearly displeased. But moments later she softens, a strange, girlish slant to her eyes and brows as she tilts her mask to the side when Rook turns with a grin to Alien X, places his hands on his hips, and says, ‘Well done.’
And even though he’s disturbed by the expression she’s currently making, Ben finds himself grinning back at the boy that smiles through to him in the window within their mindscape, his own hands clambering onto his hips in an unconscious mirroring of the pose.

‘But you should probably do something to restrain her,’ Rook then adds, thoroughly spoiling the moment as his gaze turns nervous, mostly because the Anodite is starting to straighten within the air, her eyes quickly sharpening in new-found focus. ‘I fear my handcuffs will not be up to the task.’

And in the darkness, Ben lets his smile grow warmer, a fond chuckle escaping him. And Bellacious instantly makes a pointed noise of disgust, before Serena harshly tells him to ‘shush.’

Ben ignores this. ‘C’mon,’ he tells them. ‘Help me tie her up so she can’t hurt anyone else?’

‘But to restrict the movement of another living creature…it seems quite cruel,’ Serena says, undecidedly.

But Bellacious grins, so wide that Ben is frightened that the black crack of his mouth will rip his mark-like face apart. ‘I agree with the lad! Serve the energy creature right!’

Ben turns to Serena and wrings his hands together in a pleading, prayer-like gesture. ‘Pleeease? You know she’ll only, ah, restrict the rights on the other living creatures around her if you don’t.’

Serena sighs. ‘Motion carried,’ she says, though one of her eyes is narrowed at Bellacious in what Ben presumes to be her version of the stink eye.

Green cuffs, in a set of slimmer replications to the ones that fasten about Ghostfreak’s form whenever Ben turns into him, strap onto the wrists of the Anodite, chains looping through and around the curved fastenings in their sides. Ben can feel the knowledge of the material, some etched out mineral from Anur Vladias, a planet long since dead, but still alive in the heart of the horror stories that the civilians of Anur Transyl tell each other, and marvels at the way Bellacious and Serena prompt him to choose it. It’s weird when they work together, one creature, where the thoughts of everything they know slip between them with ease.

Sunny rages, lets out a loud, angry ‘NO!’ like the spoilt brat she is, but before she can attempt to fly away, Gwen is stepping forward with a deceptively dainty gait, Charmcaster resting on her side as Gwen’s hands firmly tangle round the trailing end of Sunny’s chains. She gives them a hefty yank, Kevin stepping up behind her to lend her his muscular aid and they both watch with smug smiles as it forces Sunny to spill down onto the earth.

‘Hello, Sunny,’ says Gwen slowly, letting the taste of her cousin’s name roll out of her tongue.

But Sunny just glares at her balefully. ‘Is this the part where you run off to tell Grandma what a bad girl I’ve been? Typical perfect Gwen tactic. Shows your lack of imagination if you ask me.’

‘Nobody did,’ Kevin says coldly.

Ben watches, wide-eyed as Sunny snorts and looks away sulkily. Because yes, without Charmcaster’s voice or body to hide behind anymore, she’s now much more recognisable as their wayward cousin.

‘It was just a game,’ Sunny says, a near whine in her voice. She turns back to them with a pout. ‘I was cruising along the Vega system and I met this weird gravelly-voiced turtle guy who told me about this awesome place where all the mana comes from and so I was like, suffering from a compulsion to check it out, ya know? And then I found all sort of frequencies in the mana-field that
led from here to various objects and I started tugging at them—'

Gwen and Kevin’s faces are growing longer and longer by the second and Ben can’t blame them.

‘-and I think I made a few of them explode, not sure which exactly—’

Even Rook flinches at that.

‘-but anyway, I noticed some on Earth and I was wondering if I could fiddle with any near your house to freak you out, and maybe set a few ley-lines on fire or something, when I noticed that one was connected to a girl whose spark seems similar to Ben’s in that whole their-sparks-just-gotta-react-with-each-other-way-or-I’ll-just-die. C’mon, you’ve all felt it, admit it! Except, urgh, you humans are *lame* and can’t see that kind of energy, only feel it, and because you’re like, addicted to your limited eyesight, you never act on it! So I figured I’d give them both a liiiittle push...’

Restrained as she is, she still manages to mime a small, simple push with their palms of her hands, as though she’s nudging the air.

And okay, Ben has officially got no idea what she’s talking about.

But Gwen is looking sourer by the second. ‘Sunny,’ she says, and there’s thread of power to her voice now, a trace of that old Anodite resonance that makes Sunny flinch. ‘That’s right, names have power here, including yours; Charmcaster taught me that much, so you’d better sit up and listen!’ She reaches out and tugs on the green chains binding her cousin for emphasis, breathing hard as though she relishes each rattle she manages to shake out of them. ‘Ben and Kai aren’t...they aren’t dolls you can play with. You can’t force them to kiss and make-up.’

Her words are enough for a horrible gnawing suspicion to grow in Ben’s mind. And it’s backed up by the anger on Bellacious’ face and the slight furrow on Serena’s brow. They nod as though giving him permission and as one they, or Alien X, speak.

‘Explain. Explain what manipulations you have worked through my human form.’

It’s so weird their voice, a cumulative collaboration of both male and female tones rising up into a chorus. Even weirder to hear that voice, no, those *voices*, falling away into the exact same speed and rhythm, matching each other word for word, no tone truly overlapping each other as their throat refuse to billow and swell, refuses to rumble and vibrate the way a mammal’s would.

Sunny looks at him, and for the first time she looks weary. But she refuses to answer.

‘I might be able to help you there...’

The voice is weak, the last word coming out as a groan rather than a fully-formulated sound, but Charmcaster still blinks and forces her eyes to stay open. The fact that she doesn’t automatically try to pry Gwen’s arms off her as the other girl instantly drops Sunny’s chains into Kevin’s hands and rushes back to hover over her, speaks volumes.

‘Oh, hey there, *Hope,*’ Kevin shoots out, not looking abashed in the slightest when Gwen throws him a quelling look.

But Charmcaster still manages to flinch as though he’s poked her with something sharp and unpleasant. However, the grimace that crosses her face at his words quickly transforms from disgust to pain as she attempts to struggle upright, Gwen’s hand remaining a steady brace of support. Charmcaster eventually manages to fumble up onto her knees, her palms shaking through the dirt as though her weight’s suddenly too heavy for the thin bones inside to support.
‘I can still turn you into a frog, so watch it...’ she growls out before her head twists and her eyes find Sunny and harden into a hatred Ben’s a little too well-acquainted with. ‘That’s one unpleasant family member you got there. I don’t know whether to be happy that she’s more powerful than you, or sad. She’s even more jealous of you than m-’ she abruptly cuts herself off and then coughs. ‘Still, I guess someone got a little too excited with their experiments, didn’t they? Tweaking with mana’s dangerous and trying to alter it when it’s stuck inside the body of a reasonably sentient creature...well, there’s a reason I stick to rock familiars and animated bags, rather than those higher up on the food chain. You have to put a little bit of yourself inside two people you want to attract towards each other. So they get pulled to each other like magnets. Boop.’ She brings her two fore-fingers together shakily in a quick diagonal arch, tapping the tips together in symbolism of a quick kiss.

And Ben is left feeling even sicker.

‘Did she?’ he asks Bellacious and Serena. ‘Is a part of my...cousin inside me? How do I take it out?’ And then something else strikes him. ‘And who’s the other person she...’

But he doesn’t need to ask. Excalibur, something that apparently Kai’s connected to, throwing out a signal that’s enough to disturb Gwen. Charmcaster’s monsters surrounding it, as though it were the final quest in a video game. Except...

Charmcaster snorts. ‘You know for someone who’s obsessed with teenage romance, you sure have some funny ideas about basic courtship,’ she tells Sunny snidely. ‘And despite everything, you couldn’t do it. You couldn’t force Ben to fall in love.’ Charmcaster pauses then, to bring a finger up to her mouth gingerly, as though she wants to fall into deep thought. ‘Not that that’s a big surprise. You’d have to give him concussion to make that happen.’

Or maybe just cut off his arm, nobody says. But the thought is clear and concise and cuts through Ben’s mind for half a second before the full force of Hope’s words hit him. And then he starts to shake. Hard and fast and furious, within the mindscape of Alien X, he starts to tremble.

‘Take it out!’ He spins to Bellacious and Serena, the words torn from his throat in a shout. ‘Take it out, every-whatever it was, she put inside me!’

Bellacious looks as though he’s about to roll his eyes. And Serena? She just floats and stares.

‘Mana is life-energy, Benjamin,’ she says quietly. ‘It’s part of one greater whole. Whatever she put in you has melded itself to your being. You can’t just remove it. It’s part of you, the same way the mana from a stream of water joins and becomes one with the surge of mana inside the plants it feeds.’

Ben is furious. ‘Then what? I’m designed to what? ‘Boop’ against Kai for the rest of our lives?’

‘Calm down,’ thunders Bellacious, his brows drawing to force his wrinkles even deeper into his face; they rise up in v shapes, in angry black wings. ‘Your attraction was always there. And your life energy, these ‘sparks’ Anodites see do react and flare when they come in close proximity. This stupid child just egged on the process a little.’

‘Urgh!’ Ben turns round, crosses his arms and resists the urge to curl into himself, tight and angry. ‘When did she even...infect me? Why?’

Serena is quiet. Then: ‘We are a part of you. How do you expect us to know the inner workings of another so well?’
And then the black races away like it always does and Ben’s feet no longer float, no, they stand on solid ground and the air kisses his face, the sky and crazy paving stones suddenly taking up the space his eyes eagerly drink down. But Sunny, her face, all the frowning inches of it, remain rooted in his gaze. And he strides forward to meet it.

‘Why?’ he pushes the word out, all of him furious. ‘When? Why would you even-’ he cuts off, too angry to continue, and grabs holds of the chains from Kevin, his fingers slithering through all the holes the links open up. He has a moment to feel the flat coolness of the green links, how they feel slightly warmer in his prosthetic one, before he pulls slowly and firmly pushing himself down onto one knee as Sunny winces and has her chin leveraged towards the sky. ‘Look at me,’ he spits. ‘And answer my questions.’

Sunny’s eyes are wide, unblemished by their white. For one strange moment he hates her for not having any pupils, for making him feel like his gaze is diving down into the contours of a whiteboard, before she starts speaking. ‘I just thought you guys would be cute together! That’s all! You energy makes all these ‘whoops’ and spins when she’s near and hers crackles like those weird ‘sparklers’ you guys have even though fireworks are so much better and bigger and prettier, and I figured it would make the mana inside you settle a little more and Grandma agreed-’

Ben abruptly drops the chains and she slips back down with a gasp even though she doesn’t actually need to breathe. And dully, he realises Rook’s hand is on his shoulder, exerting gentle pressure.

‘What?’ he says softly.

‘Grandma says you were all sad and your energy was stuck in this depressing little hum, so I though your love-life needed a jump-start, ‘cos that always cheers me up when I’m depressed so I totally gave Excalibur a few tugs and Grandma promised to give me a play-by-play later-’

Ben’s heard enough. He clamber to his feet and turns away, shaking Rook’s hand off his shoulder. He keeps walking even after Kevin shouts at him, but nothing pink springs up to stand in his way, no mana platform or shield, so Gwen has decided to leave him well enough alone. Unlike her, but hey...

And then Rook’s grabbing his shoulder again and turning him around.

‘Ben,’ he says, and his face is drawn down into a frown, in his serious ‘we-are-at-work’ face. ‘She is your family. We cannot-’

‘Gwen can handle her,’ Ben states firmly. ‘Besides my Grandma is family too. But that didn’t seem to stop her from jerking me around either.’

Rook clearly bites back whatever he is going to say. ‘You feel betrayed,’ he settles on calmly. ‘I understand, but-’

‘She gate-crash our date, picked a fight with you, and deliberately set us up with Kai,’ Ben points out. ‘You have no right to defend her.’

Rook tilts his head, acknowledging the point. ‘Well, yes,’ he concedes, ‘but-’

Ben narrows his eyes. ‘My Grandma was the old lady who burst a gut over the way you were sputtering apologies at her.’

Rook’s face turns into a stone, his frown smoothing over within seconds. ‘Oh,’ he says simply.
But Ben’s done. He reaches up and rips Rook’s hand from his shoulder. ‘No,’ he growls. ‘Not ‘oh.’ Not even close. Sunny put something inside me and my Grandma sat there like a spectator, watching. She did nothing. And it looks like you want me to do the same.’ And then he spins away from the surprise crossing over Rook’s face. He doesn’t want to stop and see what other emotion will follow in it’s wake, whether it will be realisation or that lost ‘I-don’t-get-humans’ consternation. His head is lowered, his hand is raised and he mouths the words as the Omnitrix bobs into his line of sight, their volume managing to rise barely above his breath.

‘Jetray.’

The same alien as the day he discovered that the ground and sky weren’t in parallel here. The perfect alien, in other words, to help him become hopelessly lost.

And it’s strange of course; he hasn’t been in this form for months, but he can still remember the light, airy feel of the membrane that makes up the fan-like spread of his wings, only for one of them to weight him down, one of his forelimbs now unbearably metal in nature. But the rippling weave of material that spreads down to join and glisten with his body beneath the prosthetic limb feels light, lighter than paper, even lighter than the natural wing on his right side. And it’s muscle memory more than skill that saves him, that launches him into the air, and he struggles mid-flight, trying to balance himself out before he forces himself to lie rigidly still, like a sheet of cardboard, just urging everything away until he’s sure he’s not going to wobble and capsize through the air. And yeah, it feels odd and he won’t be up for any fancy turns and spins, just yet, but still. He’s flying. Not so long ago he thought he would never experience the sheer joy of it again.

And he doesn’t turn, not even to hear Rook’s echoing shout. He’s already gone, already lost, the twist of unfamiliar buildings and temples throwing jagged shadows over him like tree branches, the ground spinning, first far away, then close, far away, then to his side, completely untouchable...he’s a spinning top with nothing to ground him. Nothing but his thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

I’m taking great liberties with how Alien X works, as usual. But then again, I’m not really sure anybody understands how the species works in general.

Also, I’ll be much nicer to Sunny in ‘Nothing But Purple Inside,’ I promise. Or maybe I won’t.

Either way she fucked up badly here, despite the fact that her intentions weren't precisely 'evil' in nature - at least not in the way the show defines evil. What she did to Charmcaster and Ben was still pretty cold though and deserves to be called out for what it is.

But then I suspect the Anodite morality system is much more 'grey' than our own.

Now to actually sit down through my inbox and work my way through the comments/reviews/pms I got this past month or so.
‘I didn’t mean to hurt you.’

Ben freezes and snuggles his head further into his knees for one, bright, blissful second, before he gathers his courage and raises his head. Verdona is there, her hair waving a little more wildly then he’s ever seen before, all of it swelling like a wave before it scatters and weaves back into its familiar curling tendril.

He’s human again, the Omnitrix long since timed-out. It’s mere luck that his claws have managed to scrape against a wall a few minutes before it happened, that he’s slid his way down into a heap of orange and blue berries, aluminium foil woven between their gaps like the steep sides of a mountain flashing from beneath the vegetation.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Ben says harshly, forcing his eyes to meet hers firmly. ‘After all, it doesn’t matter to the media or all those people who read about me. They think they always know best. Do you know how many letters and emails I got about Julie when we were dating? A lot. Even a few magazine articles. About how she was wrong for me, or how it was wrong for me to drag her into my life and put her in danger. About how I should be with someone more ‘suited’ to my lifestyle. And why should you be any different? You might be family, but we’ve only met on a handful of occasions. You don’t know me, not really.’

Verdona stares at him for a moment. Then carefully, as though she expects him to reach out and bite it, she places her hand on his forehead, softly moving his hair back, so that it sprays out against the bulkier curls behind them.

‘So soft,’ she says, her voice matching the words she pushes out, gentle and wondering. ‘Human hair always is, especially when you’re young. I used to make mine softer than Max’s just to annoy him, but it never carried quite the same scent. And the texture I created never seemed quite right. But it still gave me such a thrill to touch it, to know hair that could be stationary, and see how it was too fragile to reach out and hold anything steady.’ She’s quiet for a moment, her hair flexing behind her like a fist. Then she lets his hair fall loose, her hand sliding down to touch his cheek, to smooth it over with her palm. ‘It will be different for Rook, of course. He’s a creature of proteins and carbons like you, used to the physical in a way many Anodites are not. But I still hope he touches you with the same reverence I did Max.’

Ben swallows. ‘Kai’s a ‘creature’ too,’ he says thickly. It’s weird feeling the cool set of her hand on his skin, so like Gwen’s Anodite form the few times she’s been fully unveiled in front of him. Hard and yet flexible, just like his new left arm. ‘Why didn’t you have the same problem with her?’

Verdona is thoughtful for a moment. ‘Kai is complicated,’ she says finally. ‘Your sparks are drawn together; I do not know if it is the guiding hand of the universe at work, some force greater than myself and those like me, or if it a simple quirk of nature. But you were compatible, that much is true. And I have been watching you in my spare moments ever since Max told me what happened. I could feel his grief at your despondence and truly, it unnerved me to hear and see your energy at such a low thrum. It’s been brightening steadily these last few weeks – but still I wanted to check that it was not just the result of a passing fling.’

She pauses and with a thrill that feels vaguely triumphant, Ben realises that she is actually thinking
things through before speaking.

'Rook is good for you,' she says finally, her words ponderous and slow. 'His energy is steady, for lack of a better term, though still just as easily agitated as any mammal's. But I still felt...feel worried. Because he loves you very deeply. And it would be very easy to get overwhelmed by such a thing; if you get sucked down by his feelings when you're still in such a vulnerable state of mind, it could backfire. You could use him as an emotional re-bound, or you could try forcing yourself to repay him before you're ready. I remember enough of the decades I spent living in a human form to know how guilt and obligation can crash into each other. It can make you do things that you end up regretting. Or give others a false set of expectations of you.'

Ben blinks. Then screws his nose up. 'What are you, my therapist?'

Verdona laughs and finally takes her hand away. 'You are right. You do not know me. And I do not know you. But I see you, very clearly, Benjamin. I just need you to be able to do the same, now that you are not blind with depression the way you have been recently.'

'Do you also see the sparks inside me and Rook?' Ben asks, letting his curiosity get the better of him. 'What are they like?'

Verdona gives him a sly smile, then taps him on the nose. Ben imagines it’s her grandmotherly version of rapping him on the knuckles or tweaking his ear. ‘Uh-uh-uh. No dice, kiddo. Part of the fun is seeing how you stumble around each other.’

‘That’s...really messed up.’

Verdona’s smile turns coy. ‘I am not human. My values probably are ‘messed up’ by corporeal standards.’

‘Ben!’

Ben almost doesn’t want to turn. But yep, there’s the whole gang, Sunny being dragged along behind them with her green chains in Gwen’s fists. Her eyes widen on seeing Verdona though, the sulky set of her mouth rapidly retreating into a beaming smile.

‘Grandma!’

‘Time to go, Sweetie,’ Verdona says almost wistfully, her fingers making an almost casual sweep through the ends of Ben’s fringe. He isn’t fooled though; he sees the thin tremble in her hand and the way it hesitates before it finally draws back. ‘Your cousin and I have to have a long overdue chat.’

She floats upwards as Rook steps forward, his gaze fixed on her face. His gait is casual, relaxed, arms held at his side, far away from his resting Proto-tool, but his shoulders, Ben notices, are squared up and slightly tensed.

‘Verdona,’ says Rook, his voice dripping with very polite disdain, the sort he’s mastered at veiling just thinly enough for you to know when he’s being disapproving without being able to call him out on it. ‘I believe this is our second meeting.’

Verdona smiles. ‘That you know of!’ she sings glibly.

Rook doesn’t falter. ‘Indeed,’ he says loftily. ‘I suppose manners are unnecessary for a species with the ability to quite literally read the atmosphere around them. It is no surprise that you might have difficulty accepting how rude it is to spy on people without their knowledge.’
But Verdona doesn’t look shocked or dismayed by his words. Instead her smile widens and practically arches up by itself into a wide grin. ‘Ooh, aren’t you a catty thing,’ she exclaims, looking delighted at her own pun while Kevin stares at her, looking sorely dismayed.

Rook frowns, very nearly eye-rolling before catching himself and then proceeding to step round her. And now his neck tilts up, just enough for him to stare up at Ben and quite firmly catch his eyes.

‘I wish you would not run off like that,’ he tells Ben tensely. ‘We are partners – we are not supposed to leave each other in the lurch.’

Ben sighs; already the babble of Verdona trying to negotiate with Gwen and Kevin for Sunny’s release is boring, trivial stuff, to be tuned out as soon as possible. And Charmcaster’s gone; he shouldn’t be surprised. ‘I know,’ he says. ‘I’m sorry. I’ve been acting like a jerk. I just...’

‘You felt like you were falling out of control of your own life,’ Rook says quietly. ‘And this was just one more form of betrayal you did not want to deal with.’

Ben smiles down at him tiredly. ‘She still hasn’t apologised,’ he says, jerking his head towards Verdona. ‘And I don’t think she ever will.’

Rook is quiet. He’s just standing there, staring up at Ben nestled in a crouch on top of his pile of mis-matched fruit and foil. For once in his life, Ben is kind of taller than him. Then the moment promptly disappears as Rook effortlessly covers the space between them in a simple jump. One moment he’s staring up at Ben, and the next there’s a slight force pressing in at Ben’s chest, that tight sense of his personal space being invaded as he’s left staring at the blue trim of Rook’s boots. These shift, the fruit letting out squishy noises of protest as Rook kneels in front of him, golden eyes staring down.

They’re pretty, Ben thinks suddenly. He stares at them, seeing two orange irises set against a background as yellow as a summer flower, as though they are petals overlapping the ground, each painted a separate shade of the sky when the sun falls. Ben swallows. And reaches up to feel for Rook’s chin, his Grandmother’s words echoing in his head.

You’re not an emotional rebound, he thinks hotly, suddenly certain of himself. And I’m not forcing myself to do this; other things, yes, but not this. I won’t do something I regret.

Rook catches his hand as it nestles against his fur, his fingers running over the creased dip of lifelines and soft stretch of human skin. Ben wonders if he can hear the pulse trapped beneath the connecting wrist, if he can work out how much faster it’s beating now. And the tips of his fingers move, brushing with that same reverence his Grandmother says she wishes Rook would show him.

But it’s supposed to go both ways, Grandma, Ben thinks, and then he opens his mouth to say, quite firmly: ‘I think I’m falling for you, dude. Last chance to hop off the station.’

Rook grins. Then tucks Ben’s hand more firmly into his larger one, pulling it away into the curling flex of his fingers so there’s no barrier between them as they reach out for one another with their mouths. And not even Gwen’s protesting groan can spoil this, or Sunny’s riveted squeal. There’s just them or ‘us’ and nobody has to watch it if they don’t want to. And it’s not new or fresh, just different and if he had the mind for it, Ben would remember how he had been unable to do the same for Julie, to wish the rest of the world away that time they had beaten back the Highbreed invasion. But he’ll remember later and feel a little bad.

But not now. Right now, he’s feeling too good to care.
Charmcaster is not in the bag. Charmcaster is not even attached to the bag Gwen should have stuffed her back into. Instead, once they fall back into the real world, they find her waiting for them outside the portal, sitting on Kevin’s car with her feet propped up against the windshield so that her boots leave brown scuff marks when she drags them against the glass, all the while wearing a mocking smile.

Kevin makes a noise like he’s dying and she laughs, casually rolling off the bonnet and flicking a hand at the battered windshield. The glass ripples and flares up with the sort of blue light you see glowing from the interior of public aquariums, before it shimmers back into its transparent, formerly pristine condition.

‘Magic,’ says Charmcaster casually. ‘The perfect household appliance.’ She beams as though this announcement is news-worthy.

Kevin meanwhile, looks like he’s fighting down a scream as he runs over to his car and starts knocking on the glass, peering closely at the window as though he can detect whatever molecular changes Charmcaster’s magic has wrought with the naked eye alone.

‘My poor baby,’ he murmurs. ‘No matter how hard I try, I can’t protect from a force of nature that doesn’t obey any rules. Because the universe hates us and is unfair.’

Gwen scoffs and crosses her arms. ‘Magic so has rules. They just don’t...bear any relation to the laws of physics. Well, most of the time anyway.’

‘Right,’ says Kevin, now looking just as scornful as she does. ‘I forgot. Magic pays more attention to the proper pronunciation of some dusty ancient word that hasn’t been used in casual conversation for centuries, rather than something reasonable, like gravity.’

Ben makes a face. He doesn’t find gravity that reasonable. It’s usually trying to kill him when he’s timed out from something that can fly.

Rook for his part, is actually looking like he’s mulling over Kevin’s words but before he can say anything, Ben beats to him to the crunch.

‘Helloooo,’ he says, pointedly waving as Charmcaster who gives them a smug little wave back. ‘Is everyone forgetting about the dangerous sorceress on the loose? The one standing right in front of us?’

Gwen shrugs at him. ‘What do you want me to do? She’s not attacking us right now and I can hardly stuff her back inside the bag when she’s been body-jacked. I think our family’s put her through enough today, don’t you?’

Charmcaster’s face settles into a glower at the reminder. ‘Urgh, I can’t believe I was possessed by a teenage girl who thinks romance is the be-and-end-all of her life. I’ve had enough voices jabbing at me for a lifetime.’

Gwen’s eyes brighten and she steps forward, wearing her hope on her face. ‘You could stay with us!’ she lets out excitedly. And yep, Ben notices in resignation, she’s doing that thing girls do, bringing her hands together in a not-quite clasp and letting her fingers catch at each other as though
she needs something solid to grab hold of. ‘There’s more than enough room in our dorm and I know your uncle misses you,’ she continues in a rush. ‘If you don’t want to stay with us, I’m sure he’s got space in his quarters.’ She continues chattering on, even as Kevin shakes his head at her frantically in a warning she determinedly ignores.

‘Oh, and I need someone to help me sort through some of the older texts, the ones describing magic in its rawer forms before people even began to properly formulate spells. Hex is busy a lot of the time, but with your experiences in Ledger Domain, you’re probably a lot more aware of what the authors are trying to tell me.’

Charmcaster raises an eyebrow. ‘You want to...what? Have a study session with me? Pull up a chair and do homework with you? Wow, you’re really selling this, Gwendolyn.’

Gwen gives her a sunny smile. ‘Well, Hope, since I know your real name now, I could compel you to come with us; at the very least, I can now ward my place against you the way Hex can. Besides, the fact that you hung around and waited here shows that you obviously want something from us.’

Hope bares her teeth and her eyes flash dangerously in a single flicker of white, an action that has Ben stepping back as his watch and wrist begin the quick climb to his mouth. Except...then she relaxes slightly. And scoffs. ‘I’m only here because of that audiobook you pressed up against the bag last Saturday,’ she says, her voice dangerously firm and not at all flippant. ‘Of that new Harry Potter book or script or whatever. I figured I might as well finish it.’

Ben stares at her. ‘You like Harry Potter?’

Charmcaster gives him an unimpressed stare. ‘Why are you surprised? Do you hate sci-fi films now that’s your life is basically one long chick flick within the genre? Besides, I like how Harry and company have to deal with dark shit and get to kill people who mess with their families; I can respect that.’ Something dark passes over her face for a second and her fist clenches. But then she spins on her heel and teleports herself into the back-seat. ‘Chop-chop! Time’s a-wasting! Let’s go!’

Ben turns to Gwen and stares at her. ‘Are you sure about this? Charmcaster – sorry, Hope, has never exactly been the most stable person to be around.’

‘I can handle her,’ Gwen says firmly. ‘Besides she’s not irredeemable. Kevin used to pull off stuff that’s arguably just as bad as some of the things she’s done and look how he turned out.’

Kevin makes a face, thinks about this for two seconds, and then shrugs.

‘That was...he was jacked up on his Osmosian thing! Charmcaster doesn’t have that.’

‘But she has been at the whim of Ledger Domain and its eerie influence,’ puts in Rook. ‘Not to mention whatever effect being in close proximity to the Alpha Rune brings. By all historical accounts it is not something that brings much sanity. Look at how the wielder before her turned out.’

Ben narrows his eyes. Adwaita. A gravely-voiced turtle that told Sunny about Ledger Domain. It couldn’t be...could it? But it doesn’t matter. Not like he has much luck against magical foes without Gwen by his side anyway.

He lets out a frustrated noise. ‘Whatever! But don’t say I didn’t warn you when she disappears with some of those priceless texts of yours or whatever.’

Gwen rolls her eyes, pats him on the head patronisingly and waltzs over to Kevin’s car. Leaving Ben with nothing more to do but sigh and start the trek to Rook’s Prototruck. ‘This is all going to
‘go horribly wrong,’ he complains to his boyfriend.

Rook swings open the door on his side and pauses to sweep his eyes across the seats to the other side of the truck, just as Ben tumbles inside. ‘Perhaps,’ he allows, inclining his head in the kind of compliant agreement that means that he’s not one hundred percent on board. Indeed, his eyes are miles away as he adds, more gently: ‘or maybe Gwen will break through to her.’

Ben sighs at this typical response and slouches over in his seat, glancing over out of his window to seek out the dark shape of Kevin’s car. He has enough time to catch a glimpse of Kevin’s taunt knuckles on the wheel before they turn and became lost in the shadows, the sharp twist of the movement forcing the car to swing out and strike up dust with a whine of its engine.

‘Maybe,’ he says gloomily. ‘But I wouldn’t count on it.’

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This time the ride back is filled with the uncomfortable tension that spills through the air whenever two people fear that the strike of a single spoken word will flare up into an argument they don’t have the energy to escape from. And Ben finds himself missing the other kind of tension, the one he was stuck inside before this meet-up with Gwen and Kevin went sideways, back when he was giggly and every new twist in his seat opened up his eyes to the wry twitch of Rook’s smile and then the resulting memory that sprang up at the sight. Namely of those lips touching his own and the way he was pressed back to the seat he now can’t seem to keep still within.

Ben leans over to fiddle with the knob of the radio, but there’s nothing good on, not even a creepy alien podcast he could get behind and sink into, enough to pretend he was playing a new video game. Instead, what he really wants to do is yank the wheel out of Rook’s grasp and get them both over to the side of the road, perhaps to pull up a repeat performance of the memory that now holds him hostage. But he has more road sense than that, at least when they’re not involved in a frantic car chase, so instead of his fingers drifting out to invade Rook’s side of the truck, and his voice spills out into the air inquisitively.

‘Wanna stop and make out?’

Rook chokes, but to his credit the van doesn’t suddenly jerk out of control and his fingers only tighten on the wheel briefly as he fights not to let his gaze leave the road.

‘Not when you are so obviously bored and can think of nothing better to do,’ he says finally, sounding very calm for someone who’s just been propositioned by the guy he’s supposed to be in love with.

Ben swallows. ‘I’ll throw in a blow-job,’ he throws out faux-casually.

And that is the remark that seems to tip the scales in his favour because Rook slams on the brakes and the van gives a violent shudder as it comes to a short, careening stop near a lamppost.

For a moment there is silence. And Ben glances over nervously as the dark, huddled shape of his boyfriend, the round curve of that furry forehead pressed firmly against the slant of the wheel. And then Rook breathes, letting out a sigh that rolls through the air like the small grind of thunder in the distance.
‘...Are you trying to murder us both?’ he finally asks weakly, before his head lifts up slightly, the luminous flare of his eyes pinning Ben to his seat more effectively than his hands ever could. ‘Why do you feel the need to provoke me? I understand that you are easily distractible and your attention span is, for lack of a better term, short but—’

‘We’re being weird with each other!’ Ben says sharply. ‘And I don’t even know why! This isn’t cool, dude! It feels like—’

Like he’s with Kai, bewildered by how everything he says or does is perceived as an attack and how he’s just waiting for the other foot to fall, for something to go wrong and embarrass him because something always does. But he doesn’t know how to verbalise this, so he falls silent and then, unthinkingly, he’s drawing his seat-belt back from across his chest and clambering up into Rook’s seat, shoving the guy away from his wheel because he doesn’t like that, seeing Rook huddled and small, he never wants him to feel small and unsure, not the way he often feels around Kai. No, he needs them to be different, better than that.

‘C’mon Blonko,’ he says softly and it should startle him, how gentle his voice sounds, how the words roll from his tongue, smooth and uncluttered, like he’s practised saying this other, intimate name in front of the mirror. It feels wrong, surly and childish to be using it when Rook’s never asked him to, never even displayed so much as a hint that he wants Ben to open his mouth and use the name that addresses him and not his family lineage. But Rook’s eyes are going wide and black all the same, his pupil swelling in surprise as the golden gap around them widens, the lines of his eyes rushing away into the hood of black fur that surrounds them.

They really are pretty, Ben thinks. He’s surprised that it took him this long to notice, although given that he isn’t losing his breath every few seconds, perhaps he’s always been aware of the attraction on some level. It may explain why he didn’t instantly recoil from them and their friendship the first moment he realised just how badly this guy had it for him.

He cradles Rook’s face in his palms, relishing how easy the habit is, how smooth and right it feels to have fur nestling at his fingertips instead of the gliding feel of flesh he’s always pictured beneath his hands during midnight wanderings of Julie or Ester or Kai in his mind’s eye.

‘Hey,’ he says and settles himself more firmly on Rook’s lap. ‘Don’t worry; I’m not really looking for a booty call, if that’s not what you’re up for. But I don’t like this, whatever this feeling is, that’s happening right now. I don’t know how to fix it.’

Rook smiles, but not particularly nicely, and Ben twitches as he feels the resulting muscles breathe and push out against his hands, making them rise from Rook’s cheek.

‘That was what prompted you to offer me a blow-job? Do you even have any experience in that area?’

The look Rook gives him is sly and just on the shrewd end of speculation, but the question still comes out sounding more rhetorical than it should, so Ben moodily draws his hands away.

‘You’re in danger of never finding out,’ the human remarks tartly, and then uses a single finger to tap him on the nose. ‘Also, jeez, deflection much?’

Rook sighs. ‘I am not angry,’ he states. ‘Just nonplussed. I do not like it when you run from me, the way you did this evening. I fear it will become a pattern if I do not ‘put my foot down.’ But I do not know how to speak of this without making you retreat even further from me. You often do, when my remarks hit a little too close to home.’
Ben frowns and looks away. ‘That’s just human nature,’ he says, wishing his words would come out a little firmer. ‘Nobody likes having their flaws pointed out.’

‘But I still want them,’ Rook murmurs and oh boy, does that send a shiver through Ben’s gut, at how husky and low the guy’s voice comes out as, more a croon than an urgent whisper. He never thought he could feel that way about a dude’s timbre, but here he is, on an actual guy’s lap, about to come undone at the hushed volume of his words. ‘I want you, and that means taking every one of those flaws and working with them, even if you pout and sulk about it.’

Ben feels his mouth close up into a pout at the very thought, despite the warmth coiling through his stomach at Rook’s words, but the next moment it’s smoothed away, tucked under by the heat of Rook’s approaching mouth. And the electricity flows through him as they join in a rushed feeling of ‘at last’ and he feels strangely complete as Rook breathes into him. It’s not as poetic as it sounds since there’s still the grind of the physical to contend with, muscle and heat and an oncoming arm wrapped a little too tightly round his back – and it doesn’t send quite the same charge through him that the remembered touch of Kai does. But Rook is slow and firm, even if Ben feels the tightened grip of his hand below his ribs telling a certain story of impatience and he wonders if this is the form their ‘sparks’ take, something only an Anodite can see, in a river that knows how to be gentle and unhurried, even as the current boils beneath the churning plait-like weave of its waves as a dark and dangerous thing.

And that same danger rears up, engulfs him as Rook turns suddenly, the wheel pressing from Ben’s back into his side and then away again as with a crank and a fumble of his hand, the seat twists away into the dark, falling back so it sprawls out into a sofa-like stretch. Ben is swept down into its horizontal curve, the streetlight playing against both his face and Rook’s. He glances against the sides of their arms and Rook’s shoulders and like a camera shutter falling close, Ben catches glimpses of armour being unpeeled from fur, spikes of it brushing up against his trembling hands as he moves them over their mussed up patches in the dark. And he’s wondering how they are moving into this, from Rook’s quiet assertion mere hours before that they weren’t ready, or that Ben wasn’t ready, and now they’re suddenly falling into somewhere Ben’s only read about, at least in terms of guy-on-guy action.

And then Rook’s hand catches his face.

‘Ben...we are not...we do not have to...’

The words spill out between pants and with a shock, Ben realises that he is still fully clothed despite the magnetic dance that has had Rook roughly pulling off his own.

‘Touch me,’ the Revonnahgander continues, sounding a little awed at the thought. ‘You have never, not probably, not at the places my armour commonly covers. I want you too.’

Then he takes Ben’s hand, his flesh and blood one, and glides it over the top of his leg, right towards the part where it joins to his body, the fur rolling in an unhurried ruffle over the bump of his hip. And with another shock, Ben realises that there’s no barrier of boxer shorts or any kind of underwear to stop this exploration. He lets out a slight whimper at the revelation, but doesn’t drop his hand away, letting the other rove up over the ruff of white that explodes over Rook’s chest, even though here, in the dark, it appears grey. He knows Rook’s eyes are glued to him and sometimes he’s brave enough to catch them, to stare up into them and give a cheeky smile as his hands brush and stroke as though Rook’s nothing more than an over-large pussy cat. But oh, there’s defiantly a sexual element to what he’s doing, else his fingers wouldn’t move quite so slowly, wouldn’t coil and uncoil in undulating waves against every tuff of softness that brushes through their gaps and Rook sighs and stirs every time he does so, at every small touch and
movement, like he’s having a pretty great massage.

‘One day,’ he says, and his voice dips down into a promise, low and guttural as he speaks, ‘we might have to do this again, you and I, in this very position. And I will do my best to make sure you do more than smirk up at me.’

Ben’s really not surprised that Rook has such a massive fan-club back on Revonnah anymore. Too bad for them then, that he’s taken.

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It’s really freaking funny to Ben afterwards, that under the sunlight that rolls in through the window in the morning, Rook turns into an awkward virgin. Or well, at least a big uptight boy-scout about everything.

There’s nothing wrong at first. Just the coolness of the seat against his back, the stiffness contrasting with the warmth of his boyfriend slumped over his stomach, those large arms sprawled out to tuck his smaller body between them, even though one seems to give up halfway and ends up dropping off into space at the side. Rook’s still naked and blearily-eyed as he is, Ben still manages to stifle a yawn and let his eyes roam. And yes, he has to admit that it’s actually nice to get a clear view of what exactly he’s been touching the night before, all that blue and white and black unveiled under the gleaming sunlight that rolls in to paint the mussed tuffs like paving stones on a path. Not better exactly- there had been an air of excitement to the way he could mostly feel instead of see last night, using sensation as a guide instead of sight, with only the street lamp and Rook’s eyes to mark out a rough constellation above the shadows his hands dipped into. No blow-job, not this time, though he definitely stroked something that hardened beneath his fingers into a long, lean shape that he may at some point, have to make peace with the fact that it’s going into his mouth. Ben figures that it’s probably going to happen; he likes blow-jobs after all, or at least the few he had received from Julie months back, had become little spots of heaven within his memory. And since he’s now dating someone with a dick, he figures a little quid-pro-quo is in order.

Rook shuffles, a snort escaping his mouth, and even though it’s not quite a snore, Ben finds himself grinning none the less.

‘Mornin’ beautiful,’ he chirps gleefully, taking no small amount of pleasure in the way this remark makes Rook’s eyes shoot wide open. The Revonnahgander stares at him, a look of abject fondness abruptly softening his face and allowing a smile to drop onto his lips as Ben grins up at him and presses his palms more firmly against the furred sides still pressing their weight against his stomach. ‘Now...off! I need to remember how it feels to have my belly back and uncrushed.’

Rook rolls his eyes but, still smiling, he obliges, pushing back and letting out a small wince as his knees crack more firmly against the floor. Ben’s grin softens into something gentler, a more genuine smile, but doesn’t die away completely. He feels a little sorry for Rook, for being so tall and actually not wanting to smother Ben in his sleep; it’s made the guy spend the night hunched over, his legs disappearing into the ether below the wheel and dashboard somewhere.

‘Careful,’ Ben murmurs, pressing his fingers into a sweeping line that trails against Rook’s jawline, all as he shuffles upright. ‘I thought you were a precision athlete? You’re a little too young to have your knees giving out.’
Rook rolls his eyes, but nudges against Ben’s fingers a little, in a motion so small and sweet and cat-like that it makes Ben’s breath catch.

‘If I do age prematurely, I am sure it will have nothing to do with the stress of dealing with you.’

Ben scowls, only half-meaning it. ‘Perhaps you should break up with me then. You won’t have such a big fan-club on Revonnah if they see you getting a bunch of grey hairs.’

Rook blinked. ‘Actually, our fur tends to develop a whitish tinge as we age at the very ends, and only when we are too decrepit to move as we once did. Even Kundo has failed to reach that stage annnd’ he continues more wearily, as Ben gives the pantomime performance of letting out a big yawn, ‘you do not care.’

‘Nope!’ Ben announces, letting the slap of the ‘p’ hit the air with a smack of sound.

But Rook is now suddenly looking round, his eyes widening in panic as he sees the gold of the sun lighting the streets through the windows overhead. He crouches down, abruptly self-conscious and fumbles for the armour shifting next to his feet in a small pile. Then with a motion so graceful that it makes the familiar surge of envy rise up from within Ben’s stomach, he half-leaps, half-rolls across the open pathway of the seat into the back where prisoners are usually kept.

Ben blinks. ‘C’mon,’ he says wryly. ‘It’s like five o’clock in the morning. Nobody’s up that early.’

‘We are,’ Rook points out stiffly, the only other sound being the shifting whisper of armour stretching out around an ankle or wrist. There’s a pause then, before Rook’s hand darts back frantically and pats down somewhere below the rise of Ben’s knee. Ben blinks, raises an eyebrow as he sees the navy jacket of an oncoming morning jogger approach, and quickly leans over to fish out Rook’s underwear from where’s it’s dropped down to hang over the brake. He presses it into Rook’s hand before the guy has the chance to lean over and see the newcomer and thereby be all smug about being right for the millionth time again and almost misses the stiff ‘thank out’ Rook forces out before his hand disappears into the back again.

‘No problem,’ Ben says, stifling a snigger as Rook’s voice breaks out across the van in small, irritated chunks.

‘I cannot believe I was foolhardy enough to allow us to fall asleep in my truck. Anyone could have wandered past and attacked us while we were in such a compromising position.’

Ben yawns and stretches. He’s feeling a little stiff; while he managed to get an erection last night, he became just a little too engrossed in exploring Rook, in making the other guy gasp and twitch, to pester him about returning the favour. It had died off naturally and uncomfortably as the other guy had softened and fallen on top of him, spent and already half-way into dreamland.

Because...there is something powerful about cradling this creature and stroking his brow as it relaxes under Ben’s touch, feeling those muscles melt and gradually loosen over his form in an implicit show of trust and Ben remembers it all. He feels protective of that moment, too much so to care about getting anything in return.

‘Aww, c’mon,’ he says with a grin, risking a peek over the headrest. ‘You were cute last night, all breathy, like a proper porn star. Who knew you had it in you, right?’

Rook glares at him balefully and Ben has to swallow down his disappointment as the last of that white chest disappears beneath the blue and black lining of armour.

‘Do you believe you would be much better off had our positions been reversed?’
Ben blinks. ‘Well, no,’ he manages after a moment. ‘Obviously. I mean that’s the general point of having sex. If you don’t end up all panty and moany you’re obviously doing something wrong. I mean it’s kind of embarrassing, but if you’re not getting into it, then...well, you’re not really having a good time. Or so I’ve heard.’

Rook just looks at him. ‘Panty?’ he queries, fighting down a smirk. ‘Moany? Those are not proper words, Ben. Besides, by your definition, and since you were not ‘getting into it’, I was the one doing something wrong.’

‘No, no, no!’ Ben waves his hands about frantically, now half draped over the seat, his shoulder jutting out uncomfortable over the headrest. It’s weird, how it’s almost second nature now for his prosthetic hand to join in with the same jiggly motion of the other, even if it still makes an alien twinge run up into the ball of his shoulder in a snap of unnatural energy. ‘I was definitely into it! It was just...different for me. I was at the other end of it so I could...so I didn’t have to...’ he gives up. ‘It was cool that you were okay with me seeing you like that. Or just being with me like that, since I couldn’t really see all that much. It was all intimate and stuff.’

‘And stuff?’ Rook repeats wonderingly. But he doesn’t sound particularly mocking as he does so. Instead he steps forward, smiling broadly and bends down — but before he can press the obvious kiss he’s aiming for into Ben’s hair, Ben yanks himself up and pushes his lips into Rook’s, quickly, barely enough for heat to travel through him. And then he wretches himself away. Rook blinks, looking a little dazed.

‘I forget sometimes, how adaptable you are,’ he muses, more to himself than to Ben. ‘I shall have to be careful what I teach you.’

Ben laughs. ‘Come on, where’s the fun in that? For both of us.’
And I’ll take what is mine as is my due

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sandra barely blinks at the fact that her son’s pulled an ‘all-nighter’ as she calls it.

‘Though it’s never as studious in nature as I hope for,’ she sighs, eyeing the way Ben’s abruptly pulled his hoodie up, just enough to hide the red marks scattering his neck. Honestly, thinking back, he’s surprised Gwen or Kevin hadn’t said anything. Perhaps they were more preoccupied with their own stuff, or more likely, Gwen somehow coerced Kevin into being more ‘sensitive’ and ‘understanding’ around him because he’s in a gay relationship now or whatever. It’s the kind of thing she’d do.

‘I learn plenty,’ he argues back against his mom. ‘Just...nothing really applicable for work. You know, the type of work you and Dad still secretly want me to do.’

He bites his tongue back at all the other thoughts that crowd his mind, like the memory of his mom hurriedly stuffing college prospectuses back in the drawer where she keeps supermarket receipts, or the night his dad raised his voice, not long after Rook cut away his arm and asked if Ben had 'lost enough' and was willing to lose his life and 'destroy ours in the process too!' Ben remembers being grim and down-trodden, turning his eyes to the carpet and not having the courage to lift them, to see if his mom shared the same opinion, before she shoved the water glass into his hand and said 'maybe that's enough for tonight.' Because it was more than enough for Ben. Enough to last him for years.

And now in a distant echo of that night, Rook is hovering near the doorway, being the supportive partner in the same way his mom was to his dad then. Or at least, Ben thinks that’s what he’s doing. Because why else would he still be here, what with the way his mom is twisting her head, glancing between the both of them as though she’s trying to discern what has happened in the past few hours by mind-reading alone. Her eyes can’t help but linger on Ben’s veiled neck one last time before she turns to Rook with a sigh.

‘I’ve got some leftover mediterranean tart in the fridge,’ she offers gamely and Ben loves that about her, how she can always turn what’s bothering her aside for the moment and focus on something else. ‘If you want, I can re-heat it up in the oven.’

Rook brightens, bringing his hands together in a small pleading prayer of gratitude. ‘Thank you. I am somewhat peckish, I must admit.’ His stomach almost gurgles as though to confirm this, and if he could, he would probably blush. But with all that fur in the way, he laughs instead and rubs the back of his head sheepishly.

‘Yeesh...I think I’ll pass, thanks,’ Ben says, sweeping past them both into the kitchen. His hands are already reaching for the cereal – hey he’s not just a junk-food eater, no matter what anyone says – when something stops him. Some strange noise. He turns, creeps back, though he’s fairly certain Rook’s ears will be able to pick up the soft squeak of his sneakers against the floor anyway, and braces himself against the door frame, peeking round to see his mom’s fingers wrapped round the sleeve of his boyfriend’s armour.

‘Rook,’ she’s saying, her eyes fixed on the floor. ‘A gentle word of motherly advice; don’t tell Max
about what you’re getting up to with my son.’

Rook stiffens, but that’s nothing compared to the way Ben feels iron clamp down on the shape of his spine. He can barely breathe, he’s all steel inside.

‘Mrs Tennyson—’

‘Sandra, please,’ she interrupts, her eyes flicking up to his in a surge of heated exasperation. ‘I’ve never felt more like a middle-aged woman than when someone calls me by my surname. And ‘Mrs,’...how horrifying to hear it and know that it refers to me. If you’re dating my son or having a friends-with-benefits kind of deal going on – I don’t need to hear it – ’ she says, holding up a hand to halt the way Rook’s mouth is falling open to stutter out a protest.

She stops and gathers herself.

‘It’s none of my business how my son chooses to experiment, or who he chooses to be in a relationship with. He’s more than capable of navigating his way through one without me butting in. But...if it’s serious, then at some point he’s going to want his Grandfather to know.’ She looks a little sad. ‘He’ll be more worried about how his father will react, but honestly Carl’s always been fairly accepting. Unlike some parents I could think of— and here her eyes drift over to a photo frame that includes Natalie and Frank Tennyson within its oval circumference—‘we’ve actually discussed what we would do if Ben ever turned out to be less straight than a ruler. Years ago, in fact. And the answer is: nothing. Carl was so angry at how distant Max was for a lot of his childhood, that he vowed never to push Ben away, to always be accepting and just, well there. And honestly, Carl’s always been a lot more accepting of the LGBTQ community than other members of the Tennyson family.’

Ben’s breath comes out low and rushed, in a hiss and he can feel more than see Rook’s eyes glance over to the doorway he hurriedly presses himself back behind.

‘Mrs -Sandra. I really think, given that Magister Tennyson has interacted with alien species of all genders and orientations for more than forty years, that—’

‘No,’ says Sandra firmly and Ben can just picture the mulish frown on her face as she does so. ‘It’s always different when it’s family, Rook. Max may be okay with a gay or bisexual alien or human, but when that person is his grandson, someone he’s pinned a lot of his hopes and aspirations on for the future, you might find his attitude...different. He’s always been a good father-in-law and a good grandfather. But he wasn’t always a good father and you might see more of that come to the surface if whatever you have with Ben comes to light. And he’s still...he’s still your boss, in a manner of speaking. Things at work shouldn’t be made uncomfortable for you because of it.’

Ben feels heat in his stomach. He doesn’t want to stay and listen to another word. But instead of rushing away, of bringing his watch up to his mouth to breathe out a word that will allow him to escape, he turns and stomps back over to his abandoned cereal box. And as he pours out the all those cluttered hoops of wheat, watching them spring out and bounce across the surface of a crisp white bowl he’s pulled out of the cupboard as loudly as he can, he can feel a lump spring in his throat.

What the hell is it with his Grandparents all of a sudden! He can maybe understand Verdona’s mess somewhat, even if he doesn’t forgive her; she’s not human and like he said before, doesn’t know him. But his Grandpa does. And it’s wrong to feel angry at her, his mom, for her warning, because it might be false, because maybe his Grandpa really will be okay with them. But sitting in her speech are other nuggets of truth, things Ben has never really thought about before, not in detail. Like the fact that his Grandpa hasn’t always made time for Frank and Carl the way he has
for Ben and Gwen. And the idea that his Grandpa expects things from him that he wouldn’t from a stranger or even another Plumber.

Ben slams the cereal bowl back onto the counter. The bowl is overflowing with crispy yellow hoops, they’re crashing over the side like mini waterfalls. But that doesn’t prevent him from pouring milk over them, watching it fall with a wet slap against the now sodden cereal. And then with a gentle clink, a spoon slides in against the ceramic curves, his mom’s hand leaving both the metal and his vision as quickly as it came.

‘I know you’re a growing boy, but I hope you’re still going to eat all that,’ she says, a little too brightly.

Ben recognises that tone of voice. He’s used it himself, countless times before.

‘I might be persuaded to take a bite or two.’

Rook’s voice and it presses itself over his head, as two arms steal their way around his waist. Or rather, two hands. They cross and clamp over his stomach, fingers knotting themselves firmly across the folds of his creased hoodie because it’s laughable really; Ben’s so thin in comparison that the length of Rook’s arms have nowhere to go, sticking out like sore thumbs. But then Rook sighs, his hands loosen, and he steps closer, his breaths drifting out miles away over Ben’s head. With a firm bend, his spine slides over Ben’s back, all of him huddled forward as those large elbows thrust away into the space of the kitchen.

‘Rakishar’d,’ Rook murmurs, then some other sentence crawls out of his mouth, one the Omnitrix refuses to translate for him.

Ben blinks. ‘Dude,’ he says. ‘My mom’s here.’ And he wiggles slightly, pushing back with his prosthetic hand.

‘Oh, don’t mind me,’ his mom says, eyeing them both from over the top of her mug of tea she’s somehow magicked into her hand near her position besides the fridge. ‘It’s important for young people to express themselves, free from judgement.’

‘That’s not really the issue, Mom,’ he groans, shoving a little harder against Rook, even though part of him wants to relax into the embrace. It’s a just a little weird that he’s being forced into the stereotypical role of girlfriend at the kitchen counter, what with the boyfriend creeping up from behind to hug her, or at least that’s kind of what feels like what’s going on here. ‘Seriously, Rook, you wouldn’t be like this if your Dad was here. Or your Mom.’

‘But they are not,’ Rook says smugly. ‘And your mother is a lot more tolerant. I do not have to worry that she will chase me away with a stick for instance.’

Ben blinks at that mental image before his mind abruptly runs to into a halt as Rook continues to speak.

‘And no more calling me Blonko? I must confess, you using my actual name last night was rather endearing.’

His mom snorts into her tea and Ben flushes.

‘Stop it!’ he hisses, deliberately waking backwards so that Rook is forced to move with him or else risk his feet being trodden on. He reaches out and seizes the cereal bowl, causing a few more soggy hoops to scatter, his mom’s voice instead of her footsteps thankfully being the only thing to follow them as she calls out to him. ‘Benjamin! I am not cleaning that up! And don’t go spilling any milk.
on my cushions!’

‘I won’t! And I’ll do it later!’ he calls back, less walking and now merely letting himself being
towed after Rook. He regrets doing so when seconds later, the guy almost sweeps him off his feet
and spins him round into his room with a smooth heave of his arms that is almost, but not quite a
carry. Ben narrows his eyes, feels the carpet press more firmly beneath his feet and chomps down
angrily into his cereal. He’s amazed said carpet isn’t currently decorated by a set of wheat hoops;
Rook’s seriously that good. It kinda pisses him off.

‘What?’ Rook then proceeds to ask him, correctly reading the expression on his face. ‘You are
very light. It was no trouble.’ But he looks a little too innocent and there’s none of that ‘humans-
are-so-strange-especially-YOU-Ben’ playing out over his face.

Ben grumbles and eats more cereal. ‘I need a shower,’ he decides, abruptly poking the spoon into
Rook’s mouth when the guy opens his mouth to say something. ‘And you are staying here. Not
watching.’

Rook swallows a few hoops and a drop of milk. ‘I would not dream of it,’ he answers smoothly. ‘It
is far better when someone takes off their clothes for you voluntarily, I find.’

Ben tries very hard not to think about the image that conjures up.

‘I was merely going to say that I think perhaps you should wait. I have a few ideas for a sparring
session. It is clear that your aliens cannot and do not function as they once did and I merely wished
to test out a few theories this morning. There is no need for any bathing until after what is sure to
be a very thorough work-out.’

Oh God. Ben knows what Rook thinks of as ‘thorough.’ He’ll be black and blue if he’s not careful.
But...he remembers how unbalanced he felt as Jetray briefly. And how weird it felt to learn he
could never phase through walls again. He taps his spoon against the base of his bowl.

‘Alright,’ he says thoughtfully, trying not to notice how much like a kid at Christmas Rook
resembles as the guy brightens with a grin. ‘I guess I could stand to learn a few new tricks. But,’ he
adds firmly, on seeing Rook’s grin stretch to truly dangerous proportions, ‘not today.’ Rook’s
expression freezes, then instantly cracks and breaks into a small, downtrodden grimace as Ben
continues talking. ‘We just pulled an all-nighter, man. If it was a mission or an emergency, then
sure, I’d be up for it. But it’s training. At least let me rest and get some shut-eye before you
attempt to torture me.’

And maybe if Rook’s really lucky, he’ll consider calling him Blonko again.

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Ben’s request for some ‘shut-eye’ ends up translating into a few days. Not intentionally. He’s just
so eager to get out there and do stuff, normal stuff, that the idea of doing any sort of training for it
seems dull and lacklustre and, he thinks, let’s face it: a huge waste of time. But Rook keeps giving
him the side-eye in the truck, keeps crossing his arms and looming over him whenever something
new and exciting catches his eye.

‘You sure this isn’t some sort of games console?’ Ben finds himself asking Baz-El in Undertown,
not three days after waving bye-bye to Charmcaster. ‘Because it sure looks like one.’
He taps the screen of the little brown do-hickey in his hands pointedly with his metallic fingers – he’s been jabbed one-two-many-a-time with an electrical surge from some alien knock-off gadget, to actually risk using his flesh and blood hand. It’ll still hurt if it races up his left arm; but at least he won’t smell like a barbeque.

He then gives Baz-El his best grin as a series of pink lines jump up from the LCD into the air, whizzing out into a series of cross-hatched lines as though plotting out a 3-D graph. A very distinct green spaceship appears next to some purplish asteroids. ‘Yeah,’ he says smugly, ‘totally not a game.’

The Galvanic Mechamorph sighs. ‘Dear me. Do I look like I aim to sell off harmless little trinkets that even a child could pick up and play with? You have no idea what I went through in order to get…’ he trails off under Rook’s glowering eye, the green ring spread across his own head suddenly enlarging than drawing in on itself tightly like a telescope that needs to refocus.

Rook opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, most notably a sentence containing the word ‘illegal’ Ben shoves himself halfway across the counter, the black and green boards creaking under his weight. ‘Yeah, yeah, once a weasel, always a weasel. I don’t expect you to change, Baz-El. As long as you’re not here to kidnap Ship from Julie, we don’t care.’

Rook crosses his arms and shoots him a look. ‘We don’t?’

‘Well,’ Ben amends coyly, ’I don’t. And since I’m the prospective customer, Baz-El here should be worrying more about what I think. You obviously don’t want anything from here.’ He leans further across the counter, practically draping himself over the boards which let out a deeper unwelcome creak. ‘Though wow, couldn’t you have found anything better to upgrade than a few wooden boards and some rusty nails down here?’

‘I’m running a little short on currency at the moment,’ Baz-El mutters peevishly. ’Not that I expect you to understand my plight. What do you know of a job that doesn’t pay well? Besides, you’ve been a Galvanic Mechamorph before, haven’t you? What I create is only as good as the materials I have to work with. In this case, sub-par ones.’

‘That,’ says Rook, voice dripping with disdain, ‘is obvious.’ He shoots a disgusted look at the black and green stall currently buckling under Ben’s weight.

Ben rolls his eyes. ’C’mon, show me how the leveling-up system works!’ he exclaims eagerly, pretending not to notice how Rook’s annoyed gaze has switched back to him. ‘I’ve got the money; I’m good for it.’

The Galvanic Mechamorph sighs. ‘Far be it from me to disbelieve the great Ben Tennyson has the legal tender to purchase such a device, but the point remains that this is actually a long-range controller for the vehicle of your choosing. I synchronised it with a space-ship I left near the asteroid belt between Jupiter and Mars as a demo for any prospective clients. But it’s more than that; this camera contains a smart computer that puts the ship on autopilot the moment it comes near any dangerous objects. And if you like, you can manually direct the vehicle wherever you like by selecting an area on the grid.’

‘But only within a very small area range,’ Rook mutters, the fingers of one hand within his crossed arm stance leaking out over thecrease of his elbow and tapping against the armour they finds there in annoyance. ‘The area the grid covers is a very localised one. Scarcely more than thirty meters in either direction by my estimate.’

Ben frowns down the thing in his hands, ignoring the way the top of the circle on the Baz-El’s
head dips and folds, breaking the perfect roundness, almost as though in parody of a scowl.

‘Oh man. Sumo Slammers, Gale Tornado VI: The Dark Spawn Emerges isn’t due out yet for another few weeks! I was hoping this thing might tide me over until then...’

‘Gale Tornado?’ queries the Galvanic Mechamorph. ‘Surely that is some sort of oxymoron?’

‘No,’ Rook breaks in decisively. ‘It is not, unfortunately. I find it better not to think of the naming sense of this planet, sometimes.’

Ben scoffs. ‘Just because you come from a species where you get to name yourselves when you’d old enough to-HEY!’

In the distance, a claw attached to a brown-furred arm reaches out, artfully catching onto a candied apple from another stall. Or rather, it isn’t so much an apple as it is a fruit that’s just as round and bumpy and easily bruised, gleaming a slight green hue as the jelly resin drips off it’s surface and into the cat-like snout of a boy covered with clumps of fur. The rest of him is bundled inside an over-sized jumper and fraying cargo trousers, ones which slip over the ends of his paws and almost cause him to fall at Ben’s shout. He recovers quickly, wasting no time in charging through an orange and white striped canvas that hangs from the side of what looks to be a butcher’s stall.

‘XLR8!’ Ben shouts, barely bringing up the watch to brush against his mouth before he streaks out of the green light, wheels spinning as he bypasses the next six stalls in rapid succession and hooks his arm into the back of the fleeing kid’s jumper. The kid turns and tries to sink his teeth into the arm holding him but electricity surges through Ben’s body, neurons jumping from synapse to synapse at a speed far exceeding the one that leaps out under the cover of his human skull, and Ben’s left arm, gleaming and leaving a streak of silver in the wake of its afterimage, immediately jams itself between all those teeth. They’re smaller, blunter that those he usually has to contend with, but he’s relieved all the same as the kid chokes off a few chips of enamel and lets his mouth slide off, leaving saliva rather than tooth-marks behind.

‘Don’t you have an allowance?’ Ben asks. ‘Couldn’t you save up for something like that rather than, I dunno, stealing it?’

The kid shoots him a look of pure murder, then kicks his leg out, right into Ben’s visor-less face; and the limb is strong, stronger than it looks, kangaroo-strong, so Ben gasps, letting go just long enough for the kid to bounce off his face and onto the awning of another stall nearby. Rook’s not far behind though, leaping up easily after the kid, who gives him a scornful look, then rolls off into a small hut built out of what looks to be cardboard.

The next ten seconds are filled with a kid who can’t quite leap as far as Rook can, blundering from wall to wall, house to hovel, in a series of messy jumps and rolls, while Rook chooses to race over the roofs of said buildings in an effort to cut the kid off at the end of the alleyway. Ben snorts and streaks after them, the concrete floor firmly beneath his wheels. The kid spins, his snout unfurling like a flower, and like Blitzwolfer’s, it opens to let loose a jagged howl, one that picks up broken bottles and rusted cans and thrusts them out into a tunnel of makeshift percussion instruments, and cracking glass. The small tornado of litter streams down the small alleyway and Ben skidders, fast enough to dodge some of the items thrown his way, but not agile enough to avoid what feels like a whole aisle of cereal boxes being chucked at him, their torn and flapping sides branching out to fill his way.

Rook has the advantage in that most of this strange new storm is being directed to block Ben’s path. He only has the outskirts of this stream of garbage to jump over before he attempts to lock his arms round the jaws of the kid from behind his back. And while the kid’s legs are strong, as long
as Rook remains hunched over him, his chest bearing down, the kid can’t get enough leverage to kick out.

Ben coughs out a banana skin – at least he hopes it’s a banana skin, it’s a little too brown and rotten to be sure – and races down in front of the kid. Only to stop, halted in his tracks as a long line of purple snaps out and coils round the kid’s stomach. The kid instantly falls limp at it’s touch, dog-like ears flattening in abject terror as a familiar voice raps out, ‘that’s enough, Caleb!’

Ben blinks, as Ester casually stalks down the alleyway after them, her eyes thin slits as the arm strung out between her and Caleb acts like a fishing line, shortening with each step she takes.

But Rook fails to look pacified in the slightest. ‘This child was under your supervision?’ he asks, grimacing as said ‘child’ flares to life beneath him and struggles weakly in his hold. ‘Are you aware that he appears to be a pickpocket?’

‘It’s a bad habit of a lot of the poorer kids down here,’ Ester says breezily. ‘And one I’m trying to break them of. But unless you’re telling me he took something like say, a Nuclear Fusion Device, you’re going to have to back off a little.’

She’s now close enough to stare Rook directly in the eye, craning her head a little in order to keep her gaze locked with his. What’s more impressive is that she doesn’t feel the need to use her stretching abilities to level the playing field, the way Ben would if he was her.

Rook relents and drops the kid with a sigh. The kid yelps, attempts to make a dash for it, and is stopped as Ester’s other hand shoots out to wind its way round his knees.

‘I don’t think so,’ she tells him firmly. She tilts her head to give Ben a coy look over her shoulder. ‘Looking good, Ben. I like the new arm. Very Full-Metal Alchemist of you.’

She laughs as Ben jumps a little and fiddles with himself, rubbing his right arms along the sleek, polished lines of his other.

‘I didn’t know you watched anime,’ he settles on, unsure of how to take her compliment.

She smiles wistfully. ‘I was always paying a little too much attention to what you liked than to talk too much about what I liked. I’m...trying to train myself out of that mindset in my new relationship.’ Her look turns a little pensive and sad. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t visit you at the hospital. I tried calling but you wouldn’t pick up. And it felt rude to just barge in there. I know we parted on good terms but even now, I’m not entirely sure where I stand in your life.’

Ben feels a hint of guilt at that.

‘You’re a friend,’ he replies firmly. ‘Always.’

She rewards him with a heart-felt smile and then tugs at Caleb. ‘Come on, you little scamp.’

He growls and refuses to say a word as he stomps off after her.

‘Huh,’ Ben remarks, as soon as he’s reasonably sure the kid is out of earshot. ‘You know, I’ve never seen a Lobian with such a short muzzel before.’

‘And without a tail, either,’ Rook adds, stepping up to his side. The Omnitrix times out and Ben finds himself blinking after Ester with his human eyes. ‘Well, I guess she must be over me if she didn’t make an effort to wait for my ‘cutest form’ to appear,’ he says, nudging Rook in the side and trying to make a joke out of it.
Rook doesn’t laugh. ‘Quite,’ he says, rather distantly, as though not fully processing the words. ‘It seems she is more dedicated to helping those like her. Most eager in fact, to put the actual effort in.’

Ben raises an eyebrow. Okay, he can take a hint. ‘Is that a compliment or a back-handed insult to Ester?’ he asks pointedly, ignoring Rook’s snooty tone.

‘No, no,’ Rook hastens to reply, waving a hand as though to dispel Ben’s suspicions. ‘I merely meant she is helping children caught between two worlds; Earth and the mixed alien community Undertown fosters below the surface. I imagine it must be especially overwhelming for hybrids, who do not belong to a single lone culture in the first place.’

Eyes widening, Ben shoots a second glance at the kid and yep, Rook’s right, there’s no ripped seam in his trousers for a wolf tail to spill through. And that muzzle is short, curved more like a cat’s than the long lean line of a wolf’s.

‘Oh,’ he says quietly. For a moment he reflects that in all her time with him, Ester never really brought up her childhood, rarely mentioned her father, and even less so her human mother. And he wonders, for the first time, what really happened to her family and just how much of her life was spent torn between the Kraaho and her human roots. Perhaps he’ll ask her sometime.

But not today. He hooks his arm through Rook’s and takes a second to lean his head on the taunt line that stretches up to the guy’s shoulder. He feels more than hears Rook breathe, the muscle beneath the armour giving way slightly beneath the brushed-over spill of Ben’s hair.

‘C’mon,’ he says, ‘browse with me a little longer? I know you find some of the stuff down here interesting too. Maybe not always the same stuff I do but...’

‘I do not mind,’ Rook says, ‘but Ben, I-’

Ben cuts him off with a harsh sigh, taking his head away entirely to stare up at Rook. ‘This is about the training thing, isn’t it?’ he demands. ‘You’ve been sulky and stand-offish this whole time, because of it! With Baz-El, even if he kind of deserves it, with the kid, even with Ester for a moment!’

Rook has the grace to look away, awkwardly ashamed. Ben heaves out a huff.

‘Fine, fine, if it’ll stop you being so moody, I’ll do your stupid training thing.’

He falls into step with Rook, shaking his head as Rook gives him a tight embarrassed smile. Which quickly evolves into a tiredly amused one as he hears Baz-El call out after them: 'Sooooo, I take it you're not a prospective client anymore?'

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The training room looms over them both hours later, the sharp grey contours of pillars and the hue of green lighting overhead managing to slam Ben into full wakefulness. Even if the design aesthetic does scream ‘subterranean jungle’ at him.

And it’s weird; he and Rook come here a lot, mostly at Rook’s insistence, but he never, throughout their time together, ends up adjusted to this place and it’s atmosphere the way his partner does.
Despite it’s familiarity, some part of him is put off just by the fact that he’s usually expected to work here, and with none of that emotional payoff at the end, the way that doing a few hours of genuine ‘hero-time’ always provides. Well, usually.

Rook of course, is looking eager, expectant even, Proto-Tool fixed into the easy coil of his hand, instead of climbing out over the steady rise of his shoulder. He’s wearing that grin, the sharp, you-can-see-all-my-teeth one that usually makes Ben raise an eyebrow, because it always acts as the prelude to some fancy ninja spins or other weird athletic stuff that he simply can’t imitate. But then he’s got the Omnitrix. He never needs to.

‘Ready?’ he asks, feeling his usual cocky smile slide into place.

And Rook grins back, the crescent slice of his teeth winking across the small distance between them.

‘I have been ready since the moment I stepped into this room,’ he informs Ben smoothly.

‘Confident, huh?’ Ben offers, more of an observation than a real question and then with a quickness born from years of being caught between the ‘fight or flight’ response, he whisks his wrist up to his mouth and confidently breathes out ‘Wildmutt.’ He has enough time to relish the annoyance crossing over Rook’s face, before the green light overtakes him and his body twists, arms extending and becoming outlined in orange fur, the bones inside breaking and reforming, while the new muscle ligaments coil round them until they’re not really arms any more. And he reaches out through the light with these new arms, no, forelimbs and Rook dances away, all with a cross, ‘you did not even say ‘go’ or use a countdown! You are cheating, Ben!’

Typical Rook. Chasing away the distance between them with a reprimand. The sound of it delights Ben; and then the real chase is on. His paws thud down where moments before the blinding heat trails of Rook’s legs have been, lifted up to his senses in lines of yellow with a smudge of red inside. But then they vanish, the space of the cold blue ‘everything-else’ rushing in to take away their colour; and then, before Ben’s gills can ripple, to re-find Rook, a blazing trail of lava glides up to his face in a swift score of yellow-red, all as Rook kicks out at him. Ben barely dodges, fumbling back as Rook’s foot finds the floor instead of his fur, and before he can adjust himself, the bright red-yellow-orange of his boyfriend lifts up through the air again, spinning mid-jump as the other leg sweeps round with a sly swiftness. Ben barely had time to react as the darker glide of Rook’s hip swivels, suddenly opening out into a bright yellow length that stings as it makes contact with Ben’s jaw.

Ben lets out a yip and then Rook is rolling over his back, one hand fastening into the fur as the other props the nozzle of the Proto-Tool against the rippling gills on Ben’s neck. If Ben still had eyes, he would roll them; as it is, he simply lets out a snort as Rook starts to form the beginning of his usual ‘do you give up?’ speech and then, laughing manically inside his mind, Ben abruptly relaxes all the muscles in his legs, flopping over onto his side with all the playfulness of a large dog.

The transition is quick and clean and Rook’s Proto-Tool is forced away from his grip at the motion, the Revonnahgander letting out a slight ‘omph’ as Ben forcefully rolls himself onto his back to trap Rook beneath the weight of his body. Rook sputters, caught out by a wad of orange hair and then very firmly, yanks himself out from beneath Ben’s body, with nothing more that the determined thrust of his two arms. Each curl of his fingers hooks into the faint lines that plays out between the tiles and Ben snorts again, the cooler stubs of green he sees playing along the ends of Rook’s fingers helping to key him into the fact that Rook is using a quirk of his alien biology, in this case the small nail-like claws that he usually keeps hidden away out of politeness, to even the
odds. So Ben, being the hero that he is, promptly rolls back over onto his front and undoes all Rook’s hard work in an instant, this time managing to rearrange himself into a better position to pin Rook beneath both his paws and his drooling mouth.

Ben can feel Rook give him an even stare, can picture the way his mouth and eyes refuse to give anything away with their customary Revonnahgander blankness, except perhaps the mild sort of annoyance that Ben’s memory is so good at conjuring up from personal experience. But then that’s suddenly broken by a slight ‘phish’ of noise. A whirl of blue erupts from the corner of Ben’s scent-vision. And though he can’t see it, he can sense it, the moment Rook’s mouth curls into that strong smirk that Ben always despises whenever he’s on the receiving end of it.

He doesn’t have time to feel too annoyed though; the wet slap of drenched fur against his belly alerts him to what feels to be whipped cream down there. And it continues to spurt, to stain his neck and legs and whatever else it can manage to touch. Rook, being the top Plumber that he is and never one to let an opportunity die, quickly head-butts Ben’s jaw, hard enough to make them both wince – but it does the trick, is just enough, combined with the distracting coldness now smudging Ben’s fur, for the orange grip of his paws on Rook to loosen.

The Revonnahgander quickly pulls his body from the bubble-bath that is now in danger of drowning both of them, only for his hand to dive back in, to the side, before it triumphantly fishes out the Proto-Tool, all of it now covered in the cool blue foam that continues to puff out of its end as though more smoke than liquid.

‘A fire extinguisher,’ Rook says slowly, the smile now very much present in his voice. ‘You gave the suggestion once, soon after we first met. It was a pain to adapt alongside the main features; I could not use water-‘ he breaks off as Ben takes a half-hearted swipe at him, the sound of Rook’s voice now being the only guide to his target. Whatever Rook’s using as a substitute for water has now clouded the air around his gills so that only shades of grey and green bleed through to his scent-vision – none of it bright enough to outline the form of an annoying know-it-all boyfriend. Who quickly goes silent as he realises just how handicapped Ben is. Ben wants to bellow. Wants to speak. Say a lot of things like, ‘when did you install a ‘timer’ in there because I know, I’ve seen that it didn’t have one before, and I remember that thing being at least a meter away from your hand before it went off, what’s next, a bomb?’ But instead he coughs on something that is decidedly not whipped cream.

Something firmly thuds against the Omnitrix symbol below his throat, the press of Rook’s steady fingers or the butt of his Proto-Tool, it’s too quick to tell, and then Ben’s coughs and sputters fall back into the timbre of his human voice. Rook’s hand drifts into his vision and Ben firmly grabs it, letting it pull him to his feet and back into a world of colour, before he brushes the bubbles from his face.

‘Okay, so you may have won that round, but you won’t be so lucky next time!’

Rook is busy giving him that indulgent, ‘whatever-humours-you’ smile so Ben frowns and spits out exactly what he’s been thinking seconds before. ‘Also, what gives? Are you trying to turn the Proto-Tool into a bomb or something? Since when could it explode out toxic fumes or the ice-cream of death?’

Rook raises a brow. ‘It was neither a dessert or a toxin that afflicted you. Not to worry; it is a combination of—’

‘Urgh! I don’t care!’ stresses Ben, waving a hand in a dismissive gesture. ‘I just want to know if you’ve spent more hours than usual squirreled away in your room being more of a nerd than
Ben stares at him. ‘Because if this feature was so easy to install you would have done it months ago. But you’ve done it now, suddenly, after I lost my arm–’ and it’s both terrible and freeing to see Rook flinch at how easily those words come out now – ‘and I get the sense that as well adjusted as you seem about everything, you’re going to try and suddenly overcompensate.’

Rook’s gaze finds the ground for a moment before it once again travels up to rest on Ben’s face. ‘I simply saw room for improvement.’

Ben reaches up with his prosthetic hand to flick Rook on the nose – it’s a near miss. Even on his toes, he can barely strike the line of Rook’s mouth.

‘We’re never talked about it properly, have we?’ he murmurs. ‘What happened that day. It was nobody’s fault, dude.’

Rook gives out a dark laugh at that. It’s so sudden and bitter than it chases away Ben’s hand from his face, makes him curl those metallic fingers into a fist as they quickly retreat back down against his side.

‘You acted as though it was your fault,’ the Revonnahgander says brutally. ‘Running away, shutting me and everyone else around you out – and all that time I had doubts, was chased by the thought that maybe if the Proto-Tool wasn’t so reliant on my grip, on my fingers, I could have set it up to-

‘-do nothing,’ Ben breaks in firmly. ‘Dude, it was a rock. And if it could crush my arm, I’m fairly certain it could have crushed your Proto-Tool. Or you. No gas or whipped cream spouting out of its end would have changed that.’

Rook stares down at Ben’s arm, at the sleek grey shine of it. ‘I held my Proto-Tool,’ he says softly, ‘this advanced piece of tech that I have laboured over for countless hours. And I used it to cut off your arm.’

It strikes Ben then that Gwen would be perfect for a situation for this. She could psychoanalyse this bullshit uncertainty that makes Rook want to divorce himself from his Proto-Tool for a few seconds and turn it into a smoke-bomb instead of a gun-slash-sword.

‘I would have died if you hadn’t,’ he says instead. ‘Besides it’s not like you hate the Proto-Tool now, is it? I’ve seen you use without issue since.’

Rook shakes his head. ‘No,’ he says firmly. ‘I just want it to be better. To do better. So that I never have to watch you lose another part of yourself again.’

Ben sighs and looks away briefly. He’s pretty sure Rook’s eyes have become glued to his face again, as per usual. ‘Any more tricks you want to show me?’ he asks finally turning back.

Rook hesitates.

‘Maybe one,’ he says slowly. ‘But only if you are willing.’

Ben stares at him for a second, before thumping a friendly fist into his side.

‘Dude! When have I ever not been up for some sort of crazy risk?’
Rook straightens. ‘It is not ‘crazy,’’ he says, actually sounding affronted. ‘It is the product of severe research that I have devoted myself to during my free hours and—’

Ben grins, gives a small leap and settles his arms round Rook’s neck in a brief loop, just long enough to help yank him up and give Rook a quick, punishing kiss. Rook’s eyes go wide, his words lost beneath the sudden press of Ben’s mouth and he freezes, his hands stuck hovering in mid-air. It’s a pretty nice ego-boost, and Ben lets out a breathless laugh as he rips his eyes away from the glazed golden gaze hooked on his own, his hands loosening before he drops back down to the ground with a small clatter of noise. He half-turns and offers Rook a friendly wink as he gathers his water-bottle from the bench nearby – it’s more a cement-like ledge than an actual gym bench, but hey, that’s the Plumbers’ aesthetic for you.

‘Whatever,’ he says, laughter firmly lodged within his tone. ‘Just show me.’

Rook’s eyes lose their widened shape, before a slightly dreamy quality enters them. ‘Entering a relationship with you may have been a mistake I fear,’ he says, a soft tease running beneath what should be a harsh statement. ‘You clearly intend to take every advantage you can get out of it; especially when you wish to divert my attention from educating you.’

Ben grins and chugs down what feels to be half a liter of water. ‘Nope!’ he says cheerfully, once he’s successfully come up for air. ‘Just when you’re being too much of a nerd for your own good. I’m not the only one who has to brace themselves for your endless lectures.’

Rook doesn’t look convinced. But he also doesn’t press the point, choosing to move round Ben and walk up to one of the cylinder towers, still jutting out from the ground. He pushes his thumbs into a small dint of grey, Ben has confused with a small shadow or weird, artistic quirk; though really he should know better, when has he ever seen a Galvan interested in art – and a small panel suddenly juts out into the air with all the harshness of an opened sock-drawer. Rook reaches into the small slot of darkness and pulls out a small blue cube.

‘Give me your arm,’ he tells Ben, his tone brokering no nonsense, and, only slightly daunted by said tone, Ben obeys with an easy shrug. He lets the water bottle slide from his grasp as Rook turns and takes hold of his outstretched palm, his partner’s face wearing his usual frown of concentration. Then, abruptly, Rook brings up his other hand and twists the cube into Ben’s palm. There’s simply no other word for it. He twists the cube against the metal as though it were a squishy bottle or soft toy and the cube breaks apart instantly, the fragments appearing deceptively sharp to Ben’s vision for a single second, before they melt away into his hand and vanish. Ben jerks back reflexively, but Rook’s grip on his palm holds steady.

‘Wha—’ he gasps out. But there’s no weird sensation currently coursing through the artificial nerves, no sudden heat or thrashing coldness, nothing to drive his brain into sheer survival mode. He glares at Rook anyway. ‘What the heck was that?’ he demands.

‘A solution, I hope,’ Rook murmurs, his gaze still fixed on Ben’s palm with a frown, before it lifts and he glances up to risk sending a small smile Ben’s way. But Ben is immovable.

‘That’s not an answer, Rook.’

Rook sighs. ‘I suppose not. Transform, if you will, into Big Chill.’

Ben shoots him a doubtful look, but finds himself raising his watch to his mouth anyway; the idea of Rook doing something like this to hurt him is laughable at any rate. ‘Big Chill,’ he says, making sure to grit out as much suspicion as he can into his tone before the transformation has time to rob
him of it. And then he’s suddenly hulking over Rook’s form, wings folded firmly over his body like a barrier in place of a set of crossed arms. ‘Well?’ he demands.

Rook steps back, suddenly all authoritative again. ‘Try to phrase through something; that pillar for instance.’ He indicates the pillar he’s just yanked the cube out of with a lone point of his finger.

Ben stares at him, incredulously, even though he’s sure the effect is lost on Rook, what with the way his Necrofriggian eyes lack pupils and display the wide, bug-like slant of something that rarely, if ever communicates it’s emotions through facial expressions.

‘Are you crazy?’ he demands. ‘Do you actually want me to end up screaming on the floor again?’

Rook tilts his head to the side, the angle making his smile slope into something deep and gracious. ‘Will you not trust me?’

Well there’s a sucker’s bet. Because Ben does. He really, truly does.

He lets out a deep sigh. And then zooms forward. He can’t quite help the reflexive curl that takes hold of his stomach, that makes the muscles in his chest bunch up and brace for the inevitable pain – he of all people, knows how much sway a memory holds. But still he forces the molecules holding his shape together to loosen, he relaxes and lets the pillar glide through him – wait, what?

It takes all his mental will not to sudden re-solidify in surprise, but no, Ben glances to his side and sees the faint imprint of his prosthetic limb still attached to the dulled-down colour of his natural, if intangible form. Only the faintest blue shimmer running through and over its form indicates that something unusual is afoot. Almost rapturous, Ben finishes diving through the pillar before turning round with a swirl of his wings in a sudden spurt of motion and taking a swipe with his intangible metal claws. They rake their way through the curved surface in front of him, leaving a tiny blue glimmer of light to trail beneath his eyes as the pillar remains untouched by what should be the harsh scrape of claw-marks.

Ben laughs; he whoops. Then falls back, tumbling headfirst through the floor. He rises up again seconds later, embarking in a frenzy of somersaults and sweeping dives that take him through and around the room, surfacing briefly through the ceiling to offer a passing Plumber a thumbs-up. He ignores their startled look and dives back down to circle the room again, a bright laugh booming out to fill the room with sound. It would be brighter, hold more life if it was with his human voice maybe; but locked within the sly cool vocal cords of Big-Chill it merely sounds creepy instead, the tense resonance making it boom out like something from a villain’s voice.

Ben wheels round, hears the beeping of the usual time-out that always sends him spinning out into gravity’s hold and while it doesn’t quite knock the joy out of him, it soberes him up enough to remind him to actually try to land on the ground. He doesn’t quite manage it, but that’s okay; he’s navigated it well enough so that he ends up crashing into Rook’s instead of the floor.

Rook must have been expecting him to pull a stunt like this, because he hears the put-upon sigh, even under the peals of his now-human laughter that he can’t quite stifle, and he feels those familiar hands coming up to rest on his waistline, even as they both end tumbling back onto the floor. Ben makes an effort, forcing his laughter into a giggle as he pushes his face against the feel of Rook’s chest, successfully smashing them into stifled jumps of sound against the panes of armour he finds there. It could be a lot more comfortable if, for instance, they weren’t there or Rook for once, decided to wear a t-shirt or something – but unfortunately his boyfriend seems allergic to the idea of wearing casual clothing.

Ben raises himself onto his arms, spreading his legs so that he’s now straddling Rook’s waist. The
suggestiveness of this position isn’t lost on him, but Rook seems blithely unaware, choosing to
beam up at him and reach up with a single hand to card a few fingers through his hair.

‘It seems it was a success,’ he says, looking very proud of himself. His voice becomes a little
smugger as he continues to talk, but Ben allows it – as far he’s concerned, the guy’s more than
earned it. ‘All machinery is subject to programming in the same way that biological cells are
subject to the properties surrounding them – I simply had to find a way to make the cells in your
prosthetic limb believe that they were subject to the same effect your biological ones were
whenever you became intangible. I wrote a code imitating the same frissons of electricity and
synaptic energy that took place whenever a Necrofriggian phased through solid matter – kindly lent
to me by various reports on the phenomena by a doctor my sister is acquainted with – and because
I could not directly interfere with the working of your arm, I sought Driba and Blukic’s assistance
with re-writing the code into microscopic robots who could meld with your arm and pass the code
into your arm without causing any breakdown to the complicated synaptic system already in place.’

Ben lets him rattle on and on, smiling down at him fondly as Rook’s eyes light up with a fevered
spark and his hand leaves Ben’s hair to join his other one in making a series of wide expressive
movements, as though to help give credence to his story by pointing at the air or miming the way
his actions required precision; all it does is make him look as though he’s attempting to thread an
invisible thread through an equally invisible needle and Ben pushes his hand against his mouth to
stifle the mirth he finds there, forcing his lips to twitch.

Rook hesitates, cut off by a sudden thought. ‘However,’ he says slowly. ‘I am unsure if the effect
will last with Ghostfreak. He – you – do not possess any physical sort of nervous system in that
form, at least not one that responds to electricity or anything else in the same way that the nervous
system of a living creature would.’

Ben smiles, cups his hands around that large jaw and nestles his fingers firmly into the black lines
decorating Rook’s face. ‘I love you,’ he says firmly, feeling the truth of it weigh firmly upon him
in that moment and how strange, that it’s taken this, this small act of kindness from Rook to make
his heart lift up and beat, to make his nerves sing and then suddenly became unhesitatingly calm
and sure. How weird to have the realisation slam down into him with a certainty that feels just as
inevitable as that moment less than two years ago when he let the weight of the Omnitrix fall upon
his wrist again, after three years of growing without it. A wrist that is long gone now, of course,
but he still remembers the majesty of that moment, how it has never left him, found an imprint
against his heart that he thinks will never leave.

He wants to pause, to watch his words sink in, to see Rook’s face slacken and change. Or perhaps
he will feel it tighten against his fingers, the muscles bunching up to rearrange themselves into a
huge smile. But instead, his heart suddenly pounding, urging him on, he dives down and presses
his lips firmly into Rook’s. And then Rook is surging up, one hand lifting to stroke the side of
Ben’s face in imitation to the two still pressed against his own, and Ben wryly thinks that perhaps
this isn’t such a surprise to Rook after all. The guy’s other hand has trailed up from his waist to rest
against his ribs and Ben feels the moment latch onto his memory with a thud – because here’s
another imprint that he will never forget.

Rook’s tongue pushes against his own, then pulls away in a quick exchange of heat, the guy’s
mouth breaking away from his own in quick bursts of air to shove out taunt words like ‘finally,’
and ‘thank you,’ before it returns back into the wet squelch of a second kiss. Only to yank back
mere moments later to shove out a breathless ‘you honour me,’ and then, with a quick, close mouth
press of lips, it pushes out a much less breathless and more tense, ‘please, no more hiding from me,
Ben.’
Who’s hiding? Ben thinks. I’ve got you right where I want you. He opens his mouth, whisks his touch against the lower line of teeth decorating Rook’s lower jaw, just enough to get Rook to let out a pleased growl – firmly sailing away from any canines as he does so – when the door to the training room swishes open. And his Grandpa walks in.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we all knew that was coming, didn't we?

Oh, don't worry. I'm sure Sandra was all worried for nothing.
‘Grandpa! This isn’t—’ Ben hesitates, because yes, this is exactly what it looks like. He’s also aware of Rook suddenly going very still beneath him.

‘I believe the saying is: ‘this is not what it looks like,’’ the Revonnahgander says, a trace of his old I’m-so-eager-to-fit-in-with-your-strange-culture slipping into his tone. Honestly, Ben’s not sure why Rook feels he has to try so hard all the time. It’s not like Ben’s gonna want to stop hanging out with him because he doesn’t get everything.

Either way, Rook’s hands drop away from at lightening fast speed, choosing to splay themselves out over the tilted floor, as an unsure and rather embarrassed look comes up to perch on his face.

Huh, thinks Ben ruefully. It would be nice if he showed a little more of that attitude around me sometimes.

But he feels his fingers slide away from Rook’s fur all the same and he pushes himself up off Rook, watching with a certain sense of sly detachment as Rook’s eyes widen in sudden realisation at just how compromising their position must appear to Max.

Max however, hasn’t said a word. He’s simply staring at Ben. Not with horror or outrage or anything resembling anger. Just with something that outweighs surprise. Like his brain can’t come up with the words for the sight he’s seeing.

Ben tries for a smile, but is sure it comes out weak, especially just by hearing the trembling quality to his voice as it pours out of his mouth seconds later. ‘C’mon Grandpa, you are way too tough to have a stroke, I’m sure you’ve seen way worse, especially if Patelliday’s stories are anything to go by—’

His Grandpa raises a hand. And just like that Ben finds himself choking to a stop.

‘Magister Rook Blonko,’’ says Max and his voice is firm, all steel, like a commanding officer’s. Which he is, Ben realises with a sudden surge of panic. He’s Rook’s. ‘Will you come with me a minute, son?’

Rook swallows. And if he were human, Ben is sure he’d be turning pale. ‘Of course, Magister Tennyson.’

‘What?’ Ben jumps up, races between the two of them, even as Rook starts striding over to his Grandfather. ‘No, no, no! This shouldn’t be some disciplinary hearing! This is...’

He swallows and realises that his Grandfather’s eyes are determinedly staring above him, straight into Rook’s gaze, glaring up at this alien as though he could will him out of existence. And it’s so strange and wrong; he’s always been so proud and friendly to Rook, called him ‘one of his best Plumbers’ and more than that, he’s never brushed Ben aside, ignored him like this-
‘I kissed Rook!’ Ben bursts out with. ‘If there’s anyone you should be mad at, it’s me!’

His Grandfather looks at him with such calmness, that it makes Ben feel sick.

‘Ben, you’ve been through the wringer lately, and are still figuring things out. You’re just trying to re-centre yourself. But,’ he says, his head whipping back to Rook, ‘I expected your partner to exhibit better judgement. Especially when your head’s not back in the game yet.’

Ben’s stomach drops away. ‘Grandpa,’ he says carefully. ‘Rook and I are dating. I know it’s a little weird, probably even mega-weird for you, but he’s not been assaulting me.’

And something in his words seems to make Rook’s shoulders lift, his back straighten; but even so, considering how Rook hates going up against authority, especially Plumber authority, it must take him a tremendous amount of courage to look his Grandfather in the eye and say, ‘I love your Grandson. And you are well aware that if he had a problem with it, we would never have ended up ‘making-out’ with each other on the floor. You raised him better than that.’

‘Yes,’ Max says softly, ‘I did, didn’t I?’ For the first time, he meets Ben’s eyes and gives him a strange, appraising look. ‘Alright. You better both come.’

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His Grandpa doesn’t have an office as such. But he does have access to a few small rooms, fancy blue terminals stuck inside with what look to be old-fashioned tv-ariels and miniature satellite dishes sprouting from their sides almost like the levers on a coin slot machine. In short, places where Ben suspects his Grandpa doesn’t get nearly as much work done as he probably likes to pretend he does.

‘You know, I once told Rook we needed a game room at Headquarters,’ he finds himself remarking blithely, taking careful note of the clench in his Grandpa’s jaw and the way his face seems to harden at the light and easy tone Ben conjures up in his voice. ‘But I’m halfway convinced we already have several of them here and you’re just keeping them all to yourself. Which is actually pretty stingy of you.’

His Grandpa whacks his palm down on the table closest to him, some weird thing where the legs curl up and press out from under its corners like the fancy coils you see in candy canes, and the table sways under his touch. The legs brush against each other and push out the small chimes you hear when chandeliers sway and their glass trinkets catch in the breeze; and instantly a small hexagon on the wall lights and causes the door to slam softly behind them.

Rook jumps at that; honestly jumps. That’s how strung out the guy is, and he shoots Ben a pleading look that is probably meant to convey ‘please shut up now’ or more possibly his favoured moniker of ‘be silent.’

No, Ben thinks, I will not, and raises a hand as though to wag a finger at his Grandpa. He doesn’t quite though; he still values his un-grounded life, after all, and so simply pushes it up into a benevolent open-palm gesture instead.

‘Fine, fine, you don’t really waste time, playing weird alien games here, whatever you say. Very important work afoot, I got it.’
His Grandpa shoots him a tired look from under his brows and leans back against the table, instead of dropping down into a tired heap inside the chair beside it the way Ben rather thought he would. ‘Ben,’ he says, his voice coming out a lot softer than he probably wanted it too. ‘Come on, Son. Go a little easy on this old man, would you?’

The way you were on Rook? Ben wants to snidely ask. But he pushes it down and rolls his eyes instead. ‘You’re not that old.’

His Grandpa smiles, a wry twitch of the lips. ‘I feel it, right now.’ Then he stares Ben straight in the face. ‘All right then: spill.’

Ben frowns, shifting his weight back and crossing his arms, hackles automatically rising. ‘There’s nothing to spill; not really. C’mon, you were never like this with Gwen and Kevin.’

‘Gwen and Kevin were quite...open with each other,’ his Grandpa says and Ben can tell, just by the way the other man’s eyes meet the floor for a brief second, that he’s choosing his words very, very carefully. ‘You could read the atmosphere around them for miles. Nothing about their relationship came as a surprise to me. Or to anyone, really.’

‘Yeah, well,’ says Ben, shifting his shoulders back into a casual shrug. ‘They were straight.’

Or well, he assumes they are. But Gwen’s never said anything that can imply otherwise and if she was, if she is...and okay, maybe he’d just like to think she would tell him at some point if she isn’t...but then again, given how she pretty much pushed him into realising that Rook had the hots for him, she doesn’t exactly owe him anything on that front. And Kevin...he really doesn’t want to think about it. And he imagines Kevin probably doesn’t want him to think about it either.

‘The point is,’ he decides to amend, a little sheepishly, ‘that they were both, you know, a boy and a girl. And not a boy and another, err, boy. With more fur.’

Rook shoots him an injured look. ‘I do not see what that has to do with the point being made.’

‘Actually, maybe a lot,’ Ben says softly, his voice falling dangerously low. He strides forward, just enough so that when his Grandpa’s eyes next fall to the floor, they’ll be forced to catch the edge of Ben’s trainers. ‘Kevin and Gwen aren’t exactly your average couple. But they’re both human. Or at least human-shaped. And back when we thought Kevin was part alien, well, he still looked the part of ‘normal’ boyfriend.’

‘Or at least,’ Rook breaks in, sudden understanding filling his face, ‘like someone who would not look out of place beside the human girl Gwendolyn appears to be.’ His face turns brooding and now it’s his turn for his eyes to drop against the floor, gaze brushing over tiles and grey ceramic lines with a fierce intensity that means he’s trying to shove some kind of human social puzzle together. But his arms are also folded together, brushed into a firm cross, instead of dropped dutifully to his sides that way they often are around Max and Ben takes it as a good sign.

‘To be fair, Grandpa, it could have been worse,’ he adds idly. ‘Think of all the aliens I might have ended up dating instead. There’s quite a range out there.’

Rook’s eyes keep tracing along the floor but a wry smirk lifts his mouth up at that, and Ben strikes that up against his internal scoreboard as a win.

‘I find that rather difficult to believe, Ben,’ his absolute shit of a boyfriend then proceeds to say. ‘You have a rather narrow view of what you consider to be attractive, after all. Unless you would have me believe that you find those of Vilgax’s species delectable-’
‘Ewww, groosss,’ Ben immediately bursts out with, but he’s half-laughing as he does so, his hands batting away at the air as though they can shove that stupid word ‘delectable’ back down Rook’s throat. And the sly and somewhat pleased quirk of the mouth his boyfriend sends his way does seem to indicate that this stress on the word was intentional.

Max breathes heavily. And then sighs, so long and heavily that Ben starts choking on his own laughter, trying to shove it down into something more manageable, like normal chunks of breaths. But the giggles, smaller and more fluttery, seem to escape him all the same, so as Max starts to speak, his voice has to rise up in volume to cut above the sound.

‘You’ve seen Xyleene, Ben. And your Grandmother when she’s out of the human disguise. You know I don’t have a problem with the idea of either you or Gwen dating someone who has scales or condensed mana instead of skin.’

But Rook’s a boy, Ben thinks, his lungs straining as finally, finally the laughter breaks away. And he has fur. Fur you would be okay with, maybe, if Rook Blonko was also a **her**.

Max falters. ‘This...what you have with Rook. I can’t...I didn’t see it coming, the way I did with Gwen and Kevin. They were so obvious in their behaviour around each other. I haven’t seen any of that with you and Rook.’

Rook raises a dark brow, the gold eye beneath widening to give Max the full benefit of the doubt inside. ‘Ben may be a lost cause, but I, at least, know the meaning of being discrete.’

Ben remembers a morning of Rook panicking over his misplaced underwear in the back of his truck merely hours ago and sputters, gravelly offended.

Rook tilts his head to the side, arms still crossed, but eyes, this time, fully focused on Max’s face. ‘And perhaps, Magister, you were simply not looking for it.’

Oooh, Ben recognises that tone. Coolly professional, without the usual fondness to soften it. And he bites his lip, disturbed. Because he doesn’t want this awkwardness infecting their working relationship, ruining everything which came before.

‘Okay, enough,’ he stresses, stepping forward again, enough to draw his Grandpa’s glare away from Rook’s frosty look and bring it up to his eyes, where it, remarkably, softens. ‘I love you Grandpa,’ he says, feeling small and horribly young as he says it. ’But I love Rook too.’

He fights to not turn round, to see the awe or surprised joy or maybe all of that at once, spreading across Rook’s face. He can tell it’s there by the way the atmosphere brightens and bursts against his back, a feeling of warmth that’s different to the icy one in front of him. And he knows something in his grandfather is breaking, even though Max’s gaze refuses to slide away. ‘Don’t make me fight you-’ he continues, even as he feels the warmth at his back break away, replaced abruptly by a much more physical heat as Rook steps forwards, his hands wrapping over Ben’s elbows as he croons low and grave – ‘That is enough, Ben.’

Ben swallows, pushes the feel of Rook and his fingers aside. ‘Not on this,’ he pleads. ‘Don’t make me fight you on this. Because neither of us is going to like the result.’ He stares at his Grandpa. ‘Don’t wreck Rook’s career over this. Don’t even try.’

Rook’s fingers freeze on his sleeves, the breath knocked out of him in shock. Which is **stupid**, because did he honestly not think Max couldn’t wreck serious damage with his mouth or formidable reputation? Or did he just think he was going to get a slap on the wrist, some kind of slight demotion? But Ben, for all that his grandfather taught him about honour and respect, knows
that Max is crafty and understands politics, especially in this workplace far better than prim straight-shooter Rook Blonko. Who is admittedly far from stupid. But still, at heart, a little too trusting, when it comes to figures of authority.

Max breaks a little. ‘Is that really what you think of me?’ he asks Ben, his voice sounding as though it’s about to quiver, the way real old people’s do, quiver and snap, enough so that something in Ben hurts and throbs in return. ‘Do you really think I could do that to your partner?’

‘I think,’ says Ben, voice equally as lost, ‘that you wouldn’t ever have got to the position you have in the Plumber’s today, if something like this hadn’t crossed your mind before. Even if it was just for a second.’

Behind him, Rook breathes. And then his fingers loosen and fall.

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Going back to Rook’s quarters is a quiet, downtrodden affair.

‘C’mon,’ Ben wheedles, his voice taking on the sort of drawl Rook typically takes offence to. ‘Don’t you wanna get outta this place?’

‘No,’ Rook growls, practically stomping along the corridor and shoving his thumb, loudly and firmly, against the grey access panel. Ben trails after him as he enters his room, choking down his other question – do you wanna get rid of me, too, right now? – and watching as Rook rather furiously throws his Proto-Tool onto his work-bench.

‘Whoa,’ he says, raising an impressed eyebrow. ‘Easy there, tiger. That thing’s like your baby.’

Rook barks a short, sharp laugh, utterly devoid of humour and spins to face him. ‘Yes, a tiger is apparently what your grandfather views me as. An animal who has tainted his impression of his grandson.’

Ben frowns. ‘Hey, now,’ he cautions. ‘We both know that’s Harangue’s job.’

Rook screws his face up in genuine distress and flops back on his bed, arms listlessly hanging off the ends. ‘Yes, I suppose he would have a ‘field day’ with this information too.’

‘My Grandpa will get over it,’ Ben declares with more confidence than he necessarily feels, but hey, it looks like he’s on boyfriend-comforting duty, so it’s time to suck it up. He sinks down next to Rook, reaching up to softly stoke his shoulder with his flesh and blood hand, the other pressing down upon Rook’s duvet – and even with its muted senses, he can tell that Rook likes a fine thread count because it bunches up under the metal, thin and refusing to crinkle and crease easily under the pressure.

‘Unlike anyone from the media, I expect Grandpa to come round, and yes, have a field-day with the fact that I am in a thriving relationship where nobody gets kidnapped or forced onto a game-show.’

Rook glances down at him and encouraged, Ben gives him a small smile.

‘So I expect you to kiss and make up with your baby, in a few minutes, okay? You’ll feel guilty if
you don’t. I know I would be if I splattered one of my smoothies down like that.’

Rook’s brows furrow in confusion before Ben flicks his eyes towards the Proto-Tool, now lying abandoned in the shadows of the workbench, half a book now flopped over its side. The spine shifts, still not done being jogged from a nest of wires, even with the fury of force from Rook’s throw before long since vanished and Rook watches dryly as a few more pages crinkle and bend round the shape of his weapon. Then he glances back down at Ben.

‘You know,’ he says, something oddly factual creeping into his tone of voice as Ben shifts, feeling the curve of Rook’s hand pressing in at his waist, hot and firm. ‘According to Earth lingo, there is something else here that could easily be referred to as my ‘baby.’’

Ben freezes. ‘Don’t,’ he warns, but the scowl that he can feel pressing in on his brow fails to deter Rook in the slightest.

‘Yes,’ the Revonnahgander continues, expression blandly free of whatever joke he is planning. ‘I see it now. The endearment fits you perfectly. You are definitely an overgrown baby, constantly in need of attention’- he ducks away as Ben’s prosthetic hand moves from his duvet to his pillow, offering it up towards his face with one easy heave of motion.

‘Dude,’ Ben states, ‘I said, don’t. You sound like Fistrick, man. Fistrick. I had to put up with enough nonsense that time you took in his essence or whatever and were quite literally brain damaged for a week. ‘Bro’ this and ‘bro’ that; though at least you weren’t ringing up Rayona and calling her ‘baby’, that would have been a mess I couldn’t handle.’

Rook’s lips twitch and Ben narrows his eyes, drawing the pillow up to his chest, ready for round two. ‘It might have been ‘babe,’ instead,’ Rook points out, a hint of mirth in his face at the thought. ‘Besides, you need not fear. If I ever was to become ‘broified’ again, I would probably be referring to you as ‘babe’ and ‘baby’ all the time, instead of ‘bro.’’

Ben squeaks at the thought, then shoves his face into the pillow with a groan at the smug turn in Rook’s expression. ‘I...don’t hate you,’ he pushes out into its white folds. ‘But you make it easy for me to wish I could, sometimes. At least a little.’

Rook laughs, the noise easily bleeding through the feather and foam, or whatever else is used to inflate his stupid pillow and then the white is peeled back from Ben’s eyes by Rook’s carefully questing fingers.

‘As long as it remains a wish and nothing more, I think I shall survive,’ he says. Then, almost as a carefully pondered afterthought, he adds, ‘babe.’ And he almost sounds provocative when he does it too.

Ben smothers the urge to scream. ‘I am not Gwen and you are not Kevin!’ he protests loudly. ‘I am not ANYONE’S baby!’

Rook hums and throws the pillow away, out of Ben’s reach, just enough to make Ben wish he could hate him again.

‘Tell that to your mother,’ he says tartly, arching a brow at him before his expression turns a little wistful and maybe a little sad. And abruptly, he sinks back onto his duvet, dragging Ben down with him. His head finds Ben’s chest, rubbing into it a little the way a cat would, and as though there are strings attached to Ben’s fingers, Ben finds his right hand now arranged round the tuck of his boyfriend’s chin, the hollow of his palm trying to push itself into a suitable perch. Rook lets out a low rumble of breath, practically a purr, though Ben knows his contentment will vanish if he ever
hears it described as such. So he forces the teasing jab down, the urge for retaliation quickly becoming lost as he stirs and strokes his fingers through the fur of Rook’s face above, even if that face is turned to the side, away from his own.

He needs me, he thinks, he needs this. Me, not as an alien, or a hero, just Ben, with my fingers tucked under his chin.

There’s something pleasing about this thought and Ben lets himself drift off in the silence, not quite asleep but not quite away either, the repetitive brushes of his fingers, gliding in time to the rhythm of Rook’s breath.

Ben is bored. The thought touches him as he lies awake under the weight and heat of Rook, the soft snorts of his boyfriend breaking into gentle whines as he snores. It sounds a little human, though the noise is blurred somewhat by the fur perched just beneath his nose, air from his nostrils stirring the tufts of white beneath. Ben has never had a cat or been close enough to one to watch it sleep, so he can’t really compare and say for sure that the noises Rook makes veer to that side of the spectrum in terms of the noises earth mammals make and he’s not Gwen. And has no need to do actual research-

His phone is already in his left hand before he has time to think and the metallic fingers are busy tapping over the keys, digging away into the online archive of kitteh videos out there before he has time to give himself a mental shrug and justify his actions by whining to himself that’s he’s boooored. And doing something trumps doing nothing every time.

Rook stirs and Ben freezes as a whiff of perspiration catches him. Not his, though now that he takes the time to concentrate, he does feel dry and grotty himself. He makes a face at the reminder that he never took a shower, cut off Rook’s eager urging to train with him. Judging by the stink, they could both do with a douse of hot water.

Ben hums, then rolls out from underneath Rook as gently as he can, lowering his boyfriend’s head onto the sheets beneath with a curl of his hand. The last wisps of Rook’s chin fur escape his fingers and his boyfriend frowns, a stray snippet of a dream leaving his lips as he mutters some word Ben doesn’t recognise, a harsh syllable like ‘ark’ cutting through the dim haze of the room. Ben blinks and looks at the alarm clock, a set of steely orange digits flashing out of a black and silver rectangular clock free of any sort of real character. Ben rolls his eyes and considers replacing the thing with a Sumo Slammer one as a joke some day when he figures Rook’s in a good enough mood to take it. Then he hesitates. Rook won’t mind...if he borrows his shower right?

It’s not something he’s ever done before. Usually he’s used the more public facilities nestled next to the gym and training rooms of this place. And using someone’s shower, that they’re decorated with their own bottles of body-wash and shampoo seems a little more intimate than asking to borrow their toilet. Or maybe he’s just crazy.

Ben brushes off his stupid hesitance and walks inside the bathroom. Then walks right out after being accosted by the sight of Rook’s single cream towel resting on the rail inside. Because as much as he loves stroking the fur on the guy, he does not want to rub any of that extra blue fuzz on his naked skin from the guy’s towel, thanks.
He slides open the cupboard near the door, smiling triumphantly when he sees a few piles of extra towels nestled tidily inside on the top self. Trust Rook to keep up to date on his laundry. That taken care of, he walks back inside the bathroom, letting the door slide shut before carelessly dumping the towel on the floor. There’s not enough room on the rail for another one and hey, better a towel without fur clinging to the fibres than one significantly warmer and hosting the ‘leftovers’ from someone else, so to speak.

Ben turns the nozzle, shucks his clothes off and lets the water and his accompanying warmth rain down over his skin. He can’t help but relax, to at ease to let distracting thoughts of his Grandfather cloud his mind. And the steam is just starting to settle into the air, to rise up and paste the glass around him silver when he suddenly hears the door whoosh open, triggered by the presence of another person. Ben yelps, the bottle of green body-wash abruptly slipping out of his hands and clattering to the basin-like floor as his back hits the wall with a resounding thud. He stares out, startled, fingers clawing over his nether regions before the silence gets to him and he realises that Rook isn’t about to just step inside.

‘Are you alright?’ asks his boyfriend. The concern sounds real enough and there isn’t a trace of underlying humour there the way there would be with Kevin, so Ben relaxes, just a tinge.

‘Fine!’ he calls back, wincing mentally as he hears the unpleasant squeak his own voice has taken on. ‘I’m perfectly fine!’

Silence. Then: ‘That thump sounded loud enough for me to believe you might have given yourself a concussion,’ states Rook. ‘Or maybe just an unpleasant bruise.’

‘Just a bruise,’ Ben replies, a distinct edge to his voice. He winces, feeling along his back, but there’s no lingering tenderness to pave the way for his fingers. ‘Like I said: I’m fine.’

‘You might not be in a minute,’ he hears Rook mutter, but before he can scowl and demand to know what the guy means by that, Rook’s voice grows louder as he asks, ‘are you using my body-wash? It is not designed for humans.’

Ben’s eyes widen and he gives a shrill yelp as he shoves back against the shower door, his toes desperately trying to escape the flow of green body-wash now rinsing itself away down the plughole. He doesn’t even have enough time to feel guilty about that before his towel is thrust over his shoulder and Rook reaches round him to scrap the bottle of the floor and reset the lid on it with a decisive snap. He turns the nozzle off and Ben watches the water slide and drip from his face and neck, glistening in a few run-away drops over the slide of his armoured arm, before Rook turns his eyes on him.

Ben tightens the towel round his shoulders, before realising that this doesn’t really cover the parts of him he’d preferred veiled from sight and abruptly lets it drop down to his hips, knotting it firmly in his hands before it has the time to drop lower.

Rook looks amused, even if his expression seems to sag more than usual thanks to the wet tilt of his fur. His face looks slightly longer this way but that isn’t enough to pacify the broad strokes of his eyes as they sweep over Ben’s face and shoulders.

‘I said my body wash was not designed for humans,’ he says lightly, a rather cheeky look of delight lighting up his expression. ‘Not that it was directly harmful. Either way, you do not appear to have given yourself a concussion or any kind of bruising, so I suppose I should be thankful for small mercies.’

‘Yeah,’ Ben mutters, ‘thankful. Exactly the word I was searching for.’
Rook gives him a level look. ‘You could have checked the bottle before deciding to use it,’ he points out. ‘There was no real reason to believe it was suitable for a being without any fur, given that it belongs to the bathroom of one who does. But I suppose it was too much to hope for.’

Ben who has been busy squinting at the strange alien characters printed over the ride of the bottle still loosely clenched between Rook’s hands, swiftly turns a glare his way. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ Rook says airily, ‘just that you have a strange habit of assuming that the things around you exist for your own convenience, even on other worlds.’

‘Dude, the Omnitrix translates spoken alien language, not written ones,’ Ben huffs out indignantly. He makes an effort not to cross his arms, given how hazardously the towel is wrapped round his waist. ‘It would have been no help to me here.’

‘This is written in Japanese, not an ‘alien language,’ retorts Rook, pointing at the bottle for emphasis. ‘But I take your point; your Omnitrix is notoriously fussy when it comes to translating other human languages. And it does nothing for the written word as you pointed out. Still, the fact that you could not even read the side of the bottle should have been enough to tip you off.’

‘Really, it’s Japanese?’ Ben perks up, easily ignoring the you-should-know-better tone of Rook’s voice. ‘Cool!’ Indeed, now that he peers more closely, the slant and swirl of the individual characters does seem familiar to the vertical sweep of lines he’s seen in un-translated manga scans online. ‘Wait; doesn’t that mean it’s a human product? Or do you mean to tell me that Earth’s actively making alien hair-care gel?’

‘Well, no,’ says Rook, now looking a little embarrassed. ‘It is designed primarily for felines. And I prefer it to the brands I have tried out from other countries.’

Ben can’t help but feel the grin widen on his face. ‘Whoa, whoa, whoa. You mean you brought pet shampoo?’ He makes no effort to fight the cackle that spills from his throat, especially when Rook turns the full force of his annoyed glare upon him. ‘Oh, this is killing me! I can’t wait to tell Gweno, she wouldn’t find it funny. But Kevin definitely will!’ He points at Rook and then declares, half singing the word: ‘busted!’

Rook frowns and then Ben feels the imprint of those large palms on his hips, the towel doing nothing to disguise their firmness. He yelps as Rook drags him forward, the annoyance on that face above melting away into contentment. ‘Kevin will definitely find this amusing,’ he agrees easily. ‘But Gwendolyn will soon shut him up; she has this power as his significant other. A power,’ he continues, something sly creeping into his expression and the brow that creases down over one eye, ‘that I am learning to exert on you.’ He gives Ben’s hips a light squeeze.

Ben pauses, feeling the towel bunching up under the pressure of Rook’s fingers. He could pull himself away, but under this new circumstance, he is sure the towel would sway and fall. So he leans forwards, toes bunching up as he adds as much to his height as possible, all so he can push himself towards Rook’s face. He still falls hopelessly short, but the tilt of his neck and the way Rook’s eyes follow the ribbons of wet hair still plastered to it, convince him that he still has a little power of his own to play.

‘It’s not all one-sided though,’ he murmurs and he doesn’t really do flirty, not well, but he has learnt that he can charm Rook, when he’s in the right mood. The way the guy seemed lost for words when he planted that kiss on him back in the training room attests to that. ‘I don’t think it’s all going to go your own way, mister.’
Rook’s head dips down and he’s breathing heavily, Ben can hear the pant in his breath as clearly as if it were an echo of his own and it makes him smile. He hovers on his toes a few moments more, just enough to feel Rook’s fingers fumble on the towel, not intentionally, just enough to loosen as his concentration switches fully to Ben’s face, and then Ben steps back quickly enough for Rook to wobble, his eyes blinking back into focus; and that’s compliment enough, given how steady and smooth on his feet the guy usually is.

Ben doesn’t linger to laugh; the towel is still clenched in Rook’s fingers, leaving him naked and not quite secure enough to portray all of himself to Rook that way. He darts back, trying to ignore the bounce of his dick against his thigh briefly, because no guy ever looks dignified naked while he’s moving and then he’s out of the bathroom, the door closing behind him before he’s pushing the words ‘Grey Matter’ out. He swivels as his tongue catches on the last ‘ter’ sound, and as the final syllable cracks out, his hand catches on the number-pad nearby just as his fingers start to click and shorten under the green burst of light, all to leave his Galvan form hanging by the door like a monkey. And interestingly enough, he’s not naked as this alien. Which does make weird sense given that some of his alien forms don’t have any clothing forced upon their shape at all, and also because he’s tested the theory when he was ten, transforming in the nude a few times in the bathroom, just to make certain.

Anyway he gets to work, quickly locking Rook in with the combination of which wires to twist and knot together sailing into his mind with such ease that he knows he’ll be jealous when he switches back to human form again. He can hear Rook sighing from the other side, the slight thump of his fist landing on the door as the number pad lets out a hiss and a crackle, the keys peeling off under Ben’s knobbly fingers before he thrusts them back in above the freshly knotted wires.

‘This is not funny, Ben,’ he hears his boyfriend say curtly, even if the words do sound slightly muffled and Ben snickers as he springs back.

‘Ben,’ he hears Rook repeat again, this time a little dryly. ‘Your clothes are still in here with me.’

Ben hesitates, remembering the untidy sprawl of said clothing over the floor inside like a crumpled fan. Rook’s right.

‘If this plan is to protect your modesty, it is quite frankly, doomed,’ Rook continues, now just sounding tired. ‘Ben, you have changed in front of me multiple times—’

‘That’s different,’ Ben insists and yeah, it sounds a little weird how snotty and posh his protest comes out, given his Galvan voice, but he keeps going. ‘We weren’t a thing then! It’s not weird for guys to change in front of each other. But—’

It is when you want to fumble around with each other, it is when the usual let’s-keep-the-genders-separated rules don’t apply, or at least it should be. But none of those excuses sound right to Ben, so he struggles to explain.

‘But that was quick and nobody has time to linger and stare at, you know, the goods,’ he says, feeling his face turn crusty and dry, as though his skin were suddenly exposed to a desert-like heat. Huh. Guess Galvans don’t blush. ‘It’s different now. It just is.’

There’s a silence. And then Rook’s voice drifts out, gentle, despite the door in the way. ‘Ben, I threw a towel over you when I came in. I did not stare. I knew you would be uncomfortable. You have always wished others to respect the ‘sanctity of the bathroom,’ and I had a feeling this would not vanish just because I wished it too. But...I have shown you myself unclothed. Given you more than enough time to linger over my form just nights before. Will you not return the favour at some point?’
The Omnitrix beeps and then Ben spills back out into his human form. His naked human form.
And he feels like a heel. ‘I guess it is unfair when you put it like that,’ he says unwillingly.

Rook sighs. ‘I do not want to force you—’

‘No,’ Ben cuts in scornfully. ‘You never would. That’s not what’s happening here.’

With a sigh of his own, he stumbles over to the number pad, pushing the already loosened cover
away with a small grunt. His fingers fumble inside and he yanks apart patterns of wire he has
barely threaded into place seconds ago. He’s lost the reasons for why such-and-such blue wire
should cross over this green one here, but his memory’s good enough to remember where each
coloured line was before his Galvan form started messing around with them. He fights back the
shiver coursing through his form before the door thrusts itself open with a whine.

Rook steps through, towel in his arms and he wraps it round Ben’s form, his eyes firmly averted to
the bruised-looking...well it hardly looks like any sort of number-pad now.

‘Oh good,’ he mutters, ‘more maintenance work for me to do.’

Ben wiggles, not just at the small stab of guilt but also because Rook’s arms are still wrapped
around him over the towel and he’s bent down, low enough to hook his chin over Ben’s towel-
coated shoulder.

‘No,’ Rook tells him, ‘this will take me half an hour to fix. I deserve a treat to remind me why I put
up with this from you.’

Ben smiles half-heartedly. ‘I could always turn into—’

‘No,’ Rook states firmly. ‘You may very well make things worse. Even with the best of
intentions.’

Ben pouts and can’t help but let a small cry escape him as Rook scoops him up and carts him over
to the bed. ‘Is this gonna be a thing with you,’ he demands as Rook drops him pointedly onto the
pillow. ‘You carrying me around? Because I’m over it, dude.’

Rook smiles at him. ‘You like being spoilt though.’

Ben hesitates but before he can formulate a reply, Rook swoops down for a kiss, fur nestling
against lips then his tongue pushing through and inside as Ben sighs into the mouth above. His
hands come up, to support the sides of Rook’s face to tangle and claw their way through the short
strands there and one of Rook’s hands sweeps down to trail over the metal bend of his left one. He
draws back, taking the warm scrap of his tongue with him, but not before coiling one last dance
over the lower layer of Ben’s teeth as he takes it away entirely with a very wet tease.

‘Is it really a good idea to get this wet?’ he asks with a frown.

‘It’s not your average prosthetic,’ Ben answers, hands still threading their way between the blue
and black sweep of the patterns before his boyfriend’s worried eyes. ‘Given all the stuff I end up
coated in during fights, they had to make sure it was pretty resilient. So I don’t think the metal’s
from Earth. And I mean, nobody's told me not to get in the bath with it, so I'm pretty sure they
made it as water-resistant as anything really can be.’

Rook frowns and then shifts and turns, enough for his tongue to sweep over the shiny metal digits
that had been briefly hovering below his right eye. ‘Alright.’
'Besides,' Ben continues, trying to keep his voice steady. ‘It’s not like you made those nanite things specifically weak to water, right?’

Rook looks at him, his expression gentling. ‘Of course not. I am always careful when it comes to your welfare. To the welfare of anybody, really.’

Ben offers him a cheeky grin. ‘Thought so.’ Then his grin widens. ‘Now gimme another kiss.’

‘What if I refuse?’

Ben tilts his head. Rook sounds like he’s teasing and there’s a small grin on his face but he’s eyes are keenly fixed on him in a way that makes Ben think he wants something specific.

‘Welll,’ he drawls, deciding not to fall for the bait. ‘I suppose I’ll just have to go up and get one for myself then.’

His hands firm on either side of Rook’s face and he uses this as leverage, pressing himself up in a curl that Rook refuses to bend into the way he usually does. Instead the guy draws back, the longer stretch of his arms enabling him to pull away from Ben’s hold entirely and Ben fails a little as he falls back onto the pillow.

‘Okay…’ he says. ‘Obviously you want to talk about something. How about why the Omnitrix still won’t translate bits and pieces of your Revonnahgander language, despite working perfectly for practically every other alien one? Even my Plumber badge won’t pick up the slack.’

Rook raises his brows. ‘Azumuth is a genius, not a polyglot,’ he says wryly, tapping a single finger against the Omnitrix. ‘No one has time to learn every single language. A lot of the data for the translation feature of your Omnitrix, as well as Plumber badges, were transferred from the universal archives of the Galvans; mainly the collective studies made by multiple linguists over the centuries. But both Earth and Revonnah are fairly low on the political totem pole of the Universe and so never garnered much interest from said linguists. There is a reason why you have to manually access the system in order to change your Earthern English into a language such as Spanish in a way you don’t for alien languages. Also, Revonnah has never gathered much interest except for it’s Amber Ogia. And given my species' natural aversion to ‘change’ as a whole, any eager linguists were only able to pick up a rough outline of our language, terms fit for everyday usage. But they bypassed some of the rougher dialects used by the ocean-side villages as well as some of the more private sentiments expressed from one family member to another behind closed doors. So there are words I can use that no Plumber badge will pick up on. And neither will your Omnitrix.’

Ben tries to hide his smile. He knew if he could pick a subject geeky enough to catch Rook’s interest the guy wouldn’t be able to help himself and he’d start rambling on and on. He’s about to try and hoist himself up again, to push himself up into Rook’s personal space and wrap his arms round his neck now that he’s put a sufficient distraction out into play, but Rook merely blinks, looks down at him and says, ‘now, where were we, Rakishar’d? Ah, yes…’ and with an easy grin, his elbows fold and he leans back down into Ben’s space, his hands smothering those pale shoulders beneath his chest as he nuzzles into the human hair above. Ben’s not entirely sure, but judging by the flex and brush of the mouth digging its way into his fringe, there’s a smirk forming above the strands. Then abruptly it lifts, moving down to his neck and planting a kiss there, small and sweet.

Ben wiggles, feels the towel shift a little off his hips and swallows, hands carefully moving down to readjust the slope of it over his skin.
‘Still not ready?’ Rook murmurs and Ben curses a little at being unable to read the guy’s face from this angle.

‘C’mon, the real deal is up here,’ he hastens to say, dragging his hands up to lift Rook’s face from where the guy’s now buried it under the shadow of his neck.

Rook heaves a sigh. ‘You know that is only a half-truth.’

Ben bites his lip. ‘You really want to see me naked?’

‘No,’ Rook corrects. ‘I want you to let me see you naked. And to allow me to take my time.’

‘Mmm,’ Ben hums, ‘I get it. I am pretty hot after all.’

And then, with an abrupt sweep of his arm, before he has time to change his mind, his hand grips the edge of the towel and tears it off.

Rook blinks, then his eyes widen, all as Ben forces himself to let go of the corner of the towel, to give it a small shove and a push and let it roll off the bed.

‘Ta-da,’ Ben softly sings, fighting the urge to cringe away.

Rook stares. ‘I...did not mean you had to show me now,’ he manages after a moment.

Ben huffs and rolls his eyes. ‘C’mom, you were hinting like crazy.’

Then he fights down a jump and a flicker of small worry as Rook, without a word, leverages himself up with his arms and then sweeps his eyes downwards.

*I’m not a chicken, not a chicken, not a chicken*, Ben chants desperately in his mind and though he can’t quite keep his legs from flexing and his knees from bending slightly, he manages to press most of his fight-or-flight response down, allowing Rook to take him in.

And Rook doesn’t exactly look awe-struck the way he has done at various intervals of their relationship, but he does look pleased, interested even. He actually lets out a small hum as he takes his right hand from the bed and splays it over the open space of Ben’s chest, before dragging it downwards and letting it skitter over his nipples lightly. Ben jumps and Rook smiles at him, wide and open, as his fingers trace over his ribs, gently pushing into the soft splays and dips between the bones. They pause at the slim dip that marks the beginning of his leg and the tight tuck of his hip.

‘You are nervous,’ he notes and Ben glares at him.

‘Isn’t everyone when it gets to this stage?’ he bites out.

Rook frowns. ‘I was not. I knew you liked me. And you know I like you. Besides, I find you attractive in your strange human ways and you know I would not lie about that.’

Ben grits his teeth, grabs Rook’s hand, and pulls it round his dick. Rook’s mouth drops open in surprise and Ben struggles to stop his own jaw from falling in imitation, because while Rook’s hand isn’t doing anything, the fur and the elegant curve of his fingers, longer and sturdier than his own, send an undeniable jolt of pleasure through him that makes his legs twitch slightly. The guy could form a smooth velvety tunnel with them that puts the crinkles and wrinkles of his weathered human skin to shame.

‘Oh,’ breathes Ben, ‘that’s nice.’
Rook’s mouth snaps shut and he develops a look of rigid determination.

‘Hope you don’t use any tips and tricks you picked up from the Plumber’s academy,’ Ben gaps as Rook’s fingers begin to stroke. ‘And no...urgh, textbook reciting allowed. A s-strict no-no.’

Rook gives him a look of annoyance but it lacks any real heat and then Ben is wriggling and gasping and realising that perhaps he should stop saying words for a while. Because it only seems to egg Rook on.

‘Rakishar’d.’ Rook purrs the word into his shoulder twenty minutes later, practically drips it into his skin as Ben stirs groggily beneath him. ‘I think you will require another shower.’

‘You need one too,’ Ben mumbles out sleepily. ‘I’m not the only one who stinks.’

Rook hums and bites his shoulder gently. Ben wiggles, a little more alert at the feel of teeth sliding over his skin but fails to push back with too much heat.

‘I suppose it wouldn’t be a good idea to take one together?’

Rook barks out a laugh. ‘No. It would not.’

‘Alright, alright.’ Ben breathes and pushes himself up, palms kneading the pillow – he really doesn’t want to leave. Everything is soft and comfortably warm and even the hard planes of Rook’s chest muscles pushing against his back, hard enough it leave indents it feels like, have an air of familiar weight behind them, giving a sense that it’s okay to relax and be here.

‘Is it always like this?’ Ben asks suddenly.

Rook shifts, just enough to part his chest from Ben’s back and leans over him, head nudging into view. ‘I do not follow your trail of thought. Indeed, the majority of it still seems to be firmly lodged in your mind-’

‘Enough!’ Ben says crossly, shoving his hand against Rook’s knowing face. ‘I just...this, all this taking a quickie in the back of your truck, or rolling into the bed together, shouldn’t it be...I dunno, harder?’

Rook stares at him blankly. Then rolls his eyes up towards the ceiling in thought. ‘I would hardly call it ‘easy,’’ he says dryly. ‘But either way, there is no real guidebook for relationships – well there are ones written on Earth, but on Revonnah I went without and learnt the hard way, as do most denizens of the universe. And one thing I think remains true; it can be as hard or as easy as you want it to be.’

‘I dunno,’ Ben murmurs, hands now picking at the covers. ‘Julie always made it seem as though all this...intimacy was a big deal. Something you work up to gradually.’

‘I am not Julie,’ Rook points out.

Ben looks at him for a moment, takes in his long face and the feline slant of his nose.

‘No,’ he says after a moment, picturing Julie’s smaller, rounder features and the way her smile
always seemed perfectly picturesque and clean-cut, never taking up too much of her face. ‘You’re not. Julie was much cuter.’

Rook scowls and Ben smiles, leaning back to nudge his head under Rook’s chin, pushing up hard enough to let his hair flare out. Then tilts his neck, rubs up and to the side like a cat; because he’s no expert and Kevin will die laughing if he ever sees, but Rook’s nuzzled him enough times for him to get the general idea. Sure enough, he feels the jaw muscles above unclench and relax. And though he can’t see, he can imagine the smile spreading, taking up more than enough space on Rook’s face, uncluttered and free. Something that can’t be restrained.

‘Julie would never be satisfied with any kind of tickle under the chin,’ he adds brightly and Rook laughs above him, low and soft.

Chapter End Notes

In which I stubbornly refuse to expand the actual plot. Or do I?
For I have seen how you wane

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

‘I,’ says Gwen, low and threateningly, within the gloom of Kevin’s favourite garage. ‘Am going to talk with Grandpa.’

Kevin, brow twitching at the tone in his girlfriend’s voice, gives Ben a warning glare.

Ben naturally pays no heed.

‘He just needs time,’ he says, projecting more certainty than he feels. ‘That’s all.’

Kevin sighs and grumpily sticks his head back under the bonnet of his car, the black hump of his shoulders, having briefly fallen into shadows, now seeming to rise of their own volition into a shrug. Your funeral, the motion seems to spell out.

‘I,’ repeats Gwen, her glower no less intense. ‘Am going to talk. With Grandpa.’

Ben throws up his palms in a classic backing-off gesture. ‘Well, good luck finding him! Because ever since I had it out with him, he’s made himself scarce.’

‘Yes,’ Rook murmurs, eyes tracking the grey dent that has just opened up under his fingers within the bulk of the Proto-Tool. ‘I have attempted to track him down multiple times this last week, but Magister Patelliday always stalls me with some long-winded fishing anecdote. Or else tells me he is busy on some far-off mission. Which is ridiculous because the security logs would account for such a thing and last time I checked them, they stated that he is still on Earth.’

Ben throws him a grin. ‘You think Patelliday’s stories are long-winded?’

Rook, his eyes still firmly attached to his Proto-Tool, frowns. ‘Only in this instance. Because they are designed to distract, rather than entertain.’

‘Oy, oy.’ Kevin lifts his head from his car, looking more entertained than he should. ‘You think Patelliday actually means to entertain anyone with his tall tales? You’re living in a dream-world, buddy.’

‘I am not,’ Rook says stiffly, actually lifting his eyes from his weapon to address Kevin and despite himself, Ben feels a little snubbed. ‘I am simply not a world-weary pessimist like you, who readily ascribes under-handed motives to everyone around him.’

‘Trust me, there’s no universe out there large enough to contain your boundless naivety and faith in-’ Kevin starts, a definite tick of annoyance to his voice, before Gwen taps her foot and gives him a look.

‘Boys! Enough!’

‘Yeah,’ Ben mutters. ‘You’re about to describe your girlfriend, Kevin.’

It’s worth it, just to see the pleased grin Rook flashes his way, although it does nothing to stop Gwen boring holes into his face. So Ben rolls his shoulder, tries not to tense in expectation of a
mana-whip, and mouths ‘Charmcaster’ at her.

She groans. ‘You’re not gonna let that go, are you?’

‘Nope,’ he says cheerfully. ‘Hey, how is the evil sorceress, anyway?’

‘Binge watching Wynonna Earp,’ Kevin informs him, looking vaguely disturbed as he does so. ‘I swear, she hasn’t left the couch in days.’

‘Not the point,’ Gwen remarks testily. ‘In fact, nowhere remotely near the point. Grandpa is being weird and insensitive and a lot more close-minded than I ever expected of him and I need, no, we need to fix this.’

Kevin raises an eyebrow and steps away from his car, pausing to wipe grease on the lining of Ben’s shirt. Ignoring the stifled ‘hey,’ he reaches out to clamp one heavy hand over Gwen’s shoulder.

‘Hey, I know, it sucks,’ he says, sounding as gentle as he can ever be. ‘Family members being jerks when previously they were kinda decent, or I guess looked decent... I get it. Your image of him got a little broken. It happens. But he isn’t broken. You can’t glue him back together like a snapped toy.’

Rook snorts. ‘I find it hard to believe any toy nowadays could be fixed with a little ‘glue.’ If they could, Ben would not have a meltdown any time he clumsily knocked one of his action figures from a shelf.’

Ben opens his mouth, indignant, ready to object, but Kevin gets there first.

‘Look Mr Literal, not to point fingers or anything, but what’s your family situation like? Aside from Ben’s Grandpa drama, we know his folks are okay with it. But what about yours? Do they even know?’

Rook freezes, the Proto-Tool caught between an archery bow shape and a long, lean rocket launcher and Gwen narrows her eyes at him, now looking a little wary.

‘Rook?’ she asks, a firm bite to her voice despite the slight questioning to her tone. ‘Your parents do know, right?’

Ben steps in, literally steps in, right in front of her gaze which is quickly turning rather judgemental as Rook fails to answer. Especially since Rook is refusing to meet her own, his eyes staring resolutely down at his distorted Proto-Tool.

‘Rook’s folks are kind of traditional. And strict, really, really strict. Think of...you know really religious-and-conservative-family-strict?’

‘Ohhhh.’ Kevin makes a noise of dawning understanding, snapping his fingers suddenly. ‘So they’re a bunch of homophobes!’

Rook turns his eyes to Kevin without a word and narrows them into a tight, angry glare.

‘No,’ he says coldly. ‘They will have more of a problem with Ben’s species than of any other matter arising.’

Kevin raises his eyebrows and lets a lazy grin slip onto his face. ‘That isn’t exactly much better. Especially considering the fact that you’re speaking with three fellow Homo sapiens at the moment.’
Gwen sniffs and shoves her glasses further up the bridge of her nose. ‘Speak for yourself.’

Indeed Rook is giving Kevin a rather shrewd, analysing look. ‘Technically speaking, you are an Osmosian; human in origin, yes, but still, at the genetic level, an offshoot, which would make you-‘

‘Argh!’ Ben shouts, very nearly stomping his foot in frustration. ‘Nobody cares who belongs to which genus, okay! And nobody’s going to ‘out’ Rook to his family orrrr,’ he trails off, deliberately waggling a finger in front of Gwen’s face as patronisingly as he can. ‘‘Make Rook ‘out’ himself to them.’

Gwen stares at him in exasperation. ‘I’m not trying to – argh- that’s not what I’m going for here, Ben! I just...your parents know-‘

‘Mum knows,’ Ben interrupts with a mumble, scuffing his shoe against the ground. ‘Which I guess means Dad knows, because she tells him everything.’

‘Right, and Grandpa knows which isn’t something you wanted, but hey, it’s out there. And it’s just like, Rook’s family doesn’t know. And maybe there’s a good reason for that, but I just want to make sure you don’t get hidden away like a secret. Because that’ll be really unfair to you.’

Ben stares at her, at her cross frown which he always privately thinks makes her look like she’s constipated. But despite that, her voice is earnest and bright, not quite pleading because Gwen never begs, not to him anyway, but it still carries an element of wheedling within it.

Either way, it’s enough to make Rook actually gaze across the garage at them, his hands still tightly clamped over the frozen Proto-Tool as his eyes flicker between the two of them, guilt still stuck in their depths.

‘I-’ he starts, and then breaks off and swallows. ‘I cannot perceive Shar reacting in a negative fashion. She has always been fairly broad-minded. As to the rest of my family...my siblings may suffer a little confusion. My Mother has always been reserved when expressing her true thoughts so I can only guess as to her reaction. But it is my Father who is the true ‘wild card.’’

‘Yeah,’ Ben mutters. ‘A regular explosion waiting to happen there.’

Rook grimaces. ‘Indeed.’ Then he steels himself, his expression settling into that determined I’m-about-to-suit-up-and-embark-on-a-mission look. ‘I will tell Shar then. And no one else. Not yet.’

Ben tries to picture it, thinks of Shar who sent him flowers even if she didn’t know him that well, who has, unlike a lot of eager Plumber cadets, never nagged and niggled at him for re-tellings of his adventures, never jostled and overcrowded him with her exuberance. She’s always been laser-focused on herself and he can’t really see her being too bothered about her brother’s love-life.

But the other Rooks...for a moment, Ben has a terrifying image of Rook Ben furiously ripping the posters of that lame actor version of himself down from the walls, covering the bedroom Blonko used to decorate with a confetti of blues and greens. They’d be odd white strips on the ceilings as a testament to his rage, from where he couldn’t accurately grip hold of the sides properly in his haste, leaving chunks and half-corners behind in a mockery of graffiti. And while it hurts to think of this kid that idealises him reacting in such a way, Ben isn’t stupid enough to believe that Rook Da is the only one in the family with a monopoly on anger.

‘It’s your choice,’ he tells Rook, eyes not quite on his boyfriend as he considers the other people in his life, the two sisters and the mother that he’s never really had a proper conversation with. Would their faces twist with rage? Would they start crying? Or would those two younger kids be like
some of those slash fangirls and, err-no. Bad thoughts, there. Ben deals with enough of that on the internet.

‘My choice.’ Rook speaks up gravely, echoing him, fingers running over the Proto-Tool again as though it’s a testy animal that needs it’s touch. ‘Yes. I hope I can be as brave as you have been.’

Ben starts at that. Then stops to take a proper look at Rook, at his slouch and the untidy way he’s seated himself on a crate, legs open and spilling over the side as his hands rest between them, body too low to pull them back. That can’t be good for his posture.

Ben frowns. Then saunters over, quietly stepping into Rook’s space and leaning down, close enough to catch the other’s eyes. ‘Hey. We’re not ganging up on you here. And, well, yes, I am brave, but that’s not the reason my family knows. They just sort of stumbled into us at the wrong moments.’

Rook’s brow dips, his face falling into an unpleasant scowl. ‘Your mother did not walk in on us, it was your grandfather who-’

‘My mother recognises a hickey when she sees one,’ Ben cuts in determinedly, not wanting to hear the end of the sentence and choosing to ignore Kevin’s wrenching sounds in the background. ‘Not all of us have fur to cover up...you know...’ His hand reaches up to paste itself against the side of his neck self-consciously, before he recognises the faint shine of recognition in Rook’s eyes as they alight upon the area it’s covering and he drops it immediately. The air rushes in to bate at the skin there, still a faint shimmer of pink from where Rook’s teeth have nipped and his tongue has cajoled, all that makes him shiver.

I hate you, he wants to say jokingly, but he presses it down, finds it easy to do so when a huge smile blooms on Rook’s face.

‘You have mussed up my fur enough to know that you can leave as obvious a mark on me as I can on you,’ he lectures Ben, though his tone lacks any real heat. Though there may be a hint of fang there, as his smile curls, turns smug when Kevin groans and pours a complaint into Gwen’s ear.

‘Is this sex-talk? Are they talking about sex stuff? Because it sounds like-’

‘Inter-species hanky-panky?’ Gwen cuts in with a raised eyebrow, her tone completely deadpan. ‘Maybe. I wouldn’t have you pegged as such a prude, Kevin.’ But her tone turns gentle at the end, a little teasing; enough to force Kevin to smirk back.

‘Nah, you know me, I just prefer my-’

It’s at that point that Ben successfully tunes him out. ‘It’s still not fair!’ he argues with Rook, leaning over to get more in his face and somehow, his hand finds itself on his boyfriend’s chin, to give him a quick swipe there, soft enough to turn gentle and drift through the fur. ‘Everything you do shows up like paint on me! And it takes you, what, two seconds to smooth over your fur with a finger! There’s no way you can compare the two!’

‘Mmmm,’ Rook, in more of a pacifying hum than a sound of agreement, which gets Ben’s hackles right up. ‘You have a point.’ His voice drops. ‘But then, you are not a biter, and I am.’ He bears his teeth at Ben in a grin and Ben sighs and flicks a finger back at them, the wet knock of skin against enamel serving as enough encouragement for Rook to draw them back and hide them away inside his mouth again.

‘You are so not getting any,’ Ben informs him snidely, his arms betraying him by sliding up around
Rook’s neck and nursing that blue head with his drifting palms, allowing his fingers to rise, to force the fur to fly out from the cheeks into a set of tufted spikes.

‘Your actions do not match your words,’ Rook informs him, smiling all the while, though it’s puckered, distorted by the waves Ben’s fingers are striking out above.

‘If you think I’ve messed up your fur before, you’ve seen nothing yet,’ Ben promises, feeling triumphant as a familiar clatter plays out upon the crate, Rook’s Proto-Tool sliding into his vision as he feels the hand that held it reach round to cup his waist.

Rook doesn’t croon out any strange words. He simply stretches, lets his spine rise a little bit as his head presses forward, near enough to slide against Ben’s shirt. And he breathes out.

Ben feels the thump of his heart, sheltered by a sweaty black t-shirt and now pressing out, reverberating at the warmth of Rook’s forehead. He wonders if Blonko can hear it.

He half-turns his head, but Kevin and Gwen have drifted over to the doorway talking animatedly about something that’s too far away for him to care about and Rook’s here, leaning against him and burying his head against his chest like an animal and Ben can’t say no to that, not for anything. So his fingers soften, stop tracing out crazy patterns and start to dab, to pull, to push the fur back into its usual positions.

‘Ahh,’ says Rook and the smile bleeds through his voice. ‘It seems I will not need a mirror to undo the damage you promised, after all.’

Ben raises his eyebrows. ‘Dude, do you want me to stop stroking?’

Rook doesn’t answer. Simply presses his head in tighter, a second hand rising to join the first and smoothing over the untouched bone of Ben’s hip.

So Ben swallows and does something few other aliens have managed to get him to do. He obeys, and listens to the unspoken ‘keep going.’

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Ben comes home to find his house in a mess, cupboard doors swinging open and suitcases launched out from out their crevices to litter the floor. He makes a face as he sees the familiar beige slip of his mother’s swimsuit hanging over the upturned lid of one like a waterfall sprung loose, and sighs as a distinct crack snaps out from under his foot. He lifts it to see the handle of a tennis racket his Dad hasn’t touched in years now displaying a hefty line of jagged black.

‘Oh hey, sport, I was looking for that.’ His father grins, ruffles his hair and bends down to retrieve it from its ill-placed spot. ‘Revonnahganders are pretty athletic right? Rook was telling me a game they played. Figured I could use a tennis racket as a substitute for those tall sticks they use.’

Ben blinks. ‘What?’

‘Well,’ says his Dad, now experimentally swiping through the air with said racket and Ben doesn’t have the heart to tell him that he looks like his wrist is stuttering a little short each time his arm flies out. ‘It’ll be like being a foreign exchange student all over again.’
‘Mmm,’ his mother says and Ben jumps as her head suddenly appear from out of the wardrobe, a few flighty summer dresses flying out of the darkness to land perfectly inside a purple suitcase. ‘I was an au-pair on a farm in France once, did I ever tell you? I got to feed the chickens for a whole week! Do they have chickens on Revonnah?’

‘No,’ says Ben. ‘They have giant man-eating rodents instead. Look, are you saying what I think you’re saying?’

His mom beams and the effect is odd, given that her body is still perfectly concealed within the shadows. All he can still see of her is her head and part of her dusty turquoise sweater, turned grey by the lack of light lodged inside the cupboard. It’s like she’s an animal head on the wall or one of Khyber’s prized trophies.

‘We’ve both got some time off and we figured why not go and make ourselves comfortable with the culture of our son’s significant other? It’s important not to dismiss or trivialize these things and we want Rook and his family to feel as ease around us and the best way to do that is...’

‘To throw ourselves forward into their world!’ Carl finishes for her, beaming wildly. ‘That way we can learn first-hand what not to do...’

Ben can already think of one thing. Like turning up uninvited on Rook Da’s doorstep, for instance.

‘...and push ourselves out of our comfort zone.’

Well done, guys, Ben thinks, heart falling to his shoes. You’ve certainly managed to push me out of mine.

Instead he shoves a grin onto his face.

‘Great! When are you leaving?’

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‘They’ve leaving tomorrow! Tomorrow!’ he rants down at Rook through the phone. He’s holed up in his room, back to the door in case his Mom suddenly bursts through. His eyes find the floor, where he’s pushed down his own suitcase, a strange brown thing that feels too heavy for his hands whenever he runs his fingers round them. He hasn’t used a suitcase when traveling to another world in...ever. Well. Maybe for that one road trip.

‘And they want me to suddenly come with them! You know, as if I don’t have a job I can’t afford to leave behind or anything!’

Rook is suspiciously quiet. When his voice comes through after a few seconds it sounds odd, as though he’s trying to smother down a laugh. ‘Can you simply not tell them that the Plumbers have no vehicles to spare?’

‘They’ve hired Rad upfront,’ Ben replies thickly. He slides down to the floor, his toes shoving into the carpet in long thick streaks that leave his skin feeling rough and sore. ‘Urgh. Why are they doing this to me? To us!’

‘They mean well,’ Rook says gently. ‘Even if they are being rather...forceful about the whole
thing. If I bring the Proto-truck, they can sleep in there, provided my family is not willing to play the benevolent host.’

Ben’s mouth drops open. ‘Dude! You can not seriously be going along with this! We’ve gotta shut this whole mess down!’

‘No,’ says Rook, and oh God, he’s sounding thoughtful now, like he’s stumbled upon an intriguing new textbook. ‘This might be good for us. For my family too. I said once that I did not want to cause them any distress over our relationship and that is still true. But that does not mean I should not give them a gentle nudge, now and then.’

Ben narrows his eyes. ‘This won’t just be giving them a nudge,’ he warns. ‘You’ve met my parents. They get really into things. Deep into things.’

‘And I am into you,’ Rook says and now he just sounds tired. ‘As my sister puts it. And she has advised me to ‘come clean’ as soon as possible with my Father. I think, if he is preoccupied with your parents and sees how accepting they are of our romantic involvement, it will force him to repress his initial anger and give him some time to think instead of simply react.’

‘Oooooh, I get it,’ says Ben, feeling...not angry exactly. But a mix of both disappointed and gleeful. ‘The great diversion tactic. And a little bit of ‘lead by example.’ But honestly, my parents are great and all, but I don’t think they’re going to be this wonderful beacon of acceptance. I think they’re just gonna make your Dad dig his heels in even more.’ He pauses. Then: ‘Your sister knows? You told her?’

Rook sighs.

‘How did it go?’ Ben asks, realising that he’s actually craned forward, like he’s excited to hear it, expecting Rook’s face to pop out of view somewhere. Annoyed with himself, he leans back into a stretch.

‘She was surprised,’ Rook murmurs. ‘But not greatly so. Apparently she has been digesting some homoerotic literature from Earth-’

Ben makes a face.

‘- and thinks we could be good for each other, so long as we do not model ourselves after the whole ‘seme’ and ‘uke’ mentality.’

Ben lets out a noise somewhere between a snort and a laugh. ‘Did she even explain what that means?’

‘She did not need to,’ Rook answers swiftly. ‘I am aware of the Earth Internet, Ben. And even if I did not, there are still people in the universe on the Xtranet who ‘ship’ us. The terminology of ‘seme’ and ‘uke’, ‘dominate’ and ‘submissive’ are not primarily Earthen things.’

Ben’s half-laugh cuts off with a choking wheeze. ‘What!’

‘You are a celebrity,’ Rook points out. ‘And we do hang out together a great deal. It is easy to see why some people would think-’

‘No, no, no! Dude, stop! I’m begging you!’

‘Alright,’ says Rook and this time there is a definite hint of laughter colouring his voice.
Ben pauses. ‘Wait a minute...’ he says slowly. ‘If people ship us then they probably are pushing us into the whole ‘dom/sub’ thing, right? So who do they say is the, I guess the ‘seme’ and who do they think is the....’ he trails off, his face falling a mile a second as a very telling silence presses out of the phone and into the room around him.

‘It is idle speculation, Ben,’ Rook finally says cautiously. ‘Where we are caricatures of ourselves. You should not read anything into it.’

‘But, but, the universe paints me as this macho, butch dude! I’ve seen the posters in your room. Guys like that never get written as the sub!’ Ben protests, hating how his voice cracks on the last word.

‘You do not look like that,’ Rook points out dryly. ‘And I am not even on that show. The only people who ship us are the ones who have seen us together. Besides after your appearance at the Celestialsapian court and that gameshow, the majority of the population in the universe now know what you look like.’

Ben thumps his head back against the door, loud enough for Rook to call up ‘do not hurt yourself!’ to him from the phone’s tiny speaker and slides down, far enough for his elbow to lock against the floor. The door feels cool on the side of his neck, a harsh, stable support.

‘Don’t worry,’ he finds himself muttering down to Rook, his sight made brown and blurry by the hair he’s managed to shove into his eyes. ‘I’m sure the next few days will provide enough hurting for the both of us.’

‘Ow!’

Ben sighs and rolls his eyes up towards the sky. He’s not at the top of the ramp yet, so there’s still a piece of Undertown’s crusty brown ceiling for him to fix his gaze upon, one last remnant of the familiar to hold his nerves steady.

‘Are you sure you don’t need help with that?’ he calls over his shoulder.

His Dad winces and re-hoists the high-tech blaster over his shoulder. ‘Nope! I got it!’ he takes another step and promptly drops it on his shoe. ‘Ow! Son of-’

Rook meanwhile, is standing at the bottom of the ramp, arms crossed and looking a little wide-eyed. Sandra brushes past him, dragging what looks to be a giant stuffed purple anaconda after her, a slight hiss of what sounds to be a deflating airbag accosting Ben’s ears as she starts hauling it up the ramp.

‘I do not believe Rad allows livestock to be transported on his ship anymore,’ Rook offers gamely, his fingers twitching as though they want to reach for his scanner. The twitching quickly travels, becomes a wince of his shoulder as Pixi blares out a garble of outraged chatter from the loudspeaker system Rad’s hooked up to the entrance.

‘It’s her sleeping bag,’ Ben reassures them both, eyeing the little angry face icon Pixi casts on the panel above the loudspeaker system, the brows furrowed into firm zig-zags.
His mom however, looks enchanted. ‘It’s one hundred percent organic,’ she says eagerly, sounding very proud of herself as she stretches some of the material up from out of its caterpillar crouch on the ramp and offers it out to Pixi’s icon face, which has, by this stage, starting opening and shutting its fanged mouth and letting little pink pixelated flames escape.

‘Hate to break it to you, Mom, but I don’t think Pixi cares,’ Ben says reaching out to tug the material from between her fingers and patting it back into place. ‘She just wants you on the ship, it looks like.’

‘Oh honestly, Ben, you don’t know that!’ his Mom protests as he attempts to guide her up the ramp by placing his palm on the back of her shoulder and pushing gently. ‘Just because she’s a computer program, doesn’t mean she doesn’t care about all the toxic chemicals you find littering everyday items!’

Pixi lets out a noise which sounds suspiciously like a loud raspberry.

‘Nope, I’m pretty sure I do know that,’ Ben says cheerfully, giving her one final pat on the back for good measure. He then runs back down the ramp to help his Dad lift the weapon off the end of his foot for the third time in a row. ‘Why exactly, are you even taking this thing!’

His Dad grunts, looking a little sore as Ben refuses to let go of the other end. He doesn’t protest too much though as his son starts walking backwards with it firmly in hand, though he does frown a little as Ben drops him a wink and takes his flesh and blood one away entirely, leaving the prosthetic one below to take the full strain.

‘You were the one who said Revonnah had man-eating rodents!’

Ben feels the cocky smile wiped firmly off his face and rather hesitantly casts his eyes over to Rook. Who is standing there, lifting up a querying eyebrow in return. Well, at least he doesn’t look too mad.

‘Hey, would you rather I lie about it?’ he shoots back. ‘Those things may not have eaten human before, but believe me, based on past experience, I wouldn’t put it past them to try!’

‘They can be a nuisance, yes,’ Rook agrees readily. ‘But I do not think them licking Amber Ogia juice off your body consists of a...ah, tasting session.’

Ben sighs, mostly at the fact that it’s now his Dad’s turn to raise a querying eyebrow. ‘Just...get in the ship, Dad,’ he manages. ‘And try not to make Rad mad too much. He’s not above dumping people out of the airlock.’

His Dad’s look turns rather worried and he hastily helps Ben place the weapon down on the floor of the ship with a rushed clunk before he rushes up to Sandra’s side – who has, by this stage, found Rad and is asking him about what Pixi’s rights are and how much vacation time she’s entitled too. Rad isn’t waving a blaster at her yet, so Ben counts that as a good sign.

...though it probably also helps that his parents have paid upfront.

He sighs and rolls his shoulder stiffly as he walks back down the ramp to Rook, taking pleasure in the way his boyfriend’s eyes travel up his chest at the movement.

‘Sure you don’t want a lift?’ he asks, hesitating to take the final two steps that will drop him firmly below Rook’s line of sight again. He doesn’t particularly mind the height difference – the majority of the universe seems to be taller than him after all – but it’s nice sometimes, not to have to crane his neck to look up into that familiar blue-furred face.
Rook’s look turns soft. ‘That is very kind of you. But I do not believe your parents will take kindly to having to ‘shell out’ for another ticket.’

‘Nah,’ says Ben, flipping his wrist dismissively. ‘They’re the pinnacle of chill, my folks. Besides,-’ he lowers his voice into a hushed whisper, metal hand carving out a curved shell round his mouth. ‘I think they’re so anxious to prove how ‘progressive’ and ‘tolerant’ they are of, you know, us, that they’re willing to be extra generous.’

‘Which you intend to milk for as long as possible,’ Rook says dryly, arms crossed. The next second these drop down to circle Ben’s shoulders, with enough ease that Ben realises that perhaps a two-step difference between them isn’t really enough. Sure enough, as though to mock this thought, Rook leans in without taking a single step forward, just close enough for these noses to brush. Then he grins, wide and long.

‘Perhaps I shall find some milking of my own to do. Either way, I imagine I will see you later.’

Ben sighs, thumps his forehead a little more firmly against the lean bridge of Rook’s snout and feels the curve of his boyfriend’s alien head through his hair.

‘I sure hope so. I don’t feel like taking on your Dad’s temper alone.’

‘Not to worry,’ Rook says, a queer note in his voice. ‘I will endeavour to protect the great Ben Tennyson from any harsh words my Father may utter.’

Ben laughs and pulls back. ‘Okay, now I know you’re lying. No one tells your Dad what to do.’

Something pensive crosses Rook’s face. ‘No. But I can certainly advise him.’

Ben cocks his head and the question is on the tip of his tongue, just begging to be asked. But before he can offer it out to the air, Rook’s head swoops back and the question is kissed away, pushed out of his thoughts entirely by a soft, sweet swipe of tongue and teeth.

‘I will see you later,’ Rook repeats firmly, as much to himself as to Ben, before his hands fall away and he turns, striding confidently out into the streets of Undertown.

Ben watches him go, feeling a little lost. Like he’s missed something.

‘Sweetie?’ His Mom’s voice drifts out behind him, gentle but entirely too loud for the denizens of Undertown to hear. Already Ben can see two members of Hobble’s species hunched over in the doorway of a small pub nearby, snorting into their hands. He’s pretty sure it’s the ‘sweetie’ that’s the final death knoll; according to Rook homosexuality isn’t a huge social taboo down here, but given that the majority of the species Ben’s seen here still seem to be divided by the two genders of male and female, he’s willing to bet that heterosexuality is probably still the norm.

‘Coming!’ he calls back, all too willing to escape the snorts and muffled giggles behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Well, Rook Da is certainly going to have a nice, stress-free time, isn't he?
Revonnah is as majestic as he remembers, a clouded marble of blue and green, with the hues resting in shades only a little darker than the Earth’s. His mother is already pressing her face against the window, a loud ‘oooh,’ escaping her mouth, while his dad leans back in his seat and readjusts the gun beside him self-consciously.

‘It’s gorgeous!’ his Mom declares, all subtlety forgotten as she spins round in her seat to lean over and clasp his hand. Ben feels a flash of pride in the fact that her fingers have swept unhesitatingly across his prosthetic one, to rest with a tug over the curve of his wrist, before they leave and she points back at one of the wide expanses of blue below.

‘What’s the seafood like? Is it anything like the exotic squid Mrs Vreedle like to fish up from her lake?’

Aaaaand, yeeeah, all good feelings are now gone.

‘Honestly? I wouldn’t know,’ he answers, trying to ignore the creeping sense of horror that maybe she’s cooked up one of those ‘exotic squid’ inside one of her legendary casseroles one night and he’s gulped it down without ever knowing. ‘I’ve told you before, remember? They’re all crazy about this Amber Ogia fruit.’

‘They’re vegetarians?’ His Dad asks, cocking an eyebrow. ‘I’d better remember that; don’t want to go round asking for the local steak if it’s not on offer!’

Ben hesitates. ‘...I would just eat whatever’s put down in front of you,’ he finally says. Besides, unlike his mother, he finds it doubtful that Rook’s family is going to go around cooking up three-eyed radioactive squid from the sewers. Not to mention the fact he’s seen Rook eat meat plenty of times on Earth. And those slightly-sharper-than-human canines seem to indicate that he’s not the owner of a primarily plant-loving digestive track.

That doesn’t stop him from trying very hard to repress the fact that’s he’s never seen anything that looks like a slice of meat being placed in front of him on that planet. Or that the only other species that seem to thrive on Revonnah are the Muroids. God, he hopes Revonnahganders don’t eat Muroids.

Rad meanwhile, is mumbling something in his sharp voice from the seat in front of him, feathered fingers tightly fastened to the wheel. Ben frowns slightly as his mother leans forward, her expression adopting his own as she says in what she probably feels to be a consoling tone, ‘oh, not to worry, Mr Dudesman. They may be a cat-like species, but I’m sure they don’t serve duck down there!’

Ben doesn’t need to lean any further forward in order to know that Rad’s beak is twisted open to show his bared teeth, the white a stark, frightening contrast to the surrounding blue. Instead the knots of those fingers below are tightenning over the controls as though he wants to strangle them, and this time, Ben does lean forward in order to stop his mother reaching out to stroke and soothe.

‘Mom, no!’ he tells her sharply. Then turns his head to flash what he hopes, to Rad’s eyes, appear to be a pleasant grin. ‘You can drop us down here, Rad. On the actual surface. Not via a one-way trip to the airlock.’
Rad sighs. ‘You monkeys always cramp my style,’ he declares. But there’s no real heat behind it and that’s enough to prompt Ben to lean back in his seat with a sigh.

After helping to drag his parents luggage out to the side of Rook’s family’s fields and making sure Rad’s ship didn’t land on any of the rocks sprouting Amber Ogia vines, Ben decides to crunch his way over to the door. The lights before him flash out into the night in a warm, steady yellow, so similar to the electricity that dances through the glass windows in Earth, that he can’t help but feel comforted at the sight. The comfort grows as he sees Rook’s truck parked in the docking jetty outside and he feels a rush of relief that he won’t be braving the temper of Rook Da alone. Of course, that means Rook’s had to be first one to venture out into the firing range and he feels a little bad about that, honestly...but not totally. After all, Rook Da’s probably going to be more lenient with a family member, than with the scrawny ape that’s turned his son’s eyes away from nice, safe Rayona. Probably.

Ben sighs, collects himself, and knocks on the door. As soon as he does so he has a moment of panic and frantically searches for any kind of door bell or alarm system; but no. It seems there’s no social faux pas here, because the door sweeps open moments later and Shar leans out, her chest heaving shallowly to illustrate her lost breath. And the pant beneath continues to lie heavy in her voice, rolling out under her tone as she speaks.

‘Ben! You are here! Welcome, welcome, you and all your family!’ She spreads her arms wide, not in preparation for a hug the way she would do with one of her siblings, but as a bare, all-encompassing gesture as though to include all three of them within her line of sight. And yet her gaze wavers, her head tilts, and her smile, warm as it is, slips.

Ben raises an eyebrow. ‘What’s the story, Rook Shar?’ he asks, tapping his foot and trying not to feel too annoyed at the look of surprise his Mom flashes him when he uses Shar’s full name.

Shar glances behind her nervously and Ben can’t help but note that she is not dressed in her Plumber’s uniform. ‘Oh! We have, ah, just been busy preparing for all our extra guests! Blonko has also been most...thorough, when describing the newfound status of his relationship with you!’

Ben closes his eyes, a hole dropping open in the bedrock of his stomach. ‘He didn’t have to do that,’ he says dully. And he ignores the stare of surprise he can feel his parents giving to each other over his head and walks inside, effortlessly brushing past Shar who is still gnawing on her lip, evidently undecided on what she should do.

‘Ben...’ she says, her voice trailing off gently before she shrugs and flashes a wry smile at his parents. ‘You may as well come in, since your son has decided that he is more than welcome.’

Ben eyes the wide open space of the dining hall, and the obvious absence of the rest of the family. Yeah, he thinks, real welcoming.

He spins at the sound of a small thump, and squints towards the orange glow that spills out from the open-planned kitchen, a shape coming to shift its pale purple shadow over the stone step that cuts its way up to a nearby cupboard. Bralla stands there, the quiet way she holds herself turning utterly imposing as her cloaked sleeves and stern headdress shield the majority of her body language. Ben’s eyes fall to the clenched fist displayed at the end of one trailing sleeve, a stray
knife in its grasp, and he instantly backs off, the sweat clinging to the back off his neck as he sees her wrinkle her nose at him in an decidedly unfriendly way. Then she glances down and with a sigh, casts the knife off with a clatter onto some counter hidden carefully from view.

‘I do not run anyone through, especially not a guest,’ she says quietly. But her eyes are still narrowed and thin and she remains in the doorway, hovering, as his mother steps up behind him and places her hands on his shoulders reassuringly.

‘Well, now,’ says his Mom. ‘That’s good to hear. Murder is not something I really support.’

His Dad meanwhile, casts a longing glance toward the door, as though actively considering running back to get the gun.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Ben warns him.

His Dad looks at him beseechinghly. ‘I’m a handyman, not a Plumber, Ben! You didn’t tell me anyone here would be waving knives around!’

From her position near the door, Shar leans back against the wall and crosses her arms, shooting him a slight scowl. ‘We are not some primitives, ‘waving’ sticks and stones around,’ she says tightly. ‘I have seen enough of your movies to know how you label people like us.’

‘Us?’ His Mom drops her hands from his shoulders and whirls round, a gob-smacked look on her face. ‘There is no ‘us!’ We just two sets of different people, coming together to hopefully understand one another better!’

Shar’s lips twitch. But not into a smile.

‘Ben!’

The tension is shattered, disrupted by a small blue and brown cannonball that thuds into Ben’s calves and glances up at him with large yellow eyes. ‘Ben Tennyson! You made it!’

The rush of relief Ben experiences on seeing Rook Ben’s eyes, open and gleeful and not twisted in hatred towards him is a little embarrassing. Still, he leans down, and deciding to get the whole awkwardness out of the way, raises his prosthetic arm to give the kid a slight wave. ‘Hey there!’

Rook Ben’s eyes turn wide and disbelieving as his mouth drops open into a perfect ‘o’.

‘I had heard the stories, but I did not quite believe it, even with the transmissions from both Shar and Blonko to back up the claims! This is majorly awesome!’

He looks up at Ben, the perfect imitation of puppy eyes pulled up onto his face, as he bares his teeth in grin. ‘Can I, can I, can I, please touch it?!?’

If he still had his tail, sorry, bi’nthak, Ben is sure it would be waving around so eagerly it could knock something over.

‘I don’t see why not,’ he says casually, bending down a little further so Rook Ben can run eager fingers over all the seams and joints that barely let out a click as Ben obligingly flexes them under his touch.

Shar, who has stepped away from the walk and half-opened her mouth as though to protest, shoots him an annoyed look.
‘Yes, teach the annoying little brother with no boundary issues that it is okay to touch and prod an artificial limb. I am sure that will aid him well in the future when he comes across someone else who will not be quite as accommodating!’

Ben smiles and lets his wrist twist, the slender, almost cylinder-like curve of the arm attached to it, turning like a ripple to follow the movement with ease. Under the slightly more orange hue of the lights here, it plays out in a slightly rougher shade of grey, the thin threads of eager blue from Rook Ben’s fingers sweeping out, like bugs, to leave glancing little smudges behind. Ben doesn’t mind. He’s got to hand it to Blukic and Driba; the workmanship is stellar, the little grey patter of fingerprints disappearing within minutes, very much like the clouds of foggy breath do against a heated car window. And if they stubbornly persist, usually a smearing wipe of a sleeve from the T-shirt on his other arm will do the trick.

‘Reelalaaax,’ he says, long and easy. ‘How many other of the kid’s idols are going to be careless enough to lose an arm?’

Rook Ben immediately scowls at him and whips his hand away as though he’s been shot.

‘I am not a kid! I have lost my bi’nthak! You were there!’ He says this accusingly as though Ben has somehow forgotten.

‘My mistake,’ Ben tells him easily, feeling a little amused at the sight. He wonders if he was ever this pouty when someone dismissed him as a ‘kid’ back when he was ten. Or however old Rook Ben actually is.

Rook Ben stares at him shrewdly and then nods his head, as though pleased with whatever facial expression Ben has conjured up for him. ‘Good!’ Then he hesitates. ‘Is it true that you are rolling around with my brother in the dirt?’

Ben blinks. ‘Pardon?’

‘Rolling round in the dirt with my brother,’ Rook Ben repeats, sounding very, very serious. Then he screws his face up distastefully, as though he doesn’t trust the exact phrasing he has used. ‘At least...I heard Father yelling such a remark at Blonko earlier. It was a lot more rudely put though. He called you a...’ Rook Ben stops and swallows. ‘A monkey,’ he continues in a tentative whisper, shoving his hand against his mouth afterwards as though he can somehow stuff the word back in.

Ben raises an amused eyebrow, not entirely sure if he should be interpreting that quote the way he should and glances at Shar, who looks as though she is torn between bursting her guts laughing, or arranging a disapproving scowl on her face.

He turns back to Rook Ben. ‘I don’t err, mind being called a monkey,’ he reassures the little guy, ruffling the brushy strands of the hair in that large central stripe with the hand the kid has been admiring just seconds earlier.

‘Well, I do,’ says his father curtly. ‘No one is calling my son a derogatory name, without explaining to me why they felt the need to do so and then issuing a firm apology afterwards.’

‘Yes!’ his Mom bursts out with indignantly. ‘You do not see me going round calling Rook’s father a large...cat-person, do you?’

‘I believe you just did.’

Ben feels dread curl in his stomach as he turns to see the familiar figure of Rook Da at the top of the stairs. Dimly, in the background, he can see Shim and Shi poking their faces above the
balcony’s railing that runs across the entirely of the upstairs corridor. Their black stripes and blue fur helps them to blend in somewhat against the dark, brown blotches that paste the walls behind them due to the large hulking shadows thrown from the open doors of the rooms behind them; but the tall, lean, towering one their father throws out over them all, makes them appear subdued and washed-out. But their obvious spying is all for naught as it turns out, because without turning his head, Rook Da thunders out a commanding: ‘Return to your rooms, daughters!’ They turn and flee, the doors letting out a slight snick of sound as they close...lightly. Ben isn’t fooled. He’s willing to bet there’s a gap thin enough to let sound drift through, small enough for two girls to push their ears against the crack and listen carefully.

Perhaps Rook Da isn’t fooled either, because he simply shakes his head.

‘And you should leave too, son,’ he addresses Rook Ben, eyes sweeping over them all to land on the small figure pasting himself to Ben’s side. His scowl grows fiercer as he sees his son hanging from Ben’s prosthetic hand, his blue fingers knotted firmly around the curve of the gleaming metal wrist. Though Ben has time to note that it softens slightly, the wrinkles growing a little less pronounced as they travel up to take in the entirety of that long prosthetic grey line drifting out from under Ben’s sleeve.

Rook Ben hesitates. ‘Can your arm turn into a rocket launcher?’ he asks Ben eagerly ‘Or transform into some sort of teleporter pad?’

Ben stares at him.

‘Now, son!’ Rook Da explodes with, loud enough to make Rook Ben yelp and dash up the stairs.

‘Sorry-Ben-Tennyson-I-will-see-you-later-okay?’ he yells out, the words rolling off his tongue quickly enough to stir up a faint giggle from those partially-closed doors his sisters are no doubt hiding behind. ‘Be silent!’ their brother hisses as he scampers down the corridor and into the room at the end, the one Ben has slept over in a few times before.

Rook Da now turns his fiery gaze on his remaining daughter. Who promptly squares her shoulders and steps further into the light.

‘I respect you, Father,’ she says quietly. ‘But if I am old enough to become a Plumber, I am also old enough not to rush to obey your every command.’

Rook Da sighs, especially once he catches sight of Bralla’s approving nod in the background.

‘That is fair,’ he says grudgingly. Then he casts an eye on Ben. ‘You are very good at stirring up chaos in this family,’ he remarks.

Ben’s dad meanwhile, settles his jaw into a firm line and walks to the bottom of the stairs, deliberately forcing Da’s eyes to cut from his son to him.

‘And you seem to be very good at shutting them down,’ he says coolly, arms folding firmly over his chest. ‘In less than a minute you have three of them cowering away from you. What are you, a former general?’

Rook Da’s eyes narrow and he starts to walk down the stairs, each distant thump from his boots sounding like a tick in the countdown for the eventual explosion Ben feels powerless to stop.

‘Revonnahganders are not like you humans, always so desperate for warfare. Your planet cannot keep from any kind of skirmish, not even between yourselves, whilst Revonnah has managed to
keep itself from imploding into any kind of ‘world war’ or battle for over three hundred years!’

‘Your species’ history has no bearing on your parental skills!’ Carl’s shouting now, firmly red in
the face, barely a bated breath from showering Rook Da with spit. ‘Trust me, I’ve had a military
man for a father and right now, I see no difference between his stance and yours!’

Ben hurries between them, all thoughts of self-preservation firmly lost as he places a palm out
either side of him, both of their chests coming forward to push into his opposing hands. His Dad’s
meets the cool glide of his metal one, while the slanted cloth of Rook’s Da’s robes crosses and
bunches under the life-lines from his flesh and blood one and Ben has enough time to stop and feel
foolish about that as he becomes caught in the crosshairs of Da’s glare.

‘Um...’ he tries, rapidly loosing his confidence as the glare worsens. ‘Chill out? C’mon,’ he
continues hurriedly as Rook Da’s hand seizes his wrist and yanks his hand off forcefully – because
ow, maybe he should have used the metal one for the angry Revonnahgander – ‘this is stupid-’

He’s cut off by the main door downstairs bursting open.

‘What is all this commotion?’ Rook’s voices asks, a lot quieter than any of the shouting that has
been taking place, but no less steady or firm. ‘I could hear it from ten ledges over.’

He walks in, a basket roped over his shoulder with a series of tight orange cords, the woven reeds
filled to the brim with a bunch of shiny red berries and crystallised orange baubles. ‘I got the
candle cradles and the popping goo’star seeds as you asked mother, though the market is out of
pellets for the main washer and water cistern-’

He pauses, eyes widening as they catch sight of Sandra and then his head swings round to catch the
frozen forms of the three men at the bottom of the stairs, Ben’s arms pressing out through the air to
connect them all.

Ben meanwhile, is busy ignoring the pain in his wrist to rake his eyes over Rook’s new get-up.
Because the Proto-Armour, for once, is gone.

**Halleluiah!** he can’t help but think privately, not quite brave enough to vocalise the thought with
Rook Da present.

Because instead of the usual blue and black, Rook is wearing something that slides over him in a
much looser fit, clothes that bear a striking resembling to the garb wrapped around his father’s
shape. The only real difference is the slightly darker colour that hangs on him, a dull, dun brown
that matches the rich tone of the soil outside, and the series of bandage-like bindings that travel up
from under the lapels of his robe and wrap round his throat in an all-too similar pattern to the ones
that accost his mother’s neck.

Rook’s eyes alight on his Father’s hand, still twisting Ben’s wrist away from him and a little anger
stirs his expression.

‘Release him, please, if you will Father,’ he says in a rather clipped tone of voice, and then steps
forward to tug Ben’s cool left wrist away from its place next to Carl’s sweater vest. Da lets the
other, warmer wrist fall and Ben finds himself tripping over his own feet slightly as Rook pulls
him away a good few feet. He glances up at the sigh Rook lets out, seeing the anger fade from his
boyfriend’s eyes and transform into annoyance.

‘I really cannot let you out of my sight for more than a few hours, can I?’

Rook Da snorts. ‘This should come as no surprise,’ he states, thrusting his arm out to indicate Ben.
‘What else can you expect when you start consorting with a monkey!’

‘Hey!’ Ben’s Dad looks mad. ‘I’ll have you know that my son is a fine young man and any other guy would be lucky to have him!’

‘You should be ashamed of yourself!’ his mum adds, and wow, she’s beginning to look really pissed off as well. ‘Your son has shown more manners in all the time we’ve known him, than you have in the last five minutes! At least he has never dismissed Ben with a casual slur against his, well, our species!’

‘I don’t think ‘monkey’ is a slur, Mom,’ Ben mutters. But he’s rapidly losing the fight to protest.

Rook is starting to look really annoyed and he shoots Shar a look filled with venom.

‘Do not blame me!’ she protests, raising her palms up. ‘What hope have I of making them stop? What hope have you?’

Rook pauses to mull this over. ‘None,’ he declares abruptly and seizing the handles of the basket strapped over his shoulder, plonks it and all its contents on the dining room table. ‘We will see you all later!’ he calls, refusing to turn his head and see what expression is busy curling his father’s face to distemper. ‘Hopefully by then, you will all be acting like the adults you are!’

His mother sighs. ‘Do not stay out too late!’ she calls back and Rook spares her a nod.

‘Wait, wait, wait!’ Ben mutters, only half-heartedly pulling his arm back as Rook tows him towards the door. ‘My Dad just insulted your Dad’s parenting style. Are you sure it’s a good idea to leave them alone?’

‘No,’ Rook replies honestly. ‘But I am sure that it would be even less of a good idea to leave you alone with my Father.’

Ben laughs nervously, feeling the air brush his face with a welcoming coolness as Rook pulls him outside. ‘I wouldn’t be alone with him, exactly...’

‘It would not matter,’ Rook answers, dropping Ben’s arm and striding into the back of his Proto-truck like he means business. ‘He wants you to bear all the ‘blame’ for our relationship occurring in the first place. I think, either way, you would end up feeling very alone in the long run, despite your family surrounding you.’

Ben peers in curiously after Rook, making out the shape of him bent over the co-pilot’s chair. It’s weird to see him like this, in something other than the armour that has always made the lines of his body look sleek and defined. Here his robe falls loose slightly, the lapels hammering out little bulges in the dark, and his sleeves and trousers have wrinkles in them, making him appear a little larger than he actually is. He looks...debauched. At least in comparison to his usual prim and proper self.

‘Nice new threads!’ Ben calls in after the guy and Rook actually straightens at that, casting him a small smile.

‘Not that new, I am afraid. These are clothes I had long before I ever signed up for the Plumber academy.’

‘Oh.’ Ben thinks about this. ‘Well, they’re new to me.’

Rook pauses, lifting up something and sliding it over his arm in a casual loop. ‘Yes, I suppose they
would be.’ He walks back out of the truck, the door closing with a whirl as soon as his feet meet solid ground again. ‘Here. The temperature will drop quite substantially the longer we are out here.’

Ben blinks as his hoodie is promptly thrust into his arms and he shivers at the thrill of feeling the soft warmth against his skin, and the promise of what more it will bring once he shrugs it on. Goosebumps are already prickling his arms, though he can’t help but feel annoyance scrape at him as Rook’s mouth lifts in a typical I-know-everything smirk at the sight.

‘I was looking for this,’ Ben mutters as he gives in and zip it up over his chest. ‘When did you steal it?’

‘As you have stated, many a time when I find something missing from my room, I was merely borrowing it,’ Rook says smoothly. He places a palm on Ben’s back and guides him over to the cliff surrounding the back of his family’s home. Then without further ado, that palm leaves Ben’s spine and Rook’s feet leave the ground beside him in a quick leap that transports him to the ledge a good three feet above. He turns and leans down, offering the line of his long arm out to Ben.

‘Come. I know a good spot on the plateau above where we will not be disturbed.’

Ben squints up at him. ‘The same spot you used to take Rayona for a bit of ‘alone’ time?’ He asks suspiciously, raising his fingers in curling quotation marks round the word ‘alone’ and feeling a little surprised when Rook actually casts his gaze down and nods hesitatingly in response.

Ben grins and seizes hold of the hand still stretched out towards him, planning on giving Rook a good yank, hefty enough to cause the guy to come crashing down. It’s mean, yes, but Ben is feeling impish, enough to tease and flounce. Seconds later he is forced to amend that decision as the mouth below Rook’s lowered mouth curls in triumph and his other strong hand races down to grip Ben’s wrist, heaving him into the air with a decent thrust. Ben doesn’t yelp, for once, but he does feel the breath leave him with a big whoosh as he lands in Rook’s arms which close around him like a vice.

‘That certainly backfired on you, did it not?’ his boyfriend asks with a grin, seeming to relish the way Ben struggles in his hold if the light in his eyes is anything to go by. ‘Maybe you should learn not to make such an obvious grin when you are planning something untoward.’

Ben huffs and pushes against Rook’s chest with his prosthetic hand, taking no small delight in the way Rook suddenly frowns, the muscles in his shoulders quivering slightly as he fights against something that can exert a lot more force than he’s used to Ben giving.

‘Stop that,’ the Revonnahgander says testily. ‘How else am I supposed to carry you up here?’

Ben gives him an outraged look. ‘I have legs! I can walk.’

‘Well, yes,’ Rook admits. ‘But you cannot jump, not the way I can. And you will need to, if we are to reach our destination.’

He casts an eye up the set of craggy ledges behind him, each looking at though it’s fit to give way under each crumbling step. Ben’s heart drops. Not so much at the way each ledge looks as though it’s been chiselled by a giant with shoddy equipment, though that’s certainly a cause for concern. But at the way Rook’s right; each ledge is spaced a few feet too far apart for any human to make the jump.

‘I have Crash-Hopper’s legs!’ he protests, as Rook bends down slightly, a frown carved onto his face as he gathers Ben up more firmly into his arms. ‘I have...I have literally the legs of any alien
you could think of! I can fly up there, for Pete’s sake!’

Rook’s frown develops a few more grumpy ridges as he stands. ‘Yes,’ he concedes. ‘But I do not want to snuggle up with Crash-Hopper or any of your other alien forms. And besides—’ he adds tartly, making the first leap before Ben’s even properly prepared for it. He finds himself jolted, Rook’s hand brushing into his hair, and scraping the side of his neck as the sky suddenly jumps a few feet in his line of vision, making a few more new stars appear. ‘...You would probably end up transforming into ‘the Worst’ out of spite. And I certainly do not wish to snuggle up with him, either.’

‘Ah,’ says Ben dryly, resigning himself into being Rook’s new damsel-in-distress project. ‘So you don’t love me, no matter my shape then?’

Rook shoots him a quick searching look, before he jumps again.

‘I said that I did not wish to be intimate with your alien forms. Not that I would stop loving you when you turned into them.’

Ben sighs. ‘I bet you let Rayona jump up here by herself,’ he mutters grouchily.

‘Of course,’ Rook answers smoothly. ‘She would have spurned me, had I not. You, on the other hand, are far too fond of receiving attention to ever turn to that as a viable form of rejection.’

He shoots Ben a grin and brushes a brief nuzzle into the line of his neck, despite Ben’s whine and the way he tries to shift the gap closed. ‘Brace yourself,’ Rook adds, removing his face before he takes a leap much larger than the two before, large enough to make Ben’s teeth rattle as they land.

Ben moans and wraps his arms round Rook’s chest, sliding them round the neck. ‘I’m the greatest hero of the universe, I can turn into Alien X, and you honestly think it’s a good idea to annoy me?’

Rook gives him a level stare, not looking threatened in the least. ‘Yes,’ he says decisively. ‘The look on your face is quite amusing.’

Ben promptly shoves said face against Rook’s chest, the cloth pushing into the skin and across his lips with a fuzzy harshness. And it’s not a bad feeling. Without the armour in the way, he can feel the contours of Rook’s chest more easily, all the nips and tucks where the muscle gives way and pushes out behind the cloth, especially in the places where those familiar blue plates used to form a barrier. Rook’s body warmth also bleeds through more easily, into his fingers as he scrunches them into the cloth more firmly, a clear river of temperature running through to his skin.

‘Ben?’ Rook asks, and it is not quite worry that stirs his tone, but it is close.

And all Ben can think of in response is unfair, totally unfair. He gets to feel me, the real me, most of the time.

He slides his head up a little way, peeking up at Rook expectantly.

‘Boo,’ he says, feeling the smile on his face curl and turn his tone flippant. ‘Made you stop.’

And it’s true. The sky stays still, Ben isn’t being jostled, and the worry on Rook’s face is quickly transforming into annoyance.

‘You’re cute,’ Ben teases. ‘Worried about little ol’ me when I’ve had bad guys trying to take down since I was-Ah!’
The yelp is thrown out of him as Rook, still wearing an unimpressed look, tosses him lightly into the air by a few centimetres, as though his body’s a pancake or something. When Ben lands inside the curve of those strong arms again, he finds himself re-adjusted, perched a little higher, so his eyes are level with Rook’s mouth.

‘There,’ says Rook decisively, sounding a little too pleased with himself. ‘Now you cannot hide your head away.’

Ben rolls his eyes. And people think he’s smug.
It’s certainly not the coolest mode of transportation, being hauled up a cliff-side by your stupidly athletic boyfriend. Still, at least they reach the top in one piece.

‘It would have been faster if I had used the Omnitrix,’ Ben declares as soon as Rook lets his feet to settle on the ground.

‘Hush,’ Rook says, half-laughing as Ben almost trips and falls, trying to escape his arms. ‘I refuse to believe that the journey up here was that bad.’

‘No,’ says Ben peevishly, looking at anywhere but Rook and his smirking mouth. ‘But it was still kinda embarrassing. You wouldn’t enjoy it if I dragged you up here like a princess!’

The next second, he loses sight of the anger behind his declaration and Rook’s snide ‘you are no princess’ comment being directed his way. If fact, he’s glad he’s not looking at Rook at all.

Because it’s night, and the majority of the earth and soil of Revonnah has turned purple, delving into an assortment of rich blues, especially the rockier parts. He steps forward as the night air blusters against his back, pushing around and over the top of the small plateau and causing him to look down. Below, the houses are like small lumps of molten amber, the strong squares of orange light in the windows cut out like candle flames in the darkness, painting the walls that surround them from the outside with a dull orange-brown gleam. And even with all the richer details lost, without the daylight to illuminate them, there’s still a quaint beauty here. Especially with the stars and two moons overhead, a tapestry of blue inspired with silver to roll over them all.

Rook comes up behind him, cradles his hands about his waist.

‘No real action to be found here, I am afraid,’ he says, his voice low and hushed. ‘But then I do not think you are immune to such a picturesque part-time of enjoying the view, every now and again, hmm?’

‘No,’ Ben replies, letting his hands stroke the fur on the ones hovering above his hips. ‘I’m not. It’s hard work, but I do know how to be actually be still sometimes.’

Rook chuckles and Ben feels the grin on his own face seep into his cheek, becoming a softer, more uplifted quirk of a smile.

The wind stirs, and he can feel it brush through his hair, not to mention through the fur he’s got trapped under his hands. But he stays still, lets it rush through him, even if it’s enough to make him regret the fact that the sleeves of his hoodie only fall to cover three quarters of his arms. Though really, he can only feel the goosebumps rising up on one.

Rook of course, does not shiver. But he still leans over and lets Ben slide back into him a little without asking permission to steal a few seconds worth of body warmth.

‘Perhaps I should have brought an actual coat with me,’ he mutters. ‘But then I have never taken you to the higher reaches of Revonnah; it slipped my mind that you would feel the wind more brusquely than I do.’
‘Aw, you love it really,’ Ben remarks, twisting his head so that he can stare up at Rook and his big worried face. ‘Any excuse for me to cuddle up with you. Bet it’s a bit of a novelty, right? Because you never had any need to do it with Rayona.’

Rook raises a brow and even with the limited light playing out from the stars above, Ben can still make out the dark crease of fur round his eye lifting. ‘True. She was better suited for the environment here, being a Revonnahgander.’

‘Hmm,’ Ben murmurs, eyeing his watch thoughtfully. The green glow of it, as he passes his fingers over it, makes ghoulish shadows flare out over his skin and prosthetic metal, and Rook tightens his hands over Ben’s waist in response.

‘Ben...’ his voice comes out a low warning.

‘Alright, alright, sheesh, just trying to be ‘sensible’ for once,’ Ben says, letting his hand drop from the hovering curl above. Some habits die hard, after all. And while he supposes Azumuth could restore the watch to it’s original ‘slap-it-down-and-go-hero’ style, that fear would always be lurking in the back of his mind, the possibility that he could once again, end up in a solution where he only has one arm to work with.

‘Who were you even going to transform into?’ Rook asks, exasperation colouring his tone. ‘Wildmutt? Heat Blast? Did you wish to set me on fire?’

Ben feels his smile curl up, back into a cocky grin.

‘Nah,’ he says, relishing the surprise in Rook’s face as he spins round suddenly, using his speed to twist himself free of Rook’s hands temporarily. ‘You’re already hot. Besides...’ and here he lingers, lets a finger, a flesh and blood one, full of heat Rook can actually feel, drag itself up through the cloth over Rook’s chest to pry the lapels open slightly. ‘I can turn up the heat as my human self.’

Rook eyes widen slightly, amusing Ben. Then they narrow, and Ben feels those familiar fur-coated hands clamp down on his hips, one travelling up to settle round his shoulders.

‘Oh?’ his boyfriend asks softly. ‘Can I request a demonstration?’

Ben grins. ‘A request, huh?’ he teases, edging closer. ‘Not a demand?’ His hands trail up over Rook’s chest, push deeper into the gap his finger has created and fiddle with the bindings beneath, the ones that stretch up to over his neck. Then he frowns, despite the fact that Rook’s breath has turned harsh and excited in response. Because these bindings feel stiff, like dry reeds baked by the sun, ready to crackle under the slightest pressure. And not a whisper of fur pries through, not one quick, soft gap of blue for his fingertips to unveil.

‘Dude,’ he protests. ‘Are you okay? These things feel really suffocating. Please tell me you don’t tie them tight enough to choke off your arteries.’

Rook closes his eyes, his breath slowing into a sigh. ‘No.’ He manages after a moment. ‘I think I would be exhibiting certain signs of distress if my circuitry system was placed any undue pressure.’

‘Well your breathing was definitely weird a second ago,’ Ben remarks with a smirk, tapping a wagging finger against Rook’s nose. ‘Maybe you were experiencing a certain amount of ‘distress’ then?’

Rook grabs the offending finger, swallows both it and Ben’s hand whole with a curl of his fist and pushes it back against Ben’s side. ‘I believe I am certainly experiencing some now,’ he replies
dryly. ‘I demand reparation.’

Done, Ben thinks, hopping off his toes and pushing the bounce of his mouth against Rook’s for the split second he is still in the air. He falls, but Rook’s hands tighten and fasten around his back, steady as coils of rope. Undeterred, Ben meets Rook’s eyes and manages a cocky grin.

‘How was that that?’

‘Far too short for my liking,’ Rook says, as he swings Ben round, away from the edge. The moons shine against his back, pasting his head against their white light like the backdrop of some movie, and as he’s carted away, Ben watches fields and farms, whole houses, being cut away from his vision by the dark bulge of Rook’s shoulders.

‘Were you this smooth with Rayona?’ he asks in a daze as Rook lays him down against some moss, the pale, glimmery strands from some fern reaching out to pillow his head. Rook’s fingers join them, preventing his head from brushing solid rock entirely and he smiles down, his face looming larger and larger in front of Ben’s as he eclipses the sky. He stretches down in a dive, long and smooth, his knees caging Ben in and Ben wonders at himself, at them, for letting this become the sort of romantic scene he’s still, after all this time, never pictured seeing himself encased inside.

‘I certainly tried,’ Rook murmurs against his mouth, the familiar heat trapping Ben’s tongue as they open up to each other, the small slurps and wet smacks seeming to drive away into near-silence as he becomes fully engrossed in the slip and slide of the heat nestled inside Rook’s jaws.

Rook pulls away, and Ben gives up the chase as he feels the bite of Rook’s hands against his shoulders, weighing him down.

‘...But it seems to work better on you,’ Rook concludes. ‘Perhaps you never expected anyone to court you properly.’

Of course he would say ‘court’ instead of ‘date,’ Ben thinks, a little charmed despite himself. So he lets out a snigger instead.

‘That’s just a word people use to cover up the fact that they’re trying to get laid.’

Rook looks at him levelly. ‘I could have used ‘woo’ he points out, thumb idly flicking over Ben’s shoulder, enough to make him squirm. ‘Or seduce.’

‘Is that why you picked the new threads?’ Ben asks bravely, ignoring the way Rook’s voice has dropped, to squirrel its way into his insides. ‘To seduce me by appearing as your old Farm Boy self?’

Rook scowls. ‘No,’ he says firmly. ‘I simply thought changing into something more traditional might help to ease my Father’s temper.’

Ben’s eyes widen. ‘Oh, buddy,’ he mutters. ‘Oh, wow. Trust me,’ he adds, taking Rook’s face in his hands. ‘That’s not the way to go. I get trying to butter the folks up, I do. But sometimes taking the punishment they dole out is all you can do.’

He grimaces, remembering a time when he had to shoulder being grounded and having his phone taken away, all while Kevin was fighting for his life on a ship full of Highbreed. Not a pleasant experience for anyone, even if things did turn out alright.

Rook sighs, closing his eyes and turning his head into the hand that still wears Ben’s human skin. Ben isn’t offended. Some things, metal things, are no substitute for living, breathing warmth.
‘And then,’ Ben offers up lightly, ‘you walk away.’

Rook’s eyes snap open to his.

‘...Or in my case, turn into Humungousaur and smash through the walls of the house,’ Ben finishes guiltily.

Rook doesn’t look shocked. ‘Ah,’ he says knowingly.

Ben frowns. ‘What, is that in my file too? No, no,’ he groans, as Rook doesn’t answer, instead allowing the smirk on his face to grow big and wide. ‘Don’t tell me. I think I already know.’

Rook laughs, bends, and delivers a soft kiss to Ben’s brow. ‘You are my Rakishar’d,’ he says teasingly. ‘I would expect nothing less from you.’

‘That doesn’t really sound like a compliment,’ Ben grumbles. But his thumbs till twist under Rook’s jaw and curl, delivering a smooth stroke under the bone.

Rook goes stock-still and relaxes, melting with a drawn-out ‘Ahhhh’ into Ben’s ministrations. Ben frowns as the weight slides down over him, but given that it’s now effectively cutting off the harsh temperature of the wind, he supposes he’s got no real reason to complain.

‘Jeez,’ he mutters, no real bite to his voice, ‘you’re like a dog. If you had a tail, it’d be wagging.’

‘A bi’nthak,’ Rook corrects, his voice still sounding slow and pleased. ‘And, no, it would not; I distinctly recall mine had a life of its own. And that ‘its’ was not a contraction!’ he says hastily as he sees Ben raise an eyebrow and open his mouth. ‘I was using the possessive form of the word, as an attributive adjective.’

Ben’s mouth closes. ‘Sure,’ he manages after a moment. ‘Whatever you say.’

The fern flickers in the corners of his vision, leaves sweeping over to touch his face. Rook’s fingers, now lax beneath his head, stir a little, collecting strands of his hair and twisting slightly, enough to pull his head to the side and expose his neck.

‘Hey, hey!’ Ben protests as he feels kisses appear there, small wet spots that help the wind press in and deliver ice to his skin. ‘Dude! I don’t know what you and Rayona used to do up here, but keep it clean, okay?’

Rook snorts. ‘You do not really wish for that,’ he mutters, pressing down on Ben a little harder.

‘Well, maybe not me,’ Ben acknowledges, feeling certain parts of his body respond favourably to Rook’s added weight and force. ‘But my skin does!’

Rook pulls back and stares down at the goosebumps on Ben’s exposed right arm a little crossly. ‘How annoying,’ he says, sounding prissy as hell. ‘I am fairly certain I cannot maul you with my tongue back home with my brother watching.’

Ben raises his eyebrows. ‘Okay, one: that’s a really disturbing way to describe making out with me, so don’t ever do it again. And two: what on Revonnah makes you think your Dad is gonna let the two of us share the same room again?’

Rook lets out a cross ‘tch’ and buries his face against Ben’s neck again, this time nipping a little harshly against a patch of skin still marked with his salvia.
Ben frowns, feeling just as cross as he gathers his hands up in front of him and smoothers them between cloth and hoodie before pushing up, palms taunt against Rook’s chest.

‘You suck,’ he whispers harshly, directly into the ear nearest him. ‘I said, tone it down, not turn it up!’

Rook pulls back, a twitch of annoyance to his brow. Though it slows and softens, easing out into a more crestfallen look when he sees Ben glaring back at him.

‘Forgive me,’ he says and Ben hums, firmly crossing his arms in front of him and letting a finger tap out from the crease above his elbow now that there’s enough space to do so.

‘I know that’s the way you speak and all, but why does your apology sound like a command?’ he asks.

Rook pauses, then seeing Ben shiver, lifts his hand to cup Ben’s neck. And the wind that roams there, to make the wet spots Rook’s placed there glisten, pushes into his fingers, lifts the fur enough to push and braise the skin beneath. Rook frowns.

‘You honestly see my apology that way?’

But Ben is sighing, agro already forgotten as he relaxes his neck more beneath Rook’s hand.

‘Forget it. You’re waaaaarm. All is forgiven.’

Rook’s frown grows. And then cuts off in surprise as a familiar sets of snorts prise open the atmosphere around them.

Ben sighs again, this time in annoyance, especially when Rook draws himself off completely and goes to poke his head out over the nearby ledge.

‘Muroids,’ his boyfriend announces, as though Ben never heard them before. ‘Though what they are doing so high up in these parts...’ he trails off, brow fixed and furrowed once again in confusion.

Ben crawls out after him, lacking the energy to clamber onto his feet.

‘And you didn’t even bring your Proto-Tool,’ he remarks with a smile, feeling glee grow inside him as Rook’s fingers clench over the rock that holds them both back from the sight beneath. Because yes, the Muroids are there, shuffling out over the ledges like ants, though they lack the neat soldier-like efficiently of the single-file formation such insects typically adopt. Instead their feet grip onto the sliding shuffle of small stones, scratching against the barely-visible footholds that the ridges hold out for them, the smaller ones curling up into tight balls to bounce up onto the ledges a little too far away for them for them to successfully clamber up to without falling.

‘They’re coming up here,’ Ben points out, watching the serious look on Rook’s face develop. ‘And they’re bypassing your parents house entirely.’

‘That is not strange,’ Rook replies. ‘That time they burst into our home on your first visit was far from the norm. You know this. Besides,’ he adds, pushes himself up onto his feet and rolling his shoulders; it’s not as obvious under the bulk of that brown cloth, but Ben can still see the tell-tell heave of muscle. ‘I can protect you just fine without my Proto-Tool. Though,’ he remarks, deliberately ignoring the gobsmacked look on Ben’s face. ‘...it was remarkably careless of me to forget it. Forgiv-I mean, I do apologise.’

Then he promptly leaps down to the ledge below, whirling out with one long leg to kick the nearest
oncoming Muroid-ball straight out of the sky. There’s a high-pitched squeal of protest at this as the Muroids below watch their companion sail out into a rolling dot, far, far away, before angrily fixing their beady eyes on Rook. And then the air becomes filled with rolled-up Muroids forcefully flinging themselves skywards. Ben even sees two of those rodents, a good seven ledges below, grasp hold of a vine between them and hold it taunt, while a cousin of theirs rolls up into its centre to put a strain on its entire length, before, with a twist and heave, the two Muroids catapult him up, directly into Rook’s face.

Rook doesn’t miss a beat; he twists beneath the ball and uses the force of the throw against the oncoming Muroid to spin round and slam his palm against its side, causing it to smash into the wall and slump down in a daze. But there are twelve more trying to tear him down, the ridges of their shells slamming into the earth where Rook’s feet are quickly forced to leave, each landing forcefully enough to shove out a small indent into the soil.

‘Wow,’ Ben remarks glibly. And then he slides down to join Rook, half-tempted to yell ‘Cannonbolt’ into his watch and turn this into a contest of who can roll into the best imitation of a ball and bounce each other out of the sky. But numbers are working against him so better be...

‘Heatblast!’

And then there are more shrieks and snorts, the smell of singed pill-bug drifting through the air as each rolled up ball is set aflame. Ben blows on his finger, a regular smoking gun, as he sees the Muroids hastily unroll themselves and then slide over and over, rolled out to their full body length, to put out the small flames decorating their sides. They yelp and flee and Ben turns to his partner, a grin decorating Heatblast’s sly tone as he asks, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, you were gonna what me? Just who ended up protecting who here?’

Rook glares at him. ‘It is not a competition,’ he manages between clenched teeth.

‘It wasn’t until you turned it into one,’ Ben retorts. ‘I mean, have you met me? Ben Tennyson? Since when have I ever needed-’

The rock beneath his feet crumples and without even thinking about it, Rook darts forward, hand clenching over Ben’s. And a sizzle that is distinctly not roasted pill-bug darts up between them, Rook’s face screws up in pain and Ben’s free hand is hastily slamming the symbol on his chest. He falls back into human form and crashes into Rook’s chest.

With a hiss Rook yanks his hand away from him, cradling it and watching the black chucks of fur fall off in dismay, leaving puffed up pink skin beneath.

‘Water-Hazard,’ Ben whispers and the he’s stretching out a red arm towards Rook, offering it out slowly and gently, because he’s never really had to squirt water out for someone that isn’t an enemy.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, feeling encouraged as Rook doesn’t shiver and flinch away from him and if Ben possessed a mammalian face in this moment in time, it would be frowning as he concentrates, coaxing the water to well up between his claws and bubble up over the sides like an overflowing fountain. Rook kneels and sighs in relief as the water gushes out over his hand and they remain that way for a minute or two, Rook crouched over while the water glistens and falls from the red creature towering above him. It’s the kind of scene that would be painted as one of benediction, some religious overtone seeping though all the colours.

‘Snare-oh,’ Ben breathes out, finally and the water stops, replaced by bandages that tangle through the air before they settle and weave their way over Rook’s damaged hand, drawing in tightly
between the fingers.

‘Um, you’re not going to go permanently bald down there are you?’ he asks, voice an anxious quaver.

Rook glances up at him and manages a small smile. ‘No. I am not Kundo. And I am not the first Revonnahgander to suffer a burn caused by flames.’

Ben cringes. ‘Sorry again,’ he says pitifully, hand crossing over the Omnitrix symbol to once again revert him into human form. ‘Your Dad’s gonna think I roughed you up,’ he adds quietly, real horror in his voice.

Rook’s smile is wiped away instantly, replaced by a settling scowl. ‘No. I will handle it.’

Ben stares at him doubtfully.

‘I will handle it,’ Rook repeats firmly, his free hand twisting out to pat Ben on the shoulder. ‘Now; if you don’t mind; will you transform into something that can fly both of us down?’

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‘I could understand...well, no I could not, but I might see how you might let that human lay his hands on you for some sort of satisfaction, but to allow him to burn you-’

‘That is NOT what happened, Father, and if you will just allow me to expla-’

‘There is nothing to explain! While I understand that fists can be thrown astray and kicks can hit the wrong person in the confusion of a battle, I cannot in good conscience accept-’

‘It matters not what you can accept! I have suffered far worse on multiple missions and besides, this wound can be eased in a matter of days with a dose of Gwendolyn’s healing magic-’

‘You would allow another human to lay hands on you and potentially make the problem worse! With a power you do not understand or have ready access to?!?’

And on and on it goes, into the night. Ben shuffles up onto Rook’s chair, the buttons and switches of the Proto-truck laid out before like a buffet tray, casting an uneasy wave of yellow light over his legs. His parents lay stretched out into the seats behind him, heads cushioned on the pillows Shar and Shim had hastily thrown into their awaiting hands from the bedroom windows above.

Even their words, their well-meaning, ‘give the bigot time, Ben, you know we needed it back when we found out about your extra-curricular activities,’ do nothing to ease the tension, especially when his Dad’s voice had cut out, straight within the range of Rook Da’s sharp ears.

Da had glared at them all. ‘I now see where your son gets it from,’ he had said coldly, his glare landing on the bandaged hand of his own progeny.

But now, even inside the Truck, the shouts still seep through the walls. How is that even possible, Ben thinks. This thing can survive the hostile environment of space. But apparently not the hostile yells of Rook’s Dad.

The shouts flicker through the air, and Ben cringes at the frustration he can hear in Rook’s voice.
He doesn’t care so much about Rook Da’s; he has been expecting it and besides, he’s used to adults not liking him. But Rook does care. How can he not? Ben wouldn’t be too happy if his parents hated Rook either.

Ben blinks, realising that the yelling has ceased. And is completely unsurprised to realise that the silence makes him feel worse.

He leans back, into the curl of Rook’s scent as it drifts up from the leather-like fabric beneath him, thick and heavy, and he snuggles into it, trying to breathe it in. The rise of it feels heady and relaxing, enough to lull his eyes almost closed. Until that is, he happens to lift his eyes and finds them meeting Rook’s just outside the window. He jumps and straightens immediately but his boyfriend gives nothing away and Ben hurries back to make space as he opens the door, banging his head against one of the headrests as he does so.

Rook leans inside the truck, practically falling inside to curl up within the empty seat Ben has left, and barely managing to swing the door shut behind him with a careless arm.

Nothing, for a moment. Then...

‘Did your Dad really kick you out?’ Ben finds himself asking, a lump in his throat. He’s too afraid to reach out and touch Rook properly.

But Rook simply shakes his head, jaw clenching. ‘No. I chose to leave.’ He turns to look at Ben. ‘Let us go Muroid hunting tomorrow,’ he says, anger pressing deep into his face. ‘And this time, I promise you, I will bring my Proto-Tool. And my armour.’

Ben swallows. He can well understand the urge to let off steam. ‘You sure it wouldn’t be better to go have another chat with your Dad?’

‘I do not want to,’ Rook says stoutly, managing to sound more like a stubborn teenager than Ben has ever heard him be before. ‘Right now, I do not want to think about him at all.’

Ben looks at him. And greatly daring, leans his head over to lightly tap Rook’s side, hair and neck smudging into the cloth and relishing it.

‘Okay,’ he answers. ‘He’s your Dad.’

‘Yes, he is,’ Rook answers and Ben is gratified to feel Rook’s uninjured hand creep round his side. ‘Which means he will have to get used to the idea that you are my boyfriend.’

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays; whichever term makes you feel more comfortable! Here’s hoping you end up having a better break than Rook Da.
The suns race through the sky at far too early a time for Ben to be fully comfortable with, but then he’s still running on Earth time. He wakes to find Rook missing and one of the sun shining straight into his face, nearly blinding him before he rolls over with a groan. And is instantly accosted by the smell of bacon.

Am I hallucinating, he wonders blearily, crawling out into the back and patting the two empty rows of seats his parents should have been lying in.

‘You have got to be kidding me...’

He frowns, stumbling down the ramp to the smog of smoke outside and the small hole his Dad’s managed to dig out, badly, if the dirt smeared of one of the Revonnngander’s rakes nearby is anything to go by. As well as the fact that the hole itself is rather oblong instead of circular. A series of charred vines and small red stones are nestled inside instead, a thin wire grill pasted over the top. And on top of them, lie rashers of bacon.

‘What was all that about getting immersed in another culture?’ Ben asks his mother waspishly as she pointedly uses a very American spatula to flip over one of the rashers.

‘Oh, hush,’ she tells him, rolling one of the small stones beneath the makeshift grill with the end of her spatula, and then smoothly pouring out a mixture of what looks to be eggs, flour, and milk onto the red-hot heated surface. The runny liquid instantly begins to sizzle and transform into a crisp pancake.

Shi leans over and giggles, her mother’s hand pressing back on her shoulder to keep her from inhaling too much of the smoke, and with a start, Ben sees the rest of Rook’s family staring quizzically at his mother’s new stove. Everyone except Rook Da and Shar, who is standing to one side gesturing furiously to her older brother who simply looks at her, arms crossed, and says not a word in response to her furious whispers.

‘Ben Tennyson!’ chirps a voice, before he can make his way over and find out what’s going on. ‘You are finally, finally awake!’

Ben smiles down at Rook Ben, who has bounced out of the smoke like a gremlin to grin up at him. His smile only adds to the impression, his pointed tooth jutting up above his lip.

‘Guess so. But where’s your Dad? Isn’t he...kinda mad about all you guys being out here with...us?’

The other Ben looks uncomfortable, but his mother simply snorts and rolls her eyes upward. ‘He does not own us. I would thank you to remember that.’

Fair point, Ben thinks, but he can’t help but stare at her curiously. ‘Aren’t you mad at me?’

She gives him a level stare, finally releasing Shi from her grip and then sighing heavily as her daughter giggles and promptly trips over her own feet, missing the hot grill by mere inches.
‘Yes,’ she responds. ‘I am angry. The same way I was angry when Blonko nearly cut his head open trying to wrestle a Muroid when he was seven. Or when he and Shar nearly skewered themselves trying to cross a ravine their legs were not yet developed enough to handle. I am only a little angrier because this latest revelation about your relationship is causing further discord in my family.’

‘But,’ she adds, her stare still level and not softening at all in light of the guilt Ben knows is showing on his face. ‘I do not want to drive my son away from his family entirely. I have seen what tempers do in that respect.’

Ben’s mom makes a hissing noise from between her teeth. ‘Nearly done! Then we can all lap up some unhealthy grease!’

Ben raises his eyebrows. ‘Okay, this is very unlike you.’

Sandra shrugs. ‘I think we need a little grease today. Some comfort eating. It’s not good for the heart physically, but perhaps it will help with the emotional one.’

‘I’m not one to look a gift horse in the mouth,’ Ben tells her, eyeing the orange plates Bralla has kindly set up on a smooth yellow and brown rug nearby. ‘Load ‘em up, please. I don’t suppose you happened to smuggle any chilli-fries from Earth with you?’ he adds hopefully.

His mom gives him a winning smile.

‘Nope, I thought not,’ Ben mutters watching her scoop up black-lined grilled streaks of bacon, as Shim uses a set of gloves to pry the grill off the fire and scatter more pancake mixture onto the stones beneath.

The latest exasperated motion from Shar’s arms catches his eye and he watches her stalk off. Rook frowns after her and turns back, eyes scouring the horizon line as he trots back to the side door of the Proto-truck without giving Ben so much as a glance.

Ben frowns himself, and sets off after Shar, quickly tosses a side of bacon onto Rook Ben’s plate as a distraction.

‘Mmm!’ he hears his Number One fan in this place exclaim. ‘It is truly crispy! Like Amber Ogia fritters!’

‘Hey!’ Ben calls out after Shar, jogging to fall in line with her stride which is a little difficult as her legs are actually quite long compared to his. ‘You’re missing breakfast!’

‘As are you,’ she tensely replies. ‘Besides; Blonko and I already ate.’

Ben frowns even more. ‘Were you and he planning to go off Muroid hunting together?’ he asks suspiciously. ‘Without me?’

Shar snorts. ‘And now without me too, it seems like. Blonko says he wishes for ‘alone time.’’

‘Huh, well nothing really wrong with that,’ Ben remarks, ignoring the stab of hurt he feels at how easily Rook is ignoring his words of yesterday. ‘Unless you think he’s going to do something really stupid with it.’

Shar stops and sweeps her arm out to capture her Father’s house with a single gesture. ‘I have seen this before. Blonko and my Father are notorious sulkers, at least when it comes to each other. Blonko is the eldest son, the one who is supposed to carry the legacy of Father and his farm into
the future. And he has always chafed a little at that, but only really expressed it when he decided to leave for the Plumber’s academy. And Father...is still a little sore about that. He thinks Blonko sees himself as better as him, fears that Blonko will now look down on him as an uneducated labourer.’

‘Doesn’t he fear that about you too?’ Ben asks.

Shar tosses her head, purple hair flying round and curling artfully beyond her shoulders. ‘No. It is different for me. Father cannot see me as an extension of himself. Honestly, I think he is just happy that I am not married to some boy nearby.’

Ben’s not really sure what to say about that. ‘How long do you think your Dad and ah, Blonko are going to...sulk?’

Shar blows out harshly from her nose. ‘The heavens know.’ Then she cast a sly, shuttered look at Ben, her eyelids drooping. ‘You call my brother Blonko, now?’

Ben looks away from her, far away and scuffs his shoe into the dirt. ‘Sometimes,’ he mutters.

‘Good,’ says Shar decisively. ‘He should not be called his family name by his lover.’

Ben flinches at the easy way she says the dreaded ‘l’ word. ‘How are you not embarrassed by saying something like that aloud?’ he demands, hands pressing in on his head as though he can shut her out. ‘Are all Revonnahganders this open about stuff? He’s your brother!’

Shar shoots him a look of surprise. ‘That is all the more reason for me to be open about it! I want him happy.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Ben grumbles, chancing a look at her. ‘I guess I get it. It’s not like he calls me 'Ben' all the time either.’

‘Really?’ Shar asks, genuinely interested. ‘What does he call you?’

Ben screws up his face. ‘Raki-shard,’ he pronounces, tongue fumbling over the harsh break in the middle and thinking, no, that’s not quite right, as he does so. ‘Or I guess shar’d. It’s probably something stupidly sappy knowing him, right?’ He pauses noticing Shar curled in over herself, shoulders shaking furiously. And then, with a tinge of trepidation, he watches as her hand comes up to fumble its way over her mouth. ‘What?’

Shar straightens, gulping back tears, actual tears and Ben feels dread slam down more heavily into him. ‘What?’ he asks again, the suspicion high in his voice.

‘Forgive me,’ Shar says weakly. ‘But it is so like Blonko, to call you a ‘small destroyer.’ It is quite fitting and, dare I say it, cute, especially since ’raki’ is usually a synonym we use for the very young.’

Ben freezes. ‘Shar is the ‘destroyer’ word?’ he asks hollowly. At her nod he exclaims, ‘But that’s your name!”

Shar gives a sly, knowing smile. ‘I know. I chose well at my naming ceremony, I feel.’

Forget breakfast, Ben thinks and rushes back to Rook.
He skips past the smell of bacon, the wavering, cake-like scent of pancakes and leaps into the front seat of the truck, practically crashing into Rook’s back.

‘Oi, Blonko,’ he says cuttingly, ignoring the way ‘Blonko’ rubs his head after crashing it against the ceiling and casts him a look of annoyance. ‘Or should I should I start calling you, baby?’

Rook freezes. ‘What?’ he asks cautiously.

Ben raises his hand, ticks the names off his fingers as they fall from his mouth. ‘Sweetheart, babe, honey, darling, I could go on! Take your pick.’ He leans back and crosses his arms. ‘It seems only fair. After all, you like calling me...what was it? Ah, that’s right, ’small destroyer.’’ He glares.

Rook stares. ‘Shar told you,’ he says dully, then he sighs and swivels round so he’s facing Ben.

‘Yeah, Shar told me! C’mon did you really think I wasn’t going to find out?!’

‘Oh no, I was counting on it,’ Rook replies, not sounding sorry in the slightest. ‘I thought the look on your face would be quite funny. And besides,’ he adds with a small smirk. ‘The name holds a ring of the truth about it. You are both small and cause a lot of destruction, despite it. And you are also,’ he murmurs, voice dropping at the same rate as his eyelids, producing the same coy, teasing, half-lidded look Shar gave him not a minute before. ‘...quite cute. Like our young ones.’

‘Oh great,’ Ben huffs. ‘So now you’re calling me a baby, too! That totally makes me feel better.’

Rook grins. ‘It is certainly making me feel better. I was feeling quite depressed. Thank you.’

He leans forward, enough to nudge Ben’s nose with his own. And Ben finds himself softening. Because despite his words, Rook does look tired.

‘Aw, my poor big baby,’ he murmurs, chasing the tired look away by provoking a scowl that settles in its place. He uses his thumb to smush in Rook’s cheek. ‘Maybe I should start calling you ‘sweetie.’’

‘Do not even dare,’ Rook threatens, using his un-bandaged hand to remove Ben’s thumb.

Ben’s smile fades a bit as his eyes drift down to where Rook has forced his thumb to settle, the crisp, clean lines of the bandages on his injured hand providing a smooth background of musty grey-yellow.

‘Snare-oh’s stuff hasn’t fallen off yet, I see?’ he offers gamely. ‘Yet another thing your Dad isn’t happy about, I’ll bet.’

Rook shrugs. ‘My Father saw the wisdom of letting the...’skin’ of a Thep Khufan remain in place. Apparently he trusts the well-known anti-bacterial properties of their bandages, over the ones your Mother offered from her first aid kid. And the ones my Mother keeps will suffice to keep him happy when this-’ he jogs his injured hand up into the light, eyes never leaving Ben’s face,- ‘eventually disintegrates.’

‘Huh,’ says Ben, trying not to fidget too much under Rook’s stare. ‘He can be reasoned with. Will wonders never cease?’
For a moment he wonders if he’s gone too far. But whatever passes through Rook’s eyes – a flash of irritation or perhaps simple weariness – is gone, chased off by the usual poker face. Revonnahgander expressions are always so good at settling into.

At least from a human viewpoint.

Ben leans back moodily, realises he’s in danger of falling into Rook’s lap, and, in the midst of fighting gravity, catches a flash of purple as Shar runs past, Plumber blaster slotted into the yellow twine of her belt. She stops briefly, right on the edge of the cliff, before swiveling her head from side to side, her eyes meeting Ben’s in the process. Instantly her expression detaches itself from the usual ‘Revonnahgander-poker-face’ as she sighs, eyes casting themselves to the sky before she mouths something at Ben irritably. It could be any word, anything at all, from ‘slow-poke’ to ‘hurry up’; but either way it doesn’t matter, not when she’s now quite gamely leaping into the yawning drop before her.

Ben immediately shrieks, leaps back, and stumbles out of the truck, racing towards the place Shar’s feet had been moments before. He feels his heart slide back down from its lodged place in his throat as he witnesses the purple glide of her hair below, casting a shadow over the sprawl of her body. It waves, like a cape flying over her shoulders as she practically teleports herself from ledge to ledge, leaping in the way only another Revonnahgander can.

‘She is nearly as impatient as you,’ Rook states calmly from behind Ben. ‘Still, I cannot blame her entirely. I am feeling a little restless too.’

Ben cocks a brow at him. ‘You’ve had breakfast, right?’

Rook exposes his teeth at him in a smile. ‘The bacon your mother provided was delicious. Though not quite up to her usual and far more healthy fare, I am afraid.’

Ben rolls his eyes, and smoothly leaps back as Rook’s arms oh-so-casually try to sneak round his waist. ‘Stinkfly,’ he murmurs, giving Rook a meaningful look before the flash of green light takes his human form away.

‘Ha!’ he now croons, wings blurring behind his back as he savours Rook’s slightly disappointed look. ‘Now you can’t get me! Not unless you want to end up smelling like...well, like Stinkfly!’

Rook makes a face, waving his hand in front of it as though to back up Ben’s words. ‘True,’ he allows. ‘But you will not remain so odorous for long. Not if you want to fit inside the narrower tunnels that the Muroid like to crawl into.’

And with that last remark, he leaps down to follow Shar’s trail.

What a sore loser, Ben can’t help but think, as his wings beat out a quick tune of accompaniment.

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Revonnahganders are good at leaping, true. But nothing, nothing, Ben thinks smugly, can beat the speed of simple flight. So it is that he quickly passes over Rook and zooms down to where Shar is inspecting a wide crevice in the cliff, his wings eradicating the distance between them within a shoddy two seconds.
‘Whatcha got?’ he asks sharply, ignoring the dismal purple shadow of his boyfriend in the distance, closing in.

Shar’s nostrils flare in response and she shakes her head, put off by Stink-fly’s pungent aroma. ‘Urgh,’ she says, before she re-focuses back on the crevice, fingers stoking over the crumbling scratches worn into its side. ‘I am wondering what these are doing here,’ she carries on grimly, the twist on the bridge of her nose being the only muscular tic she gives away. ‘They are level with the fore-limbs of a Revonnahgander, so no Muroid could reach this height, even on their hind-legs. If they were to try, fully unrolled, they would simply wobble and fall.’ She stops to ponder this. ‘Though that would be rather funny.’

With barely a grunt of effort, Rook lands beside them, and though he casts his sister a disapproving glare (which she promptly ignores), he quickly becomes distracted by the same problem she is facing. ‘I have seen similar grooves made before,’ he says slowly, the fingers of his uninjured hand reaching out to trace over the grooves. ‘Back at headquarters.’

‘Greeeat,’ Ben drawls. ‘Another escaped criminal landing on Revonnah. Yay for the Plumber’s security system. Your Dad’s gonna love this.’

He’s met with a twin set of annoyed glances.

‘It matters not,’ Shar says crossly. ‘I shall soon apprehend them.’ Her fingers press back over her belt where Ben can see that she’s not only stuffed her Plumber blaster there, but also a shiny set of handcuffs.

‘No,’ Rook cuts in. ‘You both misunderstand me. These do not belong to a criminal who has escaped the Plumber Base. They belong to someone who successfully invaded it. And was then apprehended and sent to a jail cell far, far away. Someone who originally belonged on Revonnah in the first place.’

Ben groans and Shar’s glare becomes worse.

‘Kundo?’ Ben asks. ‘Seriously? What, did he get homesick or something?’

‘Or something,’ Rook echoes, something angry and fierce sliding over his face. ‘I do not think Kundo longs for Revonnah much. Not when the attitudes of my people refuses to stagnate the way he wishes for them to.’

Except perhaps for your Father, Ben thinks but does not say. Besides, he’s probably being a bit unfair. Rook Da let Shar sail off to the academy after all.

‘It matters not,’ Shar states decisively. ‘My encounter with him this time, will not play out the same way it did before.’

And before Blonko can stop her, she darts into the tunnel, the darkness quickly swallowing her whole. This doesn’t stop Rook from following her though, and Ben barely has time to shove his head inside before the blackness quickly falls over his boyfriend’s back, thoroughly shielding him from view. Ben slides forward a little and then winces, his wings finally forced to still as they scrap against the sides of the tunnel.

‘This sucks,’ he says heavily, to no one in particular.
After a nerve-racking few seconds before Ben remembers the string of assorted numbers Azumuth had made him repeat twenty times the last time they met, he falls back into human form, the last ‘six-two-seven,’ escaping his lips with a sigh. It was a good idea, he thinks grudgingly, for Azumuth to install this feature, but still – why couldn’t the guy have agreed to something short and snappy, a slogan like ‘going Ben?’ He pauses, and then foolishly remembers that he could have just slammed one of his insect legs against the bright Omnitrix symbol on his chest.

Huh. Maybe Azumuth has a sense of humour after all.

Ben stumbles through the tunnels, already missing the handy torch feature that comes strapped to Rook’s Proto-Tool, before giving up and whispering ‘Ditto.’ Instantly the tunnel’s features explode into clarity, the grains of the rocky walls sharpening into focus and he grins, claws drumming out a tune below the long ridges Kundo has scrapped out above.

‘Alright then,’ he mutters. ‘Time to split.’

Because to his utter lack of surprise the path forks and turns and twists ahead. He turns to the three other Dittos he’s created, two of them giving him a bright thumbs up, while one shakes his head grouchily and murmurs a broken, ‘Dude...’

Ben glares and puts his hands, sorry, claws on his hips. ‘What? That one’s a classic!’

‘Yeah,’ mumbles Mr Mood-killer. ‘Which is what makes it so lame.’

Ben gives him a look. And so does one of his other doubles. The third ones simply glances between the four of them, looking relatively confused.

‘Are you sure you came out of me?’ Ben asks waspishly. ‘Or has Kundo invented some weird cloning machine? Because I do not need this little adventure turning into a classic scfi-horror trope.’

‘Sure,’ retorts Mr Mood-killer. ‘Blame the crazy bad guy. Maybe that will make up for your lame sense of humour.’

‘Ooooooh,’ says the third Ditto, ‘this is getting good.’

‘No!’ exclaims Ben. ‘This isn’t getting us anything! What it is getting, is well, it’s getting Kundo time.’

The second Ditto hesitantly raises a claw. ‘Er, don’t you mean, giving Kundo time.’

‘Argh!’ Ben spits, fed up with them all. ‘How can I be so annoyed at myself?!?’

‘Not the word, I would use,’ comes a cold, creeping reply, the words reverberating from all directions and in a voice Ben still recognises reasonably well. One of the Dittos instantly leaps into the arms of the second one in shock, while the fourth glares, quivers, and much to Ben’s gratitude, curls its claws into fists.

‘No,’ Kundo’s voice continues, and, Ben’s eyes now sharpened by the sudden shot of adrenalin in the cyborg’s voice gives him, manage to pick out speakers dotted around the floor, disguised behind lumps of small stones in imitation of their pebble-like shape. ‘Not the word I would use at all. ‘Angry,’ perhaps. ‘Ashamed,’ definitely. ‘Enraged,’ would be the one I would personally pick.’
Ben narrows his eyes at the uncharacteristic mirth decorating the tone of the last sentence.

‘You sound good,’ he observes cautiously, glaring round, trying to pick open the seam in a disguised trapdoor or something, perhaps one embedded into the ground. ‘Way better than how I’d prefer you to be.’

‘Yes,’ Kundo answers, all mirth now fled from his tone. ‘I am.’

Ben frowns. And then the ground shifts, shakes, and slides away into sand. The yell is abruptly torn from his throat as he falls and twists, claws scrabbling uselessly into the grit, before something brushes against his side and causes him to slide down further into the conical-shaped pit. Another something knocks into him and is soon joined by another and another, until a whole bunch of dark shapes are bumping into him, jostling him against the other flailing Dittos. Within the hard knocks and clashes of abrupt, bruising pain, Ben can make out the bumps and ridges of the Murroids, and the lean, snake-like twist of their tails as they surf through the grey sand around them, their backs cutting through beneath the surface like a bunch of sea-faring turtles. Ben spits and curses. And yet, inside this whirlwind of ground and grit, Ben can still hear Kundo’s voice, even as the gravel bites his face.

‘Like them? I do. Though once, I used to detest them. But I have taken the words of my old student, Rook Blonko, on board. I will have to adapt and change, as the cursed Plumbers and their institute do, day after day, until I become unrecognisable. A monster, as Rook Blonko would no doubt call me. But monster enough maybe, to save the rest of the universe.’

Mad guy at ten o’clock, Ben thinks and concentrates. A Ditto appears below him, shoving him upwards even as it starts to stink in the place he had been inhabiting moments before, as another suddenly springs into existence beneath its feet, rearing up and pushing in turn. And another and another, until a whole ladder of them appears, a whole weaving totem pole of Dittos both rising and sinking towards the ceiling pushing Ben, their original, to the top. He calculates and leaps, grabbing hold of a stalactite as the hungry grey sand gobbles the rest of them down.

‘Strange,’ Kundo muses. ‘I blindly followed the teachings of my forefathers before me, never took note of the other lives that shared the same world as the rest of my kind. I did not think them capable of evolving. But look at them now, how they swim through the stone! And all it took was for me to listen, to teach them the art of meditation and the divining principles of Revonnah Kai. They have learnt not to cleave stones with blows, but to pass through it and make it soft, like water.’

‘Wow,’ says Ben, ‘that’s fascinating, really.’ Then he sighs, forcing the most put-upon expression on his face. Hopefully, whatever cameras Kundo’s using, will catch sight of it and it will help work the guy up into a tizzy. ‘Why,’ he asks plaintively, ‘do bad guys always think I’d be interested in their creepy lives and habits? So you’re a karate teacher to a bunch of overgrown rats, big deal!’

‘Karate!’ sputters Kundo, the tinny quality of his words distorting slightly and Ben grins as he pictures Kundo leaning too close to his space microphone or whatever, saliva pasting the mic in his rage.

‘Yep!’ He booms it out, announces it cheerfully, now swinging from stalactite to stalactite like Tarzan, claws keeping him from slipping down to the ground. There’s no real time to pick a direction, so he wings it, down the tunnel closest to him. ‘That’s all you are, a washed-up has-been. Maybe you’re still a master, a big shot of Revonnah Kai. But whatever it is that you think you’re evolving to now, Rook’s gonna beat it. He’s adaptive like that.’
‘Yes.’ Kundo’s voice is like ice now. ‘Adaptive. A good term. But I prefer degenerate. An adapt
description, I find, for one who ‘adapts’ to the fucking habits of another species.’

The shock of it, that word, ‘fucking’, made harsh and cold by the sheer nasty twist of it escaping
Kundo’s mouth is what does it. Ben’s claws scrabble, misses and he falls in the dark into another
vortex of grey sand waiting below that sweeps him under.

And Kundo’s voice follows him down.

‘Tell me, Ben Tennyson, how well do you think Rook Blonko will adapt when he finds that I have
taken from him something as precious as what he once took from me?’

Chapter End Notes

I’m such a nice person, aren’t I? Also, holy hell, I first published this in 2016? Urgh.
Hate how time-consuming chaptered fics are to write. And there are some people who
pump out twenty-chaptered masterpieces in the course of a few months. How? Damn,
I’m envious.
But here, stop pretending:

When Ben wakes, he half expects to find Shar stretched out on beside him. Instead he finds himself alone, pitifully human, arms wrapped round the back of what feels to be a kitchen chair, that is strangely earth-like in its structure. His wrists hurt, arms ache and Ben feels cold metal fastened over them both. So, still only half-awake Ben twists, and is met not with a the rattle and slide of chains, but the painful stabbing of something that scraps against his skin and holds the metal twist of his left wrist still. But more importantly, it hurts, refusing to bend and slide the way rope or one of the more usual binding tools that bad guys use do. That’s more than enough to wake him up and he cranes his head back, witnessing the rough, rust-speckled end of an orange pipe in the corner of his vision, and realising with a quick thrill of horror that Kundo had actually bent the entire length around his hands. The result is a hell of a lot more painful that’s he’s used to.

Clever though, he grudgingly concedes. But not clever enough.

‘Big Chill,’ he states firmly.

Nothing happens. No burst of green light, no electric thrill up his spine as it twists and breaks apart to rebuild itself into something new. Ben is left human. Because. Nothing. Happens.

Ben fights off the initial burst of panic and tries again.

‘Humungousaur! Heat-Blast!’

The panic rises and swells, as he recites off every name he can think of. He can hear it in his voice as he rattles off the various access codes and passwords Azumuth has drilled into his head time and time again. But nothing changes. His bones don’t break, his skin doesn’t harden into a mineral like-shine and he remains Ben.

All that’s left is to push out a frustrated breath of air, whine, ‘aw, man,’ and let Kundo play the next move.

He doesn’t have long to wait.

‘Yes.’ Kundo’s voices rolls out between them, smooth in comparison to the thudding hobble of his steps. He looks bad, sores on his bald skin weeping as new metal patches bite over the exposed areas of his skin like make-shift armour. ‘You like men, don’t you?’

Ben’s jaw drops open, not at the contraction, because well, nothing Kundo says really surprises him at this point, but at the sight of the once proud master, stooped and bent, pushing himself along on a knot of granite he has fastened his hands over, a long swirl of marble descending to the floor beneath it. It’s a fancy walking stick, Ben realises. Not a staff for battle. Simply a prop for holding Kundo up, something he actually depends on for balance.

‘What did you really teach those Muroids,’ he asks nastily, because nope, he hasn’t suddenly forgotten the cruel twist in Kundo’s voice and the pointed barb of ‘you like men, don’t you?’ ‘Breathing exercises? Because no offence, but you don’t look like you’re in peak fighting condition.’

Kundo smiles, but not nicely. And Ben is left gasping suddenly as the watch-face of the Omnitrix presses insistently into his skin. There’s a shift suddenly, as the strap unravels from his prosthetic...
wrist like it’s alive or something and the next second he feels its cool plastic-like grip wrap round
his other, warmer hand. The pulse in his wrist beats hard and fast, a throb steady in his palm as the
strap tightens just a little too hard.

‘I had time to think in my new prison cell, to mediate and become one with all that surrounded me,’
Kundo says, as though nothing unpleasant at all is happening. Dimly, Ben takes in his
surroundings, light and airy and free of rock. It looks rather like the inside of an abandoned mill or
farm or something, orange light spilling through the gaps in the curtains that float out around
Kundo like a halo. ‘I learnt to listen, to the buzz of the machinery around, that constant humming.
Eventually I realised that it was nothing more than a heart-beat, just a different form of breathing.
But like all breath it can be controlled.’

He walks around Ben in a circle, the thud of his stick like a third footfall as he pauses at Ben’s
back. ‘When Blonko first came to me, he was unsteady. Too eager to please. His breathing was
erratic, like the pulse of wings in a small insect. And that was what he was: an insect.’

With no warning at all, a sharp pain bursts against the back of Ben’s skull and he slumps forward,
breathing heavily, stars in his vision. The stick leaves the back of his head as quickly as it came and
Ben is forced to acknowledge that maybe Kundo isn’t quite as decrepit as he looks.

‘Yes: his breathing was like that too when I disciplined him.’

Rage builds in Ben at this, makes him hulk out great breathes and then rein them in, cold and
steady. He knows this game.

‘Was Rook Da happy about you beating his son with a stick?’ he manages, almost, but not quite
nonchalantly.

‘Earth must be full of spoilt children such as yourself if you consider what I just did a beating.’

Ben raises his head, looks Kundo in the eye. ‘I’m not a kid. And neither is Rook. He’s not waiting
for you in class anymore.’

A snarl breaks Kundo’s face open, parts his lips from his gum. His teeth are yellow and sharp and
looking at him reminds Ben of lions on nature documentaries.

‘No,’ Kundo spits. ‘He is getting, ah, how do you say it? Getting ‘schooled’ by you in the art of
fucking with a monkey.’

Ben can’t help it; he laughs. And manages to lean his head to the side as Kundo’s stick sweeps
through the air, raking waves of motion against his hair. Kundo raises a brow, looking impressed
despite himself.

‘It seems you are as agile as one too.’

‘Do not forget annoying.’

Rook’s voice. And it sweeps down between them, fierce as a gale. And then he is rounding the
doorway, splintered planks from the broken frame hanging over his furrowed brow like a veil.

‘You get one warning, Kundo,’ he says, the threat low and heavy in his face as his arms sweeps up,
the end of the Proto-Tool pointing directly at Kundo’s face, sores and all. ‘And I warn you now;
the blasts from my weapon will do more than ricochet off the new armour you have woven for
yourself.’ He shrugs at the look Ben casts him. ‘Upgrades,’ he says by way of explanation.
Kundo smiles. ‘How apt,’ he says. ‘But while you and I have ‘upgraded’ as you would say, I feel it is only fair that your partner suffer a downgrade in exchange.’

The Omnitrix strap tightens against his wrist, unbearably so and Ben chokes, feeling something wet run down against his fingers. Blood, he realises, a little too familiar with the stickiness. And he is glad suddenly, that he cannot see the resulting spill of red from his wrist, that he will not be treated to the sight of a familiar nightmare, and have to travel into a flashback that will grab hold of him and slam him against the wall. But oh, it does just that and more as Omnitrix saws against his skin again and this time he lets out a grunt, is forced to shut his eyes against the pain as he hears Rook whisper, ‘what are you doing?’

His eyes fall open, see Rook’s eyes hovering on the spot behind his chair, beneath his hands where he knows, can feel, the blood slipping down to pool on the floor.

‘He lost one hand; I am simply cutting the other one free.’

Kundo’s voice is steady, damn the bastard, whilst Rook’s is anything but; it shivers, shaking as both hands clench on the Proto-Tool.

‘Stop it.’

Dizzy, Ben wonders how far Rook is really willing to go. And how much distance there is left between the bone and rest of his wrist. He’s whimpering now, feeling the scream building in his throat at the thought that it’s his Omnitrix that’s doing this to him, cleaving his second hand from his body.

No, he tries to think, no it’s not. It’s Kundo doing this.

The Omnitrix bites bone, blood vessel, or something else hard enough to let a scream spill out past his lips, and Rook’s eyes dart over to him agonised. That’s all it takes, for Kundo to spin, to hook an ankle round the chair and whirl it round so Rook’s treated to the gory image of the Omnitrix slicing through his wrist.

Ben is in a little too much in pain to either appreciate or witness the blur of blue and black as it crashes into Kundo, the piercing scream of the Proto-Tool rising in the air as it fires off a shot. Despite this, Rook is all precision, kicking a boot into Kundo’s jaw, even as the marble stick slams down into his eye.

Ben may have shouted something; but now Shar is here, deft as a ghost, slipping through the gap in the curtains to wrestle her arms round Kundo’s throat and drag him down. Kundo howls, scrabbles, and chokes, and Ben feels viciously glad for that.

Then Muroids are piling in like there’s an all-you-can-eat buffet opening up, and Rook grunts, almost tripping over the chair as he twists, the shape of him close to Ben, his hand clambering round the back of the chair - and then orange peeks into the corner of Ben’s vision, the slice of an oh-so-familiar blade whizzing in and out of his tortured sight, the heat of it’s laser-like light spilling over his waiting hand and-

-he’s back there again, nothing but pain and dark and a voice he can’t quite recognise, telling him to bite down-

‘Ben! Ben!’

He awakens, screaming, to the feel of Rook’s hand on the side of his face, and the accompanying rattle of the shorn pipe as it drops away from his hands in pieces. Rook’s injured hand is cradling
his gristly, mutilated one, blood seeping through the bandages to create a valley of red and Rook is
crying, chanting, ‘forgive me, forgive me, I’m sorry’ as his other hand drops from the side of his
face, clutches the Proto-Tool and tries to bear the blade down on the Omnitrix itself.

Ben can’t help but jerk back protectively. Even now, after everything, an older fear is rooted deep
down inside of him, the one that tells him ‘no’, whenever the Omnitrix is in danger of leaving his
wrist and disappearing into the hand of another.

But he really shouldn’t have bothered flinching. Because naturally enough, the blade of the Proto-
Tool fizzes and refuses to make as much as a dent.

Rook’s eyes narrow, even with the tears leaking from their golden glare, and he sniffs,
whispering harshly, ‘I am going to kill Azumuth.’ The tone is cold and savage enough to wake Ben
up, and he stares out dimly, right into the yawning maw of a Muroid that Rook has yet to notice.
Ben’s prosthetic hand rears up instinctively, slapping down the long, lean, crocodile-like bend of
the jaw that snaps towards them. How strange, he thinks dizzyingly, that this should still obey him
when the Omnitrix doesn’t, just because, what, Kundo’s whispering to it?

...Guess he’ll have to shout louder.

Ben sees the crowd of Murroid charging toward them, forcing himself to his feet and clutching
hold of a surprised Rook who stumbles after him with a token protest.

Shar lets out an ‘omph’ of sound as she’s finally flung against the wall, her hairband nearly spilling
off round her neck at the force of the impact, but Ben doesn’t have time to worry about that, not
with the hoard of scrabbling feet and teeth nipping at their heels. With the last flurry of strength, he
punches the stick of marble Kundo is catching his breath over, watching it crumble down into
cracks and rivers of black. Because who needs an ancient alien martial art to cut stones with, when
you have a fake arm instead?

He swings round, Rook catching on as they dive out of the way, the whole hoard of Murroids
crashing into Kundo in the physical gap their absence brings. And Kundo flails, disappearing under
a swarm of grey furry bodies as Ben watches stonily on, the Omnitrix loosening its iron-tight grip.
Ben almost faints at the rush of new pain that brings on, muscles and blood suddenly loose and
free, both of Rook’s hands suddenly clapped and cradled round this new site of gore, binding it
together with sheer bloody-minded determination.

The Proto-Tool clatters to the floor, unnoticed and Rook spares a glance for his sister as she
rightens herself, stumbling overt to bend down and retrieve it, her fingers clumsily fumbling over a
switch. The orange blasts out from the wrong end, scattering and pushing the Muroids away and
she aims a sheepish grin at her brother before she stamps over to Kundo’s unconscious form,
aiming a sharp kick into his side just to make sure.

Ben’s not sure if he has quite enough room in him to care at the moment.

‘Makes sense,’ he tells Rook triumphant, half falling into his boyfriend’s arms. ‘Because he has to
concentrate to control something like the Omnitrix, otherwise why didn’t he bother turning my arm
against me as well?’

But Rook isn’t impressed. ‘Ben,’ he says gravely and Ben giggles, adrenaline rapidly wearing off.
‘No, Ben, listen, you have to transform, while your hand is still attached-’

Ben blinks. ‘Ooooooh,’ he says slowly. ‘Riiiiight.’
He can barely think of the right name, but after a careful prompt from Rook whispering earnestly into his ear, he pushes the word out into the air.

‘Wildvine,’ he spits, taking comfort in seeing the familiar threads of green trail out to link wrist and hand together, vines bunching up in a tight coil to erase the pain.

Now he can faint.

This is how it happens the first time; hazy light, almost grey through his eyelids. He comes to with a moan and a cough, sound distorting, turning fuzzy to his ears. It’s like he’s tuning into a radio, but all of him is set to the wrong frequency, a jumble of nerves wound up with no way to ease the tension that runs through him.

He feels drowsy, doused up on the light and endless white that surrounds him. Weird, because he’s used to the grey and green of the Plumber base and the medical department he usually gets fixed up inside. But there’s no high tech scanners here, just a steady beep, beep, beep that’s here to drive him insane.

‘Sweetheart...’

A hand on his face, his Mum’s voice. It sounds wobbly.

‘Jello,’ he says and laughs, knows instantly that it’s the wrong word to say.

‘Carl? Carl! Come quick, he’s awake!’

‘Easy, easy...’

His Dad’s voice joins the cacophony. A steady clap on his shoulder, announces the presence of his hand. But it’s soft, gentle, barely stirring the skin. And Ben frowns as a chord of pain strikes him, a bite of some foreign throbbing sensation that travels from the shoulder his Dad refuses to touch.

‘Ben? Ben! Can you hear me?’

‘He’s-’

‘Dad.’ Ben is confused, but then realises that Grandpa’s been cut off, choked off by the flat tone of his Dad. Flat, but the sound still cuts out like a whip. ‘Leave. Now. We don’t want you here.’

Ben moans, tries to say ‘no, I want you to stay,’ struggles to lean up.

‘No, Ben, honey, don’t-’

‘Ben, for Pete’s sake, you’ll rip out the drip-’

Ben is awake, staring in the wide, white faces of his parents, their skin bleached of anything resembling health. They’re ghosts, clowns, pale and frightening. But nothing is as frightening as the pain that rips through him, of the blurred memory of it, that has his eyes racing down to the shoulder where a clump of white protrudes, a clump of white and no...
Ben chokes. Gasps. Lurches forwards and breathes, sweat soaking his brow, dripping into his eyes.

‘Ben!’

It’s not like the movies, he does not scream. But he panics, loses himself for the impossible seconds he tries to blot out of his memory later, the second his Dad wrestles with him, his Mom cradling his head in her arms.

‘It’s alright, you’re safe-’

‘I promise,’ his Dad breaks in over her struggling voice.

That’s a lie. Ben has never been safe. And here is the ultimate proof.

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This is how it happens the second time: he wakes up in Rook’s room. Breathes, listens, sweat on his brow again. But no one’s there. Outside, behind the barrier of the door, he can hear a scuffle in the corridor and the faint clatter of dishes in the kitchen downstairs. And, if he concentrates, the tiny creaks of the boards bending under anxious feet, just metres away.

Ben may be human now, just Ben, but still he knows that Revonnahgander ears aren’t keen enough to pick up the slide of a duvet as it unveils a wrist, nor are they sensitive enough to detect the roll of his body as he leans over to inspect the hand that was nearly severed. And has his view met with a perfectly ordinary set of fingers and nails.

He doesn’t know what he was expecting. There’s no line, no scar, no tattered pockmark of a scab sewn onto his skin. Just a hand. Ben clenches it tightly, savouring the burn of pain. It’s still there. He’s here.

And before he can change his mind, he leans forward, cups the Omnitrix that betrayed him against his mouth with only the slightest of shudders and says, quite and fierce, ‘Nanomech.’

And then he’s there, out in the sky, slipping past the cool glide of the window. The breeze buffets him, lifts him up and he sees the light in the Proto-Truck on. Letting his instincts guide him, he falls towards the beacon of it, hearing the thunder of Rook’s voice as it pours out into the night, just as he lands against the ground, human once more. For once, luck is on his side; for the door is open, just a tad, enough to let the sound spill through.

‘Everything that has befallen you is your fault,’ says Rook. ‘Not mine.’

‘I know,’ drones Kundo, ‘but I realised it would ease my suffering, if I could increase your own. At first I thought about giving you an offer, about asking you to cut off one of your hands rather than watching your beloved ape lose his remaining one. But no; it hurts more when you are denied a choice and made to feel powerless. The way I felt when I awoke and found half of me turned to metal.’

A pause. Then:

‘You are disgusting,’ Rook Da says.
‘As are you,’ Kundo instantly replies. ‘You let your son consort with a human. A man besides.’

‘I seem to recall,’ says Rook Da loftily, ‘that your sister spent the last of her days housed in the arms of another woman.’

‘She was Revonnahgander,’ Kundo mutters and there is something old and weary in his voice, something barely there, barely, should Ben dare to think it, human. ‘That thing you let touch your son, is not.’

There’s a slam, a thud, and Ben jumps as he hears a body being thrown against the side of the van he’s smothered himself against.

Heavy breathing and then Kundo spits, a dink of sound, of something small, like a quarter, ringing out against the floor.

‘Ah,’ says Kundo, sounding suspiciously pleased. ‘You have punched out one of my canines, Rook Blonko. You are determined to rid me of as much of my natural body as you can, aren’t you?’

Rook Da hisses out a breath at the contraction, but Ben jumps as something altogether different happens. The door nearest him heaves open and Rook clambers out, looking wild and fey, blood rubbed against his knuckles. Ben freezes as Rook spins and catches sight of him, his quick outtake of breath, unfortunately, not being in the list of things quiet enough to escape the ears of a Revonnahgander. They stare at each other and Ben can’t quite make out the expression on Rook’s face. Is he angry? Is he sad?

‘Oh Kundo,’ says Rook Da heavily, thoroughly ignorant of the stare-down happening outside. ‘What happened to you?’

The spell is broken at this. Rook marches towards him, even as Ben cracks out a nervous ‘hi,’ and there is nothing gentle about the way the Revonnahgander seizes his metal hand and tugs him away.

‘And you are wrong,’ Rook Da suddenly continues, even as his voice fades out from Ben’s ears. It drifts out, lost, into the night Rook is steering him into. ‘I have not let Blonko do anything for a long time now. That choice is down to him, not me. And certainly, I am glad to say, not you.’

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Rook marches and marches. Ben trots. Considers snatching his hand back. He could, he knows. This arm is strong enough to, in a way his last one wasn’t.

And then he see it; a disused storeroom. Rook pulls him over the fields, easily stepping over the furrows in the earth that Ben almost trips over, his feet pressing down into the soil enough to make him feel awake, to feel their moist coolness shift and cling to his naked feet, and then they’re inside, clumps of earth being pressed against the boards of the storehouse.

Ben’s eyes land on the pool of blood on the floor, the curtains still flapping, ready to encase whoever steps into their trailing dance. And that becomes him as Rook pushes him there, wrapping the fabric round his arms to chase away the chill that catches at him.

Ben is now thoroughly awake and painfully aware that he’s not wearing much. Just a shirt and
some underwear. And. Well. Yikes. He really hadn’t bothered to actually think before he let himself escape the house as a tiny flying bug, huh?

A tear rips through the air, fabric spilling down around his head as Rook pulls it from the frame. As it falls over him, Ben can see it’s really just a bunch of complicated netting and loops, thin gauze like the type his Mum likes to cover herself with to keep the mesquites away.

He smiles, even if his heart’s not in. ‘This won’t let the bed bugs bite right?’

‘Just me,’ Rook answers, leaning down to kiss his neck. But despite his words, no teeth flash out, to clamp down on Ben’s skin. It’s just a kiss that lands there, nothing more.

His hands are big and heavy though, and it is they which seem to bite as they close on his shoulders, his arms, still pulling the curtain over him. There’s a cocoon here and it’s all comprised of Blonko.

‘Lucky you, I’m not wearing much,’ Ben manages, but he trembles, eyes landing on the space where the chair had overturned, where the blade had pressed down. Where the stain of blood still was.

‘That is your fault, not mine,’ Rook says primly. ‘You could have changed, before you started to spy on me.’ But his words, when they land on Ben’s ears, feel gentle and not harsh.

Ben wriggles awkwardly in return. ‘Is this really a good idea?’

‘It is an excellent idea,’ Rook says firmly. ‘But only if you allow it.’

Ben pauses. ‘Every psychologist and therapist out there would have our heads,’ he decides. This point doesn’t seem to stop Rook from lifting him off his feet and bringing him to the floor, pushing him down into the netting like a trap. ‘All the more reason for you to feel as though you should say yes, then, is it not?’ he asks, looking amused despite himself.

Ben grins. Fastens his hand, the one he’s nearly lost today, into the scruff of Rook’s neck.

‘You know me so well.’

‘And I’ll hurt anyone who tries to change that,’ Rook murmurs and Ben’s breath escapes at that, at the contraction, an advantage Rook presses, to win himself an open-mouthed kiss. It’s heavy and hot and Ben doesn’t have to say it, those three fabled words that, he knows, are the reason Rook so easily lost his cool, made Kundo choke out a tooth.

‘Dude,’ he says, relaxing into Rook’s hold. ‘No way. You’re too nice for that.’

Rook just looks at him, before pointedly sweeping his still bloody fingers over Ben’s cheek, lifting them up, enough for Ben to see the drying brown marking the fur.

Ben shrugs and rather pointedly lifts up Rook’s other hand, bandages still falling over the fingers and palm, before he breathes a kiss onto the twisted grey knots.

‘That’s different. You made a bigot lose one of those vampire fangs of his. He’ll think twice before messing with us again.’

Rook smiles sadly. ‘No, he will not,’ he says, effortlessly prying the lie apart. ‘Which is good,’ he adds, ‘because I will definitely not think twice about punching him again, the next time he
The sex is...not exactly therapeutic. It’s not penetrative, nor is a mirror to some of the stuff that Ben has, albeit tentatively, watched in some gay porn videos. It’s simple, involves hands cushioning dicks with both calluses and unsteady, fumbling palms, and in some odd way this reassures Ben; he’s not sure what he would do if Rook turned out to be a pro at this. Pout, maybe. Try and swallow his pride. Maybe pout some more. But no; it’s a little rough, true, and the stain on the floor catches his eye more often than not, but it happens. More importantly, it feels good. Rook feels good, his pants landing on his skin with hot and heavy precision, rolling over him with all the power of a lion.

He should feel frightened, Rook crowding him in like this. He doesn’t. There’s open air here, the curtains keep him from the stone of the floor and Rook’s breaths by his neck, tell him that there’s the safety of a shout nearby, an ear willing to listen.

Perhaps that reassurance is all he needs. Every time his breath catches, every time his eyes linger on the blood that escaped his wrist, they find that stutter yanked away as Rook’s hand passes into view, the dried flakes of fur decorating his sight.

Rook isn’t his keeper or his protector, though he suspects the Revonnahgander often feels that way. Perhaps he is simply Ben’s, label be damned.

Ben holds him close, sighs his release into the air. And it is not bad or good, that he did this.

He is simply here, with two arms and someone who loves him.

Not there, in a memory, with a friend who can do nothing but hurt him. And cut off one of his arms.

For the second time today, Ben puts that particular nightmare to bed. And turns his attention to Rook, who is busy panting into his neck, breathing little whispers that sound suspiciously like fully formed sentences. Ones choked with guilt like, ‘I will not fail you again,’ or ‘I will do better next time, I swear.’

Ben frowns and runs his hand over Rook’s neck.

‘Dude,’ he manages. ‘Don’t.’

Rook stiffens. ‘I cannot help it,’ he says lowly. ‘Twice now, I have been helpless, when you were in danger of losing a piece of yourself. The first time...well. We both know what I did the first time.’

He stares hostilely at the shining metal line running from the ball of Ben’s shoulder and smoothly runs a hand along it’s length. ‘I know it is foolish. And I know I cannot reverse time.’ Something dark crosses his face at that. ‘But still I wish I could have found something more to do at the time.’

‘You’ve done plenty,’ Ben corrects somewhat sharply. The boneless haze his body was in danger of falling into is now lost, gone, at the chipped clip of Rook’s voice. ‘You’ve done more than your fair share. And I’m glad it was you.’ He tries to picture Gwen or Kevin being forced to shear off
his arm and flinches. Gwen is strong, but not always in the way he sometimes feels she needs to be. She can be protective, her anger burning hot, but it’s never ruthless cold, the way it sometimes has been for him and Kevin. He’s not sure if she could have ever been able to look at him, been able to force herself through the hospital doors to visit, if she had been put in Rook’s position. Kevin could have done it, he knows. But he would have been surly, black-faced, filled with more self-loathing. Added what he did to Ben as one more in a long list of why he was such a screw-up, a failure, who doesn’t deserve people like Gwen and Ben to love him.

Rook, in some ways, is probably the most well-adjusted out of all of them. Although that’s maybe because unlike the rest of them, he has had a normal, stable childhood. He has chosen to be a Plumber, never having been thrown into a life full of peril the way the three of them were before puberty had even had time to strike.

But, well. Now...

Ben takes Rook’s face in his hand. Leans up to kiss him and ignores the wetness he feels his fingers sliding into.

‘Hey now, it’s okay, I’ve got you,’ he manages. ‘I forgive you. Even if I don’t think there’s really anything to forgive you for. If you need it, it’s allll yours.’

He tries to smile, feeling something inside him clench at the heart-broken look on Rook’s face.

‘You should not be comforting me,’ the Revonnahgander says lowly, brokenly in response. ‘Not when you almost lost your second hand today.’

Ben suppresses a shiver. ‘I’m not the one who’s crying,’ he points out. ‘That always takes priority. It’s like an unspoken rule or something.’

‘Not for everybody,’ Rook mutters and Ben wonders what he’s thinking, his eyes hooded and dark as he stares down at Ben. Then his lips quirk, just slightly, and his fingers reach into Ben’s hair, smearing it against their short tuffs of fur.

‘You need rest.’ His voice is decisive, that firm bite of confidence shoved back into his tone. Though it does nothing to prevent Ben seeing the damp sleekness of the fur matted down under his eyes. ‘Rest and peace. You deserve it.’

Ben laughs, not entirely distracted and shoves Rook away, before the guy gets it in his head to try and carry him or something. ‘We both do. Come on.’

He takes Rook’s hands, smiles up at him. And is gratified to see something melt in Rook’s eyes in return, that dark bitterness easing into something softer. He squeezes the furry fingers interlocked with his own and hopes that just this, being Ben, is enough.
You will need no defending

Morning approaches and Ben stumbles across the fields, the rising sun casting long purple-grey furrows over the uneven tilts of earth. Even now, as Revonnah barely bursts back into life, there is beauty in the little the light touches. In the distance, he can see a few dots of periwinkle blue on the slopes below them, smears of yellow and orange pasted over the movements of the clothed bodies below; other Revonnahganders, farmers, who have start gathering for the long day’s work ahead of them. There’s something cheering in the sight, he finds.

He blinks and that cheer is abruptly gone, chased off by the silhouette of Rayonna among them, the rosy tone of her hair waving like a flag. He turns away, shoving his head away from the sight. After all, she can’t be the only Revonnahgander with pink hair right?

He stands and waits, for once up a little earlier than Rook. He tries to banish the sight of the darkened trails of fur beneath the black hoods of Rook’s closed eyes from his memory. Waking up, that had been the first sight to catch his view, and he had let his fingers trace over the fur there, dried and caked together by the moisture that had lingered over it hours before, perhaps when he had been sleeping. Ben hates the idea of it, of Rook crying, while he’s busy sleeping his ass off, unable to do anything about it.

Still, that’s Rook all over. Big, reliable, older-brother who’s used to surpressing himself if he deems it unproductive to whatever personal mission he’s devoted himself too. And Ben does not like to think of himself as being the ‘mission’ in question.

He blinks, focuses harder, almost despite his better judgement, and decides that yes, that is in fact Rayona down there. She’s busy bent over her scythe, clearly focused on the rocks before her, and if he peers closer he’s convinced he can spot the familiar dots of white flowers lining her head like a crown, each petal as striking as a jewel.

And so, like all his bad ideas, Ben gives into the impulse to go down and prod. A quick and easy whisper of ‘Big Chill’ has him gliding into the mountain, pushing through the brown rock until he can surface just yards away from her, behind some bushes that nurse a strange batch of purple berries. He shuffles, spares a glance at the surrounding Revonnahganders and as casually as he can, transforms back to Ben again. And steps out.

Some of the Revonnahganders doggedly continue on with their work. Others pause and cast him the old hairy eyeball. But on the whole they aren’t going out their way to attack him. Then again, he doesn’t look like a large locust this time and well...Rook has always been determined to empathise just how ‘peaceful’ his people truly are.

‘Um,’ he says, an unsure waver in his voice. ‘Rayona?’

He steps forward, lifts a hand and then thinks better of it as Rayona turns, still clutching her scythe. The movement is smooth and poised and Ben can’t help but wince as she holds in front of her like a barrier, instead of simply lodging it into the soil.

‘Yes?’ she asks, and in contrast to him, there is no uncertainty in her voice. Or any sort of real curiosity within her tone. Even her face looks blank.
Except of course, now that Ben’s follows his strange impulse to come and talk to her, he has no real idea what to do with it. So, as always, he wings it.

‘Do you like doing all this work?’ he asks and then cringes at how awkwardly the start of this conversation must sound to everyone else. And how strange. ‘I mean, I guess everyone around here is doing the same sort of work and maybe it’s not really something you’re supposed to question, but do you enjoy it?’

Rayona tilts her head to one side and Ben catches a small smile softening her expression before her next words chase it away. ‘This is a very strange way to start the morning, I must say; I did not expect the legendary Ben Tennyson to come down and ask me about my career aspirations!’

Okay, he’s pretty sure he’s not imagining that slightly bitter twist to her tone.

‘Sorry. I know I’m really not the person you want to be talking to...probably ever, actually.’

He’s never come out and actually asked Rook point blank about how his relationship with Rayona ended; never really wanted to. Rayona seems nice enough, and he always thought it was kind of cool of her to be okay with the long distance thing they had going on, but...Ben has never really cared about her. Or attempted to get to know her. Just sort of accepted her as being ‘there.’ And then she wasn’t, and he has never really stopped to notice her absence or worry about it.

Rayona looks at him steadily and then something in her posture wavers and breaks. ‘Please get rid of that look on your face,‘ she says. ‘It makes it harder to feel angry with you.’

She huffs and Ben watches, almost disbelievingly as she pushes the sharp edge of her scythe into the soil, pressing hard enough for it to remain upright, even after it leaves her grip.

‘What happened?’ she asks, motioning to well, all of him. ‘You look as though you got in a fight of some kind.’

Ben shrugs. ‘A bad guy showed up. And we beat him. Same old, same old.’ He sees a few other Revonnahganders nearby freeze at this description and calls out again, ‘and we BEAT him, so there’s nothing to worry about! He’s locked in the back of Rook’s proto-I mean, space vehicle!’

Rayona laughs at his hastily made correction and sends him a smirk. ‘You are not as thoughtless as you appear to be, after all! True, I do not know if our people would know what a ‘Proto-truck’ is, but a space vehicle...yes. Truly a description for the ages!’

Ben squints. Is she making fun of him?

‘I begin to understand,’ she murmurs, an analytical twinkle in her eyes as she muses aloud. ‘Why he may have been drawn to you. We do not have many with your sort of boisterous personality here, on Revonnah. And Blonko has always been attracted to that which is atypical. He probably finds it fun to tease you...as I am now doing...’she trails off, a brief frown appearing on her face.

‘So...’ Ben hovers, uncertainly. Then takes the plunge. ‘Rook’s always wanted ‘more’ than this?’ He motions to everything around them and eventually ends up completing the effect by pointing at Rayona’s scythe. ‘But you...don’t?’

Understanding spreads over Rayona’s face. ‘Ah...so this is why you were asking me if I enjoyed this life.’ Her head turns and her glance, Ben can see, takes in the mountains around them and their sweeping beauty, the rocks and crags, the plants sprouting out of its sides to drape green over the brown. And he sees her eyes soften. ‘Truthfully, I can think of no other world, on which I would wish to live.’
Ben nods, even though she’s not looking at him. And it’s on the tip of his tongue to ask, to wonder, to push out that question that she’ll probably hate him for...

‘But that is not the reason Blonko and I are no longer together,’ Rook’s former girlfriend suddenly says. She spins and fixes Ben in her sights. ‘Though that may have been in the back of our minds when we made our decision.’ She hesitates, and then sighs. ‘Or rather when Blonko made his decision.’ She casts a nervous glance towards the other Revonnahganders, some of them clearly straining to listen and steps forward. And Ben suddenly feels very foolish as she lowers her voice in a harsh whisper. ‘You should be more cautious! Blonko may not live here, but his family does! And even the high regard our people have for him may not open their minds up enough to be accepting of his recent romantic endeavour!’ These last few words are practically spat out, her nose barely inches from his own, and Ben has to fight the urge to step back from their venom.

‘So,’ he says softly. ‘I was the reason you guys broke up.’

Rayona pauses and while she does not soften exactly, she eyes him with a new curiosity. ‘He did not tell you?’

‘I never asked,’ Ben murmurs. ‘It didn’t seem like it was any of my business.’

A wry smile twists Rayona’s lips. ‘But mine is yours, I suppose?’

Been feels a little ashamed.

‘I understand,’ Rayona says somewhat breezily. ‘It is easier to ask a stranger something intimate, because you can easily walk away from them. You do not have to care too much.’

Ben is only now beginning to understand how sharp Rayona is, how quick she is to slice to the heart of the matter. Perhaps that’s why Rook first liked her.

‘Blonko...’ Rayona pauses. ‘Blonko is fair. Or tries to be. He told me that although it was not his intention, the long distance between us was helping to cool the initial attraction between us. And it was doing nothing to help douse the new feelings he had been developing for someone else.’ She gives a wry smile. ‘Though if they were strong enough for him to not only be aware of them, but actually vocalise their existence to me I suspect they were not as new as he made them out to be at the time. Blonko is fair, but he is not above twisting the truth slightly to help himself.’

‘When was this?’ Ben finds himself breaking in to ask. It is suddenly vitally, vitally important for him to know.

Rayona casts him a knowing look. ‘About two weeks before that disgusting game show aired, the one where I and several other women were forced to compete for your affections.’

Ben frowns. ‘You’re talking about Revonnaganderian weeks, aren’t you?’

Rayona gives him a smile that causes her lips to curl a little too much for Ben’s liking. It reminds him of all the times Charmcaster’s given it before she blasts him or Gwen. ‘Of course.’ She turns back to her scythe. ‘Have fun working out the approximate calculations, in order to translate it into your own Earthian calendar,’ she calls over her shoulder and Ben clenches his fist. He is not going to transform into Brainstorm or Grey Matter in order to work out some odd alien arithmetic, he is not!
‘Why are you a Cerebrocrustacean?’ Rook asks blankly ten minutes later, once he’s stirred himself from the fog of sleep.

Ben grumbles and hunches over, the shadows playing out shades of coffee-brown over his shell. He has the answer now, to the question Rayona refused to solve for him, but as always, his brain has refused to stop in this form and now he finds himself distracted by the vectors of the slanted beams of sunlight drifting into the workshed, working out how their angles will change and slide throughout the course of the day. It’s an interesting little puzzle, given how Revonnah’s multiple suns will cause various light beams to refract and criss-cross each other as the hours draw on, so much better than the ones thrown up by Earth’s silly little singular star. He jolts a little as Rook slides over and props himself against the hard outer covering of his head.

‘This is not a form I expect to see you take at leisure,’ he remarks tapping the head-plates with a gentle finger.

‘What?’ Ben asks defensively. ‘Brainstorm’s cool!’

‘Yes,’ agrees Rook. ‘But on the whole, you are far more likely to transform into someone who is more...flashy, when you are bored.’

‘I can shoot electricity out of my brain. How can you get more flashy than that?’

Rook seems to give up because he sighs, presses his head briefly against Ben’s much large one and asks, instead, ‘are you feeling any better?’

‘What, after you attempted to rock my world last night?’ Ben snorts and mutters ‘going Ben,’ so he can see Rook turning away, viably flustered with his human eyes rather than his Cerebrocrustacean ones. For all Brainstorm’s brain power, his colour vision’s not that great. Maybe that’s why the species become so good at maths and mental predictions, especially when it comes to calculating vectors: to avoid bumping into things.

‘Well, aren’t you adorable?’ he murmurs teasingly, shoving Rook with his elbow. ‘All shy and flustered and embarrassed because of doing the dirty with m-’

‘There was nothing dirty about it,’ snaps Rook, turning to fix him with a sudden glare. ‘It is this place which is dirty.’ He turns back round to glare pointedly at the nearest wall, eyes narrow enough to burn holes from them.

‘Whoa,’ Ben mumbles. ‘I sure wouldn’t want to be that wall right now.’

‘Forgiv-I am sorry,’ Rook says, each word coming out clipped and short. ‘But this is not something I can simply work through in a single night, no matter how unfair that might seem to you.’

Ben pauses. Then shoves Rook again with his elbow, more gently this time. ‘Hey, if it helps, you don’t have to force yourself to say ‘I am sorry.’ Just use your usual, old fashioned ‘forgive me.’ I never asked you to do that, you know, to change things about yourself for me.’

Rook frowns. ‘I want to change,’ he says slowly. ‘I need to.’

Ben raises an eyebrow. ‘There’s nothing you can do to stop crazy people from wanting to cut off my arm,’ he says pointedly.

Rook stiffens immediately and Ben can tell he’s hit a home run. He takes Rook’s hand. ‘Don’t,’ he
tells him softly, running his finger between the tense joints that crack out from Rook’s knuckles like miniature mountains, feeling out the little knobs of bone that remain hard beneath the fur.

‘Don’t beat yourself up about it. You’ll go crazy. Come on. Remember how you beat Kundo the first time? By rolling with the punches and not being such a stickler for rules and tradition. You mixed up your moves a little and improvised. Winged it, basically. That’s what every fight gotta’s be like, you know that. There’s no perfect rulebook you can follow to prevent this’– he locks Rook’s fingers with his own and drags them over, swiping both their hands against the grey coolness of his prosthetic arm – ‘from happening again.’ He smiles, and knows it’s not a particularly happy one. ‘That’s the life we chose.’

Rook stares at him, a little awed, and Ben smiles and leans over to nuzzle his face against the strong arm he’s still attached to. ‘You couldn’t be like all those other Revonnahgander farmers, right? Well, here’s the cost.’ Then he draws back sheepishly. ‘And I know you know that. But wanting to forget and turn into some kind of perfect warrior that makes the impossible happen, isn’t...well, it isn’t going to happen.”

Rook sighs. ‘Forgive me,’ he says, so softly that Ben has to strain to catch it. ‘I just want to keep you safe and whole. And nearly failing for the second time in a row...’ he hisses between clenched teeth. ‘It does not sit well with me.’

Now it’s Ben turn to sigh. ‘Come on,’ he says. ‘I think we’ve done enough sitting around.’

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Ben and Rook patter inside the house, the lingering rays of the sun dappling their steps and pouring in to illuminate the sight of his parents sprawled out on a pile of blankets and rugs. And Ben blinks at the way crazy geometric patterns of brown and orange clash heavily beneath the simple colours of their sweaters, respectively a pale lilac and a minty blue. It’s enough to make him pause, to let guilt strike him at the sight. They haven’t even changed into pyjamas, a clear testament to their worry over him.

His guilt guides him as he approaches, makes him raise his hand and stretch it out to seize a slumbering shoulder. His Mom’s probably. She’s a little weird, but then she’s always been able to roll with what he’s thrown her way a little easier than his Dad.

As soon as he thinks this, his foot snags on the end of one of the bunched-up rugs, caught on a wrinkle that looks as though it’s playing host to a blurred math equation – and given Revonnahgander brains, it wouldn’t surprise him at all if, yes, they actually find math symbols to be pretty great interior decorating choices – and Rook catches his elbow, not looking much better in the process.

‘We really should eat something,’ his boyfriend mumbles and Ben savours it, this rumpled look he has upon being freshly awoken, hair escaping from the main stripe on his head. All Ben’s fault of course, him and the cunning exploration of his fingers. ‘I will start making preparations. And ah,’ – and here Rook grimaces – ‘attempt to rouse my Father.’

He trails off into the kitchen and Ben re-focuses his attention on his mother, shaking her shoulder with the hand he’d almost lost yesterday.

‘Mom?’
She yawns, stirs and blinks her eyes open, straight into his face. A few seconds past before awareness registers and then Ben’s cheek meets her hair as she smashes him inside her arms. ‘Oh honey...’ she draws back, eyes worriedly tracking the sight of the hand that still hasn’t left his shoulder. ‘You’re still here.’ It’s instinctive, what she says, he can tell by the way she immediately looks a little annoyed with herself afterwards. But he gets it.

‘That’s right, Mom,’ he says with a carefully closed-off smile. ‘All of me’s riiiight here, present and accounted for.’

She looks like she wants to swat him. Instead she turns round and shakes his dad awake.

‘Carl? Carl! Your son’s awake. And-’ she casts a heavy eye over Ben, ‘looking quite rumpled.’

Ben hates the special emphasis she gives the word. Just, why? But what he hates even more is that once his father wakes up and gives him a once over, well, his dear old Dad grins just as brightly and agrees.

The table quickly becomes a focal point for laughter and the general bustle of activity. Rook Bralla and his Mom end up carting over plates of food and something that looks like a citrus-tinged version of ratatouille, while Shim whisks stuff out of the fridge and pantry that looks as though it’s barely been dusted over with flour five minutes before. Though judging by the spills of white he can see lining the kitchen surfaces from the corner of his eye, and the faint aroma of freshly baked bread, he’s guessing that there was more than a little late-night baking going on while he was out.

Rook Ben is happily seated at his side, practically clambing into his lap whenever curiosity tugs at him, and his hand keeps squeezing at Ben’s prosthetic arm, fingers running over the joints as he stares out at it with wide-eyed fascination. Luckily Ben’s feeling charitable enough to extend his palm and let the little critter play with the fingers there, curling and bending them round his own. It’s all he can do to hold his tongue back when he sees Shar eyeing them disapprovingly. Rook Ben’s not always going to display such open levels of fanatic behaviour; one day he’s going to be old enough to try and play it cool in front of his idol. But until that time, Ben’s more than open to bask in the admiration that spills over from him, eager and bright.

‘Why do you not install a shrink ray? Just think of it! You could shrink down such vile adversaries as Vilgax and flatten them with a single step!’ Rook Ben hammers his fist against his palm for emphasis. ‘Squish! The fight would be over!’

Shar makes a face. ‘That is gross.’

‘It is efficient!’ Rook Ben snaps back. ‘Think of the energy and time that could be saved.’

‘It is also unethical,’ Rook interjects, though he does look a little amused. ‘I imagine ‘squishing’ someone would result in a trial for first degree murder.’

‘Oh,’ is all Rook Ben manages to say, looking both crest-fallen and sheepish at the same time.

‘I dunno,’ Ben says with an easy shrug. ‘There are plenty of bad guys out there who could do with being cut down to size. Quite literally. There’s no rule saying we have to squish them. I think a shrink-ray’s a neat idea.’
Rook Ben brightens instantly.

‘Please do not encourage him,’ Shar mutters, observing the orange porridge in front of her with a wrinkle of distaste to her nose. The spoon is half raised to her mouth and she eyes the sloppy gruel within it for a few seconds before shuddering and letting it slide back into the bowl.

‘I don’t know, it would certainly be therapeutic to stomp down on the heads of people who like to keep trying to kill my son,’ Carl muses aloud. ‘Maybe you should go and get that froggy little guy to hook you up with a shrink-ray after all.’

Ben hides his face in his hands as an awed hush descends on the table. Probably because no one here would normally to think to refer to Azumuth, the greatest mind in five galaxies, as a ‘froggy little guy.’

Carl, for his part, smiles nervously into the face of the silence he can sense he caused. ‘Erm, what was his name again? As-mouth? I certainly know it’s not Kermit!’ He accompanies this joke with a wink and Ben blanches.

‘Dad,’ he moans, peeking out from between his fingers. ‘Please, stop.’

‘Yes,’ pipes up Shim, ‘I have seen those felt-like puppets you Earthlings derive humour from; and I am sure Azumuth would not be pleased. He is, I am certain, far more soft and cuddly.’

Ben’s jaw drops.

And then, after a few tense seconds, there is a wheeze. It erupts from between Rook Da’s harshly clenched teeth, as he lowers his face to the table. His fist resolutely bangs down against the resin, once then twice, his whole body shaking as his once proud back bends and stoops, his face hidden from view. And then, with a shout, the whole of him unfurls like a flower, vibrating as he shakes himself apart into peals of laughter.

Ben has never been so terrified before in his life. Even Rook looks a little daunted.

Rook Ben however, looks frightfully proud of himself.

‘Oh stop it,’ Rook Shar mutters. And then, steeling herself, she finally takes a bite out of her porridge.

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Nobody is talking about what happened. No one is so much as mentioning Kundo’s name. Ben knows people think he is oblivious and that serves him just fine; it makes it easier to catch his Dad sending heated glances towards the window where Rook’s truck is in plain sight and the slight mania in his Mom’s eyes as she chatters to Bralla.

‘So, what sort of cleaning product do you use? All organic, I imagine? Ben tells me Revonnah is a self-sufficient planet.’ She pauses as Bralla kicks open a small vent lodged into the wall and flicks a switch nearby. Instantly a small sucking noise is heard and bits of stray dust and food start to be yanked across the floor and into it’s small, yawning mouth.

‘I believe you use your ‘vacuum cleaners’ for the same purpose,’ Bralla explains dully to Sandra’s
interested look. ‘They certainly seem more manoeuvrable; we favour using a small brush to yank any dirt out of any hard to reach places and allow the vent to do the rest of the work. As for cleaning products? Well, Amber Ogia would attract too many Muroids. So we turn to other plants...’

Ben rolls his eyes. He’s busy playing some sort of board game with Rook Ben, Shi and Shim. And thoroughly getting his ass kicked too.

‘So...’ he says, after landing on a green square for the fifth time in a row. ‘I get...karblanked?’

‘Kur-blon-ked,’ pronounces Shim easily. She has a superior look on her face as though Ben is the younger one here. ‘You have delayed the harvest by three days. Pray the gods have mercy upon you.’

Gods? As in plural? Ben’s not too interested in Revonnahgander religion, but he supposes he should try paying a bit more attention to such things. He’s not actively trying to get into Rook Da’s good books here; he feels like he shouldn’t have to. But the guy does remind him of some of the more conservative neighbours in his street, the ones who are still nervous around Rook, and well, nothing ever opens them up like a good dose of religious talk. Even if it was frightfully amusing to see them gawp as Rook became more well-versed with quoting scripture back at them than they did in order to win debates. So he’s about to open his mouth and ask, maybe glean some more details, when the man in question’s shadow falls over him.

‘How is it that are you losing against mere children?’ he asks, voice not quite dipping into a low growl. But close enough to make Ben keep his eyes fixed on the board.

‘They’re your children,’ he points out and is gratified to hear an edge to his voice. Normally he tries to be deferential to Rook Da. But after yesterday, he doesn’t much feel much like playing nice.

‘True,’ Da allows after a moment and Ben hears the upwards lilt in his voice, a trace of the proud smile that moves those lips. Then there’s a shift in the air, a near murmur of warmth near his side, and the cloth of Rook Da’s right arm slides close enough to see. Ben freezes.

‘I do not know what to make of you,’ Rook Da confesses, voice low and pondering. ‘You are rude and spoilt, undisciplined and unruly...but after seeing the way your parents flitter and fritter about my house, I being to understand what makes you so ungrounded.’

Ben has to bite his tongue very hard at that.

Da pauses. ‘And I am sure that there are aspects of my parenting style that could use work. Your Father...raised some interesting points in our argument yesterday. But then I have never left my family for long periods of time to go galavanting about the galaxy, so some of his accusations, of my similarity to his own father, I believe are unfounded.’

‘My Grandpa,’ Ben says firmly, before moving his wooden piece, a carving of some Revonnagander female carrying a knobbly stick, into the ‘prayer circle’ area of the board. ‘Was not gallivanting about the galaxy. He was saving lives.’ He turns to look Da in the eyes, ignoring the wide-eyed looks and bated breath held by the three youngsters surrounding them. ‘And so is your son.’

Da smiles grimly. ‘I know.’ Then his look turns a little angry and he pointedly drags his eyes down Ben’s prosthetic limb. ‘He helped save yours, even if he could not save your arm; I am sorry that happened to you. And I am sorry you nearly lost your remaining arm while staying as a guest in my
household.’ He inclines his head, in a short, stiff-necked bow and Ben holds his breath, suddenly unerringly cautious of the way things could unfold.

It’s true; he has no real firm memory of what happened after Rook finished cutting off his left arm. But the guy must have done something to prevent him bleeding out, before help arrived. Either way, he’s glad Rook wasn’t there, the first moment he awoke.

‘I know this isn’t what you wanted,’ he says quietly. ‘I know a lot of the things Blonko has done, has chosen, I mean, aren’t things you wanted. But I don’t think I’m one of the things you need to be worried about. I’m not about to go gallivanting off into the galaxy without him.’

Perhaps it’s the wrong thing to reassure Rook Da about; it’s exactly the sort of thing he doesn’t want to hear. He wants Ben to leave his son, for them to be on the separate sides of any galaxy, any universe if at all possible. Probably. Ben can’t read Rook Da, doesn’t know what sort of thoughts are racing behind his eyes. He can’t translate the sigh the other man gives out into any recognisable sort of emotion, it’s just a sound that falls hollow and empty. Kinda like the look in the guy’s eyes as he rips his eyes away from Ben’s. It’s not a victory, not quite, but it’s something.

And maybe if he can weather this, whatever just happened, he can survive the rift that’s opened up between him and his Grandpa.

Hopefully.

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Hope flees, the moment a scream sounds out at near the end of the day. It’s not a scream of horror, of terror, nothing as whimpish as that. It’s a roar, a roar of rage. Of passion that drives out of a chest that should be too small to contain it and sends almost all of them out of the house, spiralling in a haze. Well, some of them.

Ben, Rook and Shar jump into action, their legs already cutting through the swirl of dirt and carrying them towards Rook’s truck, the back door lifted off at its seams as though gloating, allowing them to spill into the mess inside.

Red. Red, red, red. It coats the floor and the pillow someone had angrily tossed at Kundo last night, someone who presumably had more mercy lodged in their soul than Ben has for Kundo.

And now, obviously, his Mother. Who stands, with barely a tremble, the blaster Carl had insisted taking with them, now firmly in her hand.

There’s a hole punched through Kundo’s chest below the point at which the blaster drops, electricity sparkling and jumping across the blemish of red that pours through the gap that armour and flesh now barely manage to bridge and cross. Kundo’s hands twitch, barely making a move to blot the flow and he raises his head to show his teeth in a bloody smile.

‘See,’ he sneers, his voice cutting out afterwards into a cough. ‘This, this is what happens when you expose Revonnah to the rest of the universe!’

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It starts as soon as he gets back, as soon as his fingers can jolt against a keyboard and gain access to the Xtranet and Earth’s internet both.

‘Ben Tennyson’s Violence Tendancies Explained?’ booms one wiki-wannable article.

‘This is why a human is unfit to wield the Omnitrix!’ squeals another, this time a commenter on a Sumo Slammers tumblr post. ‘Look at the violence that it will take thousands of years to breed out of their genes!’

That one gets a good snort out of Ben. Like any alien out there has room to talk. He can still remember the triumph in Kundo’s grin, the pride in his chest even as the motors clanked and wheezed within, each breath a burden he could barely manage. He’s not dead, but for one brief paralysing moment, Ben wishes he was. And then feels terrible because of what that would mean for his Mother.

He just... never thought...never could think....why did she go into the truck? And what could Kundo have said to her to make her, to goad her into...

Ben’s mind boggles, it flees from the possibility that there is no easy witchcraft to explain why she did what she did. Not when there’s been multiple occasions where he’s stood there, in front of someone many people would say arguably deserved it, and known he had the thread of their life running through his hands, known that he could transform and cut it short. But he never does. Sure, he’s done things, meted out punishments for some villains that people might say were worse than an outright death. And he’s not even sure what happened to every villain he’s taken out, especially some of the run-of-the-mill monsters he’d battled when he was ten. Because at some vital seconds, you favour surviving over being careful, and decide that Grandpa and Gwen and their lives are more important over worrying about whether the bad guy is durable enough to survive being run over by a train. It’s a snap-second decision that is made, one not always verbalised, and it’s not something a random member of the public can always understand.

Ben is bombarded with the chatter online. It’s not so bad on the street or in Undertown; people always gossip louder in the vacuum that is the internet, that in the public space outside. Still, that doesn’t stop some of the pondering looks he receives and some of the chortling cat-calls he gets from the shadier areas of Undertown. In some ways, this is worse than when he lost his arm. He can’t fight against intergalactic law.

His Mom is up for first-degree man-slaughter. Rook had restrained her, even though she hadn’t fought him, and Shar had put the cuffs on her. Carl had shook, demanded to sit with her in the back and Ben had joined him, silent, numb. He finally thinks he now understands what Rook Da had been feeling when Ben had spoken to him moments before.

He didn’t look at Rook, didn’t want to see the professional mask the other had slipped on even if he had stuttered and then stepped up and firmly read his Mom her rights. Only once, did he throw him a glare, when Rook got the usual line of how if she were a telepath, she had the right to keep her thoughts to herself, and then anguish had flashed briefly and brightly across his partner’s face, before dying out like a star.

It’s so...his Mom sitting in a cell. Eating those green blocks of space food that Driba and Blunkic deliver every day. Ben, for his part, has been eating pasta untouched by whatever red and brown things his Mom like to throw in the blender, swallowing down cereal sprinkled with sugar that his Mom would never buy, and stacking up microwavable meals that she would tut over the nutriantal value she would read off the back. And it tastes...both sweet and sharp, full of artificial flavours
that he would normally be gooey-eyed over. And yet, there’s a disconnect between his taste-buds and his brain and all that glory, e-numbers and chemicals, turns to mush in his mouth within a few seconds. He chews, swallows, and every time, feels like hurling.

His dad meanwhile has barely eaten, leaving half-nibbled toast still on the plate as the only remainder of his presence. It’s turned hard and stale now, like left-over fish batter ever since yesterday, ever since he’d marched into Grandpa’s office, camped out at his desk, and now pleads with him to pull every string he has.

‘If you do nothing, then we’re done, Dad,’ he keeps saying. ‘Permanently.’

Ben has seen him, of course he has. Asked for his advice, thrown similar pleas. But the answer is always the same. Just ‘sorry, sorry, sorry, if it weren’t for the fact that...’ his Grandpa always tries to cut off, divert the subject. But Ben knows the truth.

If it weren’t for the fact that all the eyes of the universe are on you, Ben Tennyson, he thinks, everyday, for the rest of your life, Mom could have a normal trial, not the media circus everyone seems to want. She needs to pay, they say. She can’t be immune, because she’s the mother of the greatest hero out there.

But he doesn’t want her to. Pay, he means. Never mind the fact that if it had been any other person out there cutting down Kundo, even someone like Elena, he would have far less sympathy for them.

A gentle series of chimes rings out, so at odds with the harsh way that he feels, that he jumps and glares down at the culprit. It’s his phone, vibrating against the duvet, Gwen’s name flashing across the screen. He lets it ring itself hoarse, waits for the flicker of her name to die out. And sighs.

A few minutes later, it buzzes. Kevin, Ben assumes. Sending a text. He’s almost touched. Would be, totally, if it wasn’t for the yawning pit in his stomach.

He breathes, his fingers clenching harder against the card in his hands, the edges running grooves into his skin. They’re beginning to hurt, the red ridges cutting against the healthier pink of his hand as it turns and tilts, exposing the card to different angles of light.

Another half hour passes. The phone rings again. Rook, probably, Ben guesses. But he continues to stare at the card in his hand.

Half a second later, the call cuts out. But silence refuses to fall as knock lands against the window and Ben turns, to see Rook Blonko in the flesh, mouthing something through the glass.

Ben grimaces in response and nearly turns away. Before he abruptly changes his mind, aborts the half-turn he is making, strides over to the window. With a sharp yanks, he pulls the glass away by the frame, opening his mouth to snarl out some comment about how if Rook is creepy enough to learn his file off by heart, then he supposes he shouldn’t be surprised to see him step up into an actual stalker, but the words die before they have a chance to form, are literally rebuffed and pushed back by the sight of Rook clambering inside his room, the veneer of politeness dropped away from his face.

Ben is just tired, not angry. Well, no, he is mad. He just wants to channel it into something useful, the way he usually tries to do.

‘Ben...’

The Revonnahgander looks lost for a moment, before shaking his head and trying to reach out and
Ben fights against the angry shout bubbling up inside him.

‘It’s been less than forty-eight hours,’ Rook states quietly. ‘Have you been to see her?’

‘No Plumber will let me,’ Ben says. ‘Or rather, she won’t let me. And, well, if she doesn’t want to see me, then there’s nothing they can do.’

Rook’s eyes drop to the card in his hands.

‘Ah,’ he says. ‘That seems like a good idea.’ Then he hesitates. ‘Need me to help foot the bill?’ he asks, a little hesitantly.

Ben grimaces. ‘I still have a headache over paying off the last one,’ he says drily. ‘Keep your money; it’s worthless unless the guy actually delivers.’

And with that he takes a breath and allows himself to call Chadzmuth.

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It will be strange later, to remember the call, and the part of him that will not been rendered totally numb at the time, will later marvel at how calm and smooth his voice had been.

‘Hey,’ he says now, to the little green hologram of the Galvan in question, noting the neat knot of the tie and the way it doesn’t seem to hold a striped pattern within it. Instead it displays only a plain darkness in the same tone of dubbed-over green of the rest of the hologram. ‘I’m guessing you know what’s up; the whole universe has been talking about my Mum for days. And as much as I hate to admit it, I could really do with your...urgh...help.’

The hologram smiles; like a crocodile, Ben thinks grimly. And then with a flash of white light, Chadzmuth teleports himself into the room.

Ben’s eyes travels to his tie, noting the dull crimson it now flares out with; a strange fashion choice for a Galvan, he thinks, and a lawyer to boot, but okay. Each to their own.

‘I have to admit, kid, didn’t think I’d be seeing you again so soon. Usually a case like this wouldn’t be brought before the intergalactic court; but given your reputation and the numerous complaints people have been lobbying at judge Dormer regarding the way the universal justice system tends to brush by those crimes committed on lesser-known planets, you and your mother have become an unfortunate scapegoat, a proxy if you like, to avail said complaints.’

‘Great,’ Ben says dully.

‘Which makes it perfect for me! Today’s your lucky day kid! For you and your mother both.’

‘Yes,’ Rook says evenly, stepping a little closer to Ben, enough so that his shadow looms out, over Chadzmuth and his floating seat both. Ben’s amused to see the crimson colour of the tie dip down under it’s oppression into a darker hue, an almost grey-scarlet as a result. ‘The media’s attention to this case will certainly help you draw in new clients, especially those from those ‘lesser known
planets.’ How fortuitous for you.’

Not a flicker of anger or smugness crosses Chadzmuth’s face, just that same crocodile smile remaining resolutely in place.

‘We have to be careful how we play this,’ he states, speaking as though Rook had never spoken at all. ‘People love drama, but what they love most of all is the idea of retribution. Your mother could be a saint, but there will still be plenty of strangers out there who will want to see her brought down low.’

Because she’s related to me, Ben thinks but doesn’t say. Instead, in a rush of anger, he spits, low and hard: ‘Compared to a lot of the people you’ve helped Chadzmuth, my mother practically is a saint! And if you can get them off, I don’t see how you can’t help her too!’

Chadzmuth gives him a level look. ‘You’ve got to level with me here, kid. Has she told you her side of story?’

Ben’s mouth closes like a trap and Rook’s hand falls on his shoulder, closing over it like a vice.

‘Sadly, no. Mrs Tennyson has been... uncooperative in that department.’

‘Then we’ll need to shock her into testifying.’ Chadzmuth’s smile instantly blooms, daring to show a few teeth. ‘That gives me a few ideas...’

‘Well, hopefully they’ll be better than the ones you came up with when you were meant to be defending me,’ Ben shoots back tersely.

Chadmuth actually has the cheek to not look annoyed in the slightest. In fact he even thumbs his nose and gifts Ben with a wink, which, paired with the hand gesture, ends up feeling dismissive more than anything else. ‘Hey, got you off, didn’t I?’

‘Wow,’ Ben deadpans, rocking back on his heels and shaking off Rook’s hand; because there is something in Chadzmuth’s eyes then, when his gaze locks onto the blue furry digits clamped over Ben’s shoulder. It looks almost greedy. ‘Freeing me from the burden of paying two lousy pieces of Taydenite. So excite. So wow.’

‘Perhaps dropping earth internet lingo or ‘memes’ into the conversation is not very productive at this time,’ Rook hisses into his ear with a mutter, his voice sounding slightly stung, like he’s hurt Ben brushed him off.

But Ben is too busy frowning at Chadzmuth to soothe anybody’s hurt feelings at the moment.

‘Yeah, right, like he’s gonna tell us anything about his ideas, in the first place,’ he declares stoutly, a haggard confidence in his tone. ‘That’s not how he works. He likes to drop people in it, literally. And expects us to be a mind-reader when stuff goes wrong. Then he makes it up on the fly.’

Chazmuth grins, wide and sharp. ‘Like you don’t do the same, kiddo. We both play with lives. The only difference is, I’m not in danger of watching anybody actually expire, when I get my business rollin’. So here’s to workin’ with you again!’

Then in one bright burst of light, he vanishes.

Ben is frozen for a moment. There’s nothing but the creek of his window, shifting in his frame, or perhaps it’s just his cupboard door, lodged held open by a fallen sweater. It’s hard to tell with houses sometimes, just how to pinpoint where the random noises start and stop.
Without looking, his hand fumbles backwards, for the warm curl of Rook’s. For one panic inducing moment, he feels nothing. And then suddenly, Rook’s arm wraps round his waist, catching up his lost hand and imprisoning it with his own.

Ben swallows. ‘I hate this,’ he admits thickly, dropping back to the bed, all of him wanting to sink into it like a stone. It doesn’t really surprise him that Rook chooses to fall with him, his grip tightening over Ben’s stomach. ‘I hate Chazmuth.’ It comes out as a whine, childish and painfully high. Shrii, too shrill to be anything mature.

Rook nuzzles at his neck, instantly forgiving, and Ben is too tired to push him off.

‘Get some sleep,’ his partner advises, the volume of his voice turning and falling as he moves, muffled as his chin scrapes softly against Ben’s throat, the movement perfectly sure of itself, like a cat. ‘You will need it.’

I need you, Ben thinks, but is not quite generous enough to say. Instead he sighs, hand reaching up to roll over the top of Rook’s head, to stroke the fur along his stripe flat. ‘You’re going to stay with me, aren’t ‘cha?’ he asks, already knowing the answer.

He lets Rook roll him under the covers, the movement losing its grace and turning clumsy by the sharp angles of Ben’s hips and legs twisting under the duvet Rook holds open for him.

‘Wild Muroids could not drag me away,’ Rook reassures him, digging his own way under the covers to cradle Ben against his chest. His fingers splay out across the line of Ben’s stomach, leaving warm trails that tingle and jump across Ben’s skin, despite the barrier of his shirt to protect him. It’s like leaning forward, to let the warmth of an open oven drift out and touch you in the middle of a winter afternoon.

Ben feels a tired smile pull at his mouth. Because even this touch isn’t enough to stir him, not fully. It honestly hurts to move, even to let the familiar line of his mouth rise up. In fact all of him feels heavy, depression weighing him down like lead.

‘Horses, Rook, it’s horses. Refusing to let Murroids drag you away, is an easy promise to make while you’re on Earth.’

‘I prefer my version,’ Rook says stoutly, dropping a firm kiss on Ben’s cheek. ‘Murroids are much more vicious than horses. Therefore I would have to put up more of a fight to stay with you.’

Ben’s smile twists. ‘Cute.’

‘I am glad you think so,’ Rook states, a wry curl to his smile; Ben can see it from the corner of his eye. ‘Now; perhaps you can settle down and allow us both to get dragged away into the ‘land of nod?’

Ben snorts at Rook’s second clumsy attempt to utilise an English figure of speech. But obligingly, he turns his head, and his arms and legs and curl into Rook deeply, nose brushing the armour plates before him.

‘You really have to sleep with all that on?’

Rook makes a soothing noise, brushes his hand over his hair again and utters an apology; but Ben is already halfway into the land of nod and fails to hear whether it is the familiar line of ‘forgive me’ or another newly attempted ‘sorry.’
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