The Bounty Hunter's Escort
by Cypher_DS

Summary

Nikki always dreamed of meeting aliens from another planet, she just never imagined Earth's first visitor would be a beautiful and deadly bounty hunter on a mission to avert a parasite invasion. When every human contact has left Nikki hurting, can the lonely gamer girl find a silver lining in the otherworldly Celeste?
A Wish Upon a Starship

Four words.

Four words that should have released her from an unbearable silence, freed her from expectations weighing her down like prisoner's chains. Four words that should have made life and all of Nikki’s relationships so much easier.

"Mom, Dad … I'm gay."

So why did the voices on the other end of the telephone pause for so long?

Her mother was the first to recover. "That's … interesting, dear." To her husband, a harsh whisper. "Emmet, say something to your daughter."

"She tells us this over the phone?" It was a private aside but her father was still close enough to the speaker that he practically hissed it in her face. Her mother cleared her throat and resumed command.

"Nikki? Your father and I want to thank you for sharing … that with us. You know we love you very much, sweet bean. No matter what." A pregnant pause. "So… when will we be meeting your girlfriend?"

*Thanks, mom. Kick me while I'm down, why don't you.* "Mom, I … don't have a girlfriend. I've never had one."

"Oh." Was that relief in her voice? "But, Nikki, how can you be sure you're … that way? I mean, if you've never been in a relationship isn’t it difficult to know that’s what you want?"

"You're frustrated," her father chimed in. "Nikki, you're only eighteen. Little premature to be making big decisions, isn't it?"

*Oh, but moving out and living on my own is all right?* "Mom, dad, I can't explain it." Or perhaps explaining would be inappropriate for this audience. The collection of lingerie models populating her DeviantArt favorites list; the way she played male avatars in RPGs so she could rescue and romance the opposite-sex NPCs. The flush of heat she felt glancing at the smooth, bare legs of her summertime customers. The thrill as they sat carelessly at the bar stools and let their sundresses slide up their thighs…

Nikki searched for some polite summary but came up wanting.

"I mean, I just … I like girls."

Her mother's heavy sigh again. "Sweet bean, this really isn't a conversation for over the phone."

"I know that," she growled, *but saying it face-to-face …* She couldn't go through that again. Not after Tiffany and Audrey.

Three months she'd sat in her friends' presence suffering the guilt of a liar. Café nights, fun outings; hell, Tiffany had even invited her for Christmas dinner at her mom's and she'd said nothing. It was practically torture when Miss Jessie, her secret keeper, looked at her with that expectant smile - "so hon, any exciting news?" - and Nikki could only hide her cowardly face and deliver the gift of disappointment. Even after that hasty New Year's resolution it had taken two weeks of practice in
front of her bathroom mirror before she’d felt ready to sit the girls down at the Nutmeg café and stutter out her secret.

And, like everything else in her life, it all went horribly wrong.

Tiffany had released a girlish squeal and clapped her hands like she was a cute dog that had performed a successful trick. “Yay! Oh Nikki, I’m so excited for you!” Something about the eagerness of her smile and the swiftness of her reaction – like she’d been hiding and waiting to yell ‘surprise!’ – felt so off-putting. Not for the first time, Nikki felt her blonde friend had been anticipating this conversation.

Her enthusiasm jabbed at Nikki with patronizing little needles. *Was I that obvious?*

Then Audrey. Eyes wide but pupils retreating into little black specks; her back digging into the plush booth in a startled ‘flight’ response. When the platinum-blonde diva found her tongue it was venom that spewed.

"You're a dyke? You?"

"Audrey…"

"Don't *Audrey* me, Tiff! She tells us this now? After we showered with her at the hot springs? After we stayed over at her place and she ogled us in our pajamas and underwear?" A revelation. "You were taking pictures of me! That's why you had your phone out all that night!"

"What? No, I just couldn't sleep –"

"Don't talk to me! You fucking stay away from me!" To Tiffany. "Don't you get it? She's been eye-fucking us this whole time! Now she's just waiting to get us back home with her so she can get us drunk and then she can –"

Audrey never finished that thought. Her body wouldn't allow her to finish, freezing up like a faulty computer; eyes blank and lungs hyperventilating. *Is she having a seizure?* Tiffany had to squeeze the diva’s hand and shake her back to life and, when Audrey rebooted from her panic attack, her eyes glared sharp and cruel as daggers.

"Not this time," Audrey whispered to herself. "I'm not getting fooled by another nasty, two-faced, lying little cunt! Didn't I tell you, Tiff? Everybody's always after something! Well I know what this little lezzie wants and the buck stop here. Come on, we're getting out of here before this carpet-munching little slut gets any more ideas!" Audrey stormed to her feet and, when the slack-jawed cheerleader didn’t follow, she issued her ultimatum.

"It's her or me, Tiffany. If you stay, don't think I'll ever speak to you again."

Tiffany’s reaction was crueller than any verbal spear Audrey could toss: she *hesitated*. With horror in her eyes, the blonde looked at them both, weighing her options as though there were some twisted logic to Audrey’s homophobic ranting. It was too much. *If you can’t make up your mind, I can!* Tears in her eyes, Nikki snatched up her coat and ran for the door…

"Nikki? Sweet bean, are you still there?"

The hesitancy in that voice. The woman who was supposed to love her no matter what and she was squirming over the idea of having a gay daughter. Her parents were no better than Tiffany.

"You were right, mom. Calling was a mistake. I'm just one big, dumb gay mistake, so sorry for
She cut the call and toggled her phone over to airplane mode before whipping the device across the room. The world had made it abundantly clear that it had nothing but cruelty to share and she had no desire to open her wounds further.

Nikki wrapped her blankets around her like a tourniquet and scooted to the warm glow of her TV and video game consoles. A world where she was a hero and saviour, where no problem was beyond the skills of her rapid-fire fingers. No rampaging dragon could withstand her might; no world-conquering empire or evil corporation could outmaneuver her strategies; no deluge of falling blocks was beyond her ability to stack and sort. This was where she belonged.

Working through tear-stained lenses, Nikki dusted off her PS1 and booted up her dearest comfort food: her Final Fantasy VII ‘Golden Saucer’ files; adventures that were saved just before the player character was invited on an amusement park date by a female party member. She had a file for each possible girl – fearless Tifa, spunky Yuffie; hell, she’d even grinded through the obscure route that allowed her to go out with burly muscleman Barret (such was the life of a completionist). Tonight, though, she wanted Aerith, the flower girl. She needed someone gentle and kind.

Nikki remembered her surprise and delight during that first childhood play-through: a midnight knock at your hotel door, a pretty girl inviting you to sneak away with her. Running side by side through a carnival world of games and wonders and, finally, a gondola ride for two under a sky lit with fireworks. How utterly romantic!

Looking back, maybe that game had been the first inkling that she’d been … different. She, Nikki Ann-Marie, who’d always told herself she was above the dopey crushes of those gossipy girls who fawned over boy band posters, found herself daydreaming and doodling pictures of a polygonal brunette in a pink dress. She remembered her younger self rationalizing the oddity - I just want to look like her when I grow up; I just want to have a friend like her – but whenever she stole away to her video game haven, she never projected herself into the role of the “hero’s girlfriend”; never imagined herself being courted by Cloud Strife or Squall Leonhart or Locke Cole. Secretly, she was the hero, and she was being asked out by a girl.

Tonight, playing through these treasured sequences left her numb. It isn’t me, she realized. Even with her character christened ‘Nikki’, it wasn’t her being asked on a date, it wasn’t her receiving a clumsy confession of love; it wasn’t her on that gondola ride for two. Nikki switched off her TV and let the darkness of her room drape her like a second blanket.

Maybe she needed some fresh air.

Turtle Bay Beach was closed to the public. A seasonal jellyfish infestation blanketed the shore with scores of the mucousy pink blobs, but that suited Nikki just fine. More than anything she wanted some place devoid of other people, and at this late hour even the boardwalk food stalls were locked up. Slumping down the steps of the concrete pier that guarded the sands, she curled up on one of the public beach chairs and looked to the stars.

The cloud-like glow of the Milky Way was on full display tonight, embracing the sky in its cosmic swirls. Nikki had always found comfort and awe in stargazing; knowing she was part of grander universe made bullies and trolls and nagging parents seem so much smaller. Tonight, though, the celestial glow left her miserable.

Billions of stars like our sun, millions orbited by habitable worlds. All those possibilities and I'm stuck here. A nowhere city on a nowhere planet; friends that despised or belittled her; family that
were ashamed of her and no one who understood her. There was no flower girl to fall in love with. Even the sight of comets shooting across the sky failed to cheer her spirits. *Just rocks and hunks of ice burning up in the atmosphere.* Wasn't that a wonderful analogy for life on Earth? Everything unique and special that came close to this dumb world got dragged down in a fiery wreck. Way to go, planet.

Even if she did indulge that childhood pastime of wish-making, what would she dare to hope for? A big asteroid to come and smash this town to smithereens? Audrey and all her tormenters to get run over by a truck?

*I wish … Whoa!* Nikki hit the pause button on that thought. A new light had appeared in the heavens. *What is that?* Shooting stars normally lanced across the sky in "blink and you'll miss it" moments, but this comet was taking its sweet time to burn through the starry twilight and had grown a sizable tail to go with its nickel-sized head. Nikki sat up and centered the fiery ball in the crosshairs of her phone camera. Space debris? A satellite burning up in the atmosphere? Whatever it was, the chance was too rare to pass up.

*I wish …

*I wish I had someone to talk to.*

Love was too far-fetched, even for a wish upon a star, but someone who would listen to her, understand her? She closed her eyes and beamed those meager hopes at the earthbound messenger. *I know you're just gonna disintegrate in a couple seconds but it'd be really, really nice if you'd give me a chance.*

Nikki parted her eyelids and – big surprise – nothing changed. Nothing ever really changed…

Then something strange happened: a second, tinier comet – a proper, zippy little fellow – winked across the sky and bopped into her wishing star. The big rock froze. It literally stopped, let its tail spool into its burning head and then it changed direction.

*What the -?* The oddity repeated before her eyes: a second mini-comet shot into the big meteor. The meteor froze in place and reversed its course.

Nikki dropped her phone and wiped her glasses clean. *It's not pausing,* she realized. The canopy of stars appeared as a flat canvas from Earth but you had to account for three dimensions. The big meteor was swerving: banking hard rights and lefts as it moved to avoid the incoming sparklers. It was *dodging* the little lights!

Another sparkler raced at the meteor and this time the big rock spat out a firework of its own. The two tiny lights flashed on impact and, in the burst of starlight, Nikki saw the source of the pesky shooting stars: a second burning meteor.

This one was smaller – a pinprick to its nickel-sized cousin – and it danced around the larger flame like a horsefly nipping at a lumbering cow. The big star popped off volleys of sparklers – an irritated swish of its tail – but the tiny fly juked and dodged with ease before retaliating with counter-fire. Blooms of light flared around the bumbling cow-meteor.

Nikki had enough presence of mind to raise her phone and keep recording. Whatever this was, it wasn't natural. Her mind pulled up memories of conspiracy blogs and classified government aircraft, but these lights, these vessels, were beyond the altitude of any atmospheric planes, and the sizes didn't match up either. *They're spacecraft!* They had to be! And they kept growing bigger; they kept dropping closer to the planet.
She could see them clearly now: black shadows blocking the starry canvas, their bellies coated with the red fire of atmospheric entry. The lead ship was big and blocky like a semi-truck with wings; its pursuer round and elegant and saucer shaped. The truck ship swivelled a top-mounted turret and sprayed its pursuer with green laser fire. Lasers! Actual beams of deadly light! The saucer ship glided through the storm of lights and replied with a volley of arcing missiles into the cruiser's backside.

Explosions blossomed over the ocean.

The dance, the dogfight, had reached its finale. Black smoke howled from the blocky cruiser, its pilot no longer dodging; its path a direct line for the shore. *It's coming this way,* Nikki gaped. It was growing bigger every second; she could see the individual hazard lights blinking on its charred hull! The ship was coming straight at h-

*Oh,* said a little, rational part of her mind. The ship was coming in for a crash landing. Towards her. *Oh,* her mind repeated, a mental cue for her legs to move. *Oh no, no, no!*

Nikki sprinted up the boardwalk, cursing the doughy sand and her fumbling feet while the whine of a crashing plane snapped at her heels. Up the stairs, two at a time. Quick scan for cover. An ice cream stand! Nikki dived behind her impromptu bomb shelter just as a tsunami of sand exploded over the boardwalk.

When the ground (and her brain) stopped rattling, Nikki ventured a peek. The ship – and it was a ship! A twisted, mangled, not-of-this-Earth ship with wings and jet thrusters and foreign markings – had slammed all the way into the concrete barrier, its front cockpit crumpled like a car in a trash compactor. Nikki would have spent an eternity staring in wonder but the approaching howl of jet engines jostled her attention to the encore performance.

The pursuer – the saucer ship that had danced nimbly as a hummingbird – now sputtered like a reverse Icarus flying too far from the sun, too fast to pull up. Nikki watched the small craft skip and skid over the ocean as the pilot fought for control. It tried to nose up hard but its rear engines caught the waves and the craft spun like an out-of-control Frisbee, plowing to a stop in the sandy shore only meters from its downed quarry. This time, the sand wave hit her right in the face. While Nikki coughed up granules and shook her clothes clean, the second ship’s engines sputtered feebly before powering down in a slow decrescendo.

Lesser women would have screamed and ran; more still would have called 911 and washed their hands of this accident scene. Nikki Ann-Marie considered herself anything but ordinary, and she gazed upon the beautiful wreckage like it was an art gallery masterpiece. She savoured the smell of burning oil and glassy sand like a fine wine. Two crashed ships. Two crashed alien ships, one crumpled and licked with flames, the other silent and half-buried in sand.

"Thank you," Nikki whispered to the heavens. It wasn't the comfort of a friend, but when it came to consolation prizes she wasn't about to gripe over a front row seat to first contact with aliens.

Time to cut loose! Nikki took the boardwalk steps three at a time to get a closer look. Her rubber soles hissed and melted in the wreckage-scorched sand but she couldn't care less.

"My name is Nikki Ann-Marie," she panted into her phone. "It's January 15th and I am recording live from Turtle Bay Beach at the site of an actual alien crash-landing! A double landing! Two ships!"

She waved her phone over the cruiser first, spellbound by the claw-like tears gouged into its hull by enemy missiles. There were noises coming from inside. The growl of machinery? The pad-pad drip
of oil on metal? Or was there something alive in there emitting canine snarls and tiptoeing on padded feet?

Nikki aimed her camera at the closest gouge and pinched her screen to zoom in…

A metallic groan erupted from the saucer ship and she turned to catch its rounded nose rising from the sand. No, not rising, but being pushed upwards. A gangplank like a long mouth was opening from its underside; on a proper landing it would have dropped on controlled pistons, but in its half-buried state it forced the ship up like a lever. Steam and a blast of icy air plowed Nikki off her feet as the pilot disembarked.

Nikki heard the figure first. The deliberate, angry stamp of boots on the plank. The ragged heaving of lungs scraping in air and spewing out rage. The rhythmic hammering down the metal path: clomp-drag, clomp-drag. The figure was injured, and she was enraged.

She. Nikki could assume nothing less from the hourglass shadow that cut through the mists, silver hair flapping off her shoulders and sickle-hooked horns curling above her ears. Black, syrupy liquid smeared from her hair into her eyes - blood? A head wound? - and square teeth champed in her jaw with a force that would bite through iron. Pain wracked her face but she mastered it, dominated it; gripped it like a hot coal that would fuel the engine of her body so she could move forward and finish her work.

One arm applied pressure over an injured shoulder; the other gripped a long and dangerous rifle.

Nikki's heart palpitated with a cocktail mixture of terror and wonder as she drank in the space-woman's battle-scarred splendor: blue skin smeared with blood, angry lips snorting hot steam, breasts rippling with beads of sweat; a warrior goddess, a Valkyrie from the stars. The blue-toned alien scanned the beach and locked eyes with the pale-faced little girl toppled on her backside.

"Um… hi. … Are you oka- ?"

A loading trigger clicked and Nikki stared down the humming barrel of her electric gun.

"Cho te nai," the Valkyrie barked, limping forward. Nikki scrabbled backwards in the sand.

"Oh god, don't shoot!"

"Cho te nai!" she repeated, her pace quickening.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry; please don't kill me! Nikki dropped her jaw to plead but a guttural, animal growl interrupted her speech. Hot breath hissed down the back of her neck and Nikki felt the unmistakable presence of body heat behind her. Turning, Nikki stared into the jaws of a monster like a skinless dog, muscles and veins twitching through translucent flesh. Teeth like ivory spikes parted, offering a glimpse into the abyss of its throat.

The dog-monster reared on its hind legs. The Valkyrie screamed. "Te Nai!" Get down, Nikki realized, and she flopped into the sand. An electric hum, a pulse of blue plasma and the dog-beast exploded into hot, green slime that drenched Nikki in a bath of alien guts.

Fire crackled under the night sky. Ocean waves lapped steadily at the shoreline, oblivious to the carnage collected on the golden sands. For a long while Nikki was like the ocean: consumed in a mindless rhythm – breathe in, breathe out – while her higher functions tried to make sense of the last thirty seconds.

She was at the beach. She hated the beach, all that crappy sand and sunburn. She was also in the
middle of two crashed spaceships. She liked that; spaceships were good. She'd almost been devoured by some alien monster. One point for 'traumatic memory'. She'd been saved by a breathtakingly beautiful alien warrior. Return point for 'dream come true'. Now to tally up the tie-breaker: there was sand up her nose, a banging sledgehammer where her heart should've been. She'd probably scared three years off her lifespan, provided she didn't catch some space disease from the green alien guts soaking into her hair and skin. All evidence recommended she emit one final lunatic scream before retreating into a vegetative coma for the rest of her days.

She raised a baggy, oversized sleeve and regarded the neon goo dripping down its length. And yet...

Nikki's lips cracked in a half-mad grin. *I am never washing this sweater so long as I live! BEST DAY EVER!*  

The clunk of metal on sand interrupted her fangirl moment. The blue warrior's rifle lay on the beach; the fierceness in her face, the rage in her eyes fell with it. Only exhaustion remained, coming out in deep, relieved pants of air.


"Cel … ara?"

Then the blood loss overtook her senses and she crumpled in the sand.

Police sirens raced through the night. At her back, Nikki heard the scamper of padded feet through the sand and turned in time to see a pack of four-legged monsters galloping across the beach. Towards the city.

Nikki shook the blue alien's shoulder. "Hey, wake up!" Armored cars approaching, weird monsters escaping; this was no time for sleeping on the job!

No response. *This is all wrong!* She'd wished for a friend, not … Nikki surveyed the fiery wreckage on the beach and her bones shook with the mother of all bad feelings, envisioning the alien devastation consuming all of Glenberry, her family; her friends!

*What am I supposed to do?*
A collapsed and unconscious alien. The siren wail of emergency response vehicles, not yet near enough to be seen but getting closer every second. Then there were all the bystanders who had seen (or felt) the crash landings, probably throwing on their housecoats, grabbing their cameras and preparing to swarm the beachfront like a hive of simple-minded ants.

Nikki looked at the alien woman, crumpled on the sand like rare blue orchid, and one thought rang clear.

She had to get her out of here.

An idiot would let her get carted off by the ambulances, transferred to some military hospital where she'd be examined, dissected and locked away for all eternity. A dumbass would take her home with her; toss her in the back seat of a car or heft her into a shopping cart and make a break for it. Try playing nursemaid and resuscitating her when you could barely treat your own paper cuts.

Nikki had dwelled on this potential moment far too long to make those mistakes. Across paranormal message boards she'd debated first contact scenarios with like-minded alien enthusiasts and come to this simple conclusion: if you make first contact and the alien is injured, you take them back to their ship! If they're advanced enough to master interstellar travel they've probably got a pretty sweet first-aid kit on board, plus it'll be geared for their physiology!

"The gun first," Nikki decided. No way could she leave alien tech for some beach bro to abuse. With thumbs and forefingers she gingerly lifted the weapon, keeping the barrel pointed away from her soft and explode-able organs. Chucking it up the ship's loading ramp was maybe a wee bit reckless but she was pressed for time and nothing blew up, so it was all good. Now for the hard part.

"Up you go," Nikki grunted, sliding her hands underneath the blue woman's armpits. Oof! Either her species was incredibly dense or she was incredibly out of shape. It took a lot of wheezing, dragging and back-wrenching but Nikki pulled her limp body up the drawbridge and onto the ship's deck, where she collapsed with the alien's head flopped in her lap.

Through the exit hatch, Nikki stared at the battle-scarred cruiser and hesitated. Are there survivors on board? Were those dog-things the crew? They didn't seem intelligent but you couldn't hold any assumptions with alien lifeforms. She didn't like the idea of leaving a whole ship to be pillaged by CIA spooks but time was short and she had to prioritize.

She shot that thing dead to save my life. In Nikki's books, that boosted the Valkyrie's standing by a couple thousand points. Now she had a favor to return.

"Hello?" Scanning the saucer ship's interior gave Nikki the impression she'd entered the shell of a giant, silvery egg. A single, empty chamber, domed and rounded on all sides to match the outside shape. A halo of dim emergency lighting lifted the shadows, but only barely. Cold, she shivered. It was like she'd walked into a giant refrigerator.

A black computer screen was built into the front wall, and below it seemed to be some sort of control bank but all of the panels were bare. Squinting into the dark, she could see that the walls and floors were carved with the outlines of all sorts of hidden panels, consoles and trap doors but all of them were shut tight. "Anybody home?"

In response, an overhead panel ejected a small robot. Shaped like a bowling pin attached to a hinged
joint, Nikki could only assume it was some sort of security camera. A rounded blue lens jutted into her face.

"Kosoko kangai na Shikai-to Subasa. Ta cho chuwan, Ki-Celeste?"

Oh joy, another language barrier. "Umm... Bah-weep Graahna Weep Ni-Ni Bong?"

The camera robot ignored her universal greeting and repositioned to scan the blue alien, her head spilled over Nikki’s lap. Its blue lens jolted to an alarmed red.

"Shoku kantan! Asaroîzu na viten tenryo!" The camera retreated into its wall panel and the ship's lighting blazed to full strength.

The gangplank began retracting.

"Whoa, hey!" In the time it took for Nikki to extract herself from beneath the alien, the exit panel had sealed shut and the entire ship shook under the roar of engines. An autopilot? She had no time to consider. The floor of the ship began rotating like a giant turn table, spinning Nikki and her savior to the far side of the vessel where the robot camera had emerged from a new pop-out cubby. Beneath its panel, a flat table like a prison bunk extended from the wall. Invisible arms - tractor beams! - lifted the blue alien from the floor and deposited her on the platform, probably a medical table. A shelf lined with chemical vials had just ejected from the wall, and two segmented pincer-arms emerged from the camera bot's compartment to begin rummaging through the supplies. The doctor was in session.

The camera bot swept beams of light over the alien's body, dotting her injured scalp and shoulder with holographic circles. The pincer arms zeroed in on each targeting reticle and went to work: jabbing syringes into her skin, cauterizing her wounds with heated lasers and using some sort of space-age glue gun to glob a translucent gel over the injuries. Guess they got rid of bandages in that galaxy far, far away. The Valkyrie gave reflexive twitches over the needlework but did not wake, not even when the machines clamped a skin-tight metal cuff over her bicep and fed her an intravenous drip from a bag of black liquid.

That was weird. Who travels with spare pints of their own blood?

Nikki, of course, was recording the entire operation on her camera phone. As an establisher of first contact with a space-faring species, it was her duty to archive as much of this historical moment for the benefit of the human race. That, and to give a big, fat "I told you so" to all of her haters online.

"I don't know if you can hear over these crappy speakers,” Nikki said to her future audience, "but that rumbling in the background like a bad AC system? That's the ship's engines. We're, um, being moved somewhere. I'm still getting free wi-fi, so I don't think we're off planet or anything, but um ... yeah. I'm in an alien ship. I'm flying in an alien ship!"

The medical bot didn't seem to mind her running commentary. "I get the feeling it's kinda limited for an AI," Nikki explained to her camera. "Or maybe it uses biometric imprints and can only recognize her species. Anyway, I'm not being vaporized so that's a plus."

Her camera screen focused on the unconscious alien. "This is her. The one who saved my life. Um, the ship's really starting to rumble a bit, and I'll try to keep the picture steady, but basically she's humanoid in appearance. She's got all our same limbs and features and ... proportions." Nikki's cheeks flushed as her phone traced over curves that would make a human supermodel green with envy.
"She has white hair, but I don't think she's that old. There's um, a lot of scars on her skin but it's pretty smooth looking." Nikki wondered how it felt - rough like leather? Cool as porcelain? Just the thought of running her fingers along that icy-blue skin sent a shiver through her body but her rational brain clenched her fists in revolt. **Dude, that is so fucked up! Focus!**

"So, basically, she's a lot like us. I mean, there's the skin of course, and then these -" she focused on the bone-like growths curling out the sides of her head like a ram's horns, "- thingies."

**Wow, Nik, you're just a walking thesaurus tonight.**

Maybe it was time to move onto clothing. On first glance, the alien's wardrobe seemed to be a space-age cocktail dress - a sleeveless, hip-hugging white skirt with thigh-high boots you'd expect to see on a go-go dancer - but to Nikki it was clearly a piece of wearable technology. What looked like oversized button studs were electronic sensors with green, cat's-eye lenses that flickered when she brought her phone near. Her right glove was imprinted with an arm-mounted keyboard, "and then, on her upper body you'll notice a ... well, um ..." Okay, there was no polite way to say it - her dress had a boob window.

"Clearly a ventilation patch for temperature control," Nikki coughed, switching her camera off once she realized how long her shot had been lingering. *I think I'd better edit that part out ...*

"**Viten tenryo sai,**" the camera bot announced. Its patch job seemed to be wrapping up. Watching the mechanical medic, Nikki wondered if, while this was advanced tech for an Earthling, perhaps it wasn't very good by alien standards. The pincer arms moved in blunt, jerky motions, not the kind of precise dexterity you wanted from a battlefield surgeon, and when one selected a green sponge to clean the dried blood from its master's face, it just mashed the scrubber against her face - once - and left her wet and bloody before retracting into the wall compartments and leaving her all alone.

Nikki frowned the cheap bedside manners. *Was that it? True, the alien warrior seemed to be breathing steadily, wounds patched and IV drip secure, but she was still filthy with the grit of sand and dried blood. Nikki searched her pockets and found a crumpled tissue paper. *The least I can do,* she reasoned, reaching a hand to wipe the alien's moistened cheek.*

Blue eyelids split open.

Nikki freaked. She jumped back, feeling the swipe of a fist where her throat had just been. Flat on her ass again, the gamer girl made a crabwalk scuttle to the opposite end of the ship while the alien woman rose from her bunk with a rage that would send Audrey Belrose whimpering in fear. The Valkyrie made to pursue but found herself rudely tethered by her IV clamp. Her hand patted at her scalp and shoulder, and she made a face at the goopy slime her fingers found.

"**Cogni cho kaba,**" she snarled at the wall compartments, then she was back to Nikki, staring her down like she was a cockroach crawling across a kitchen floor. Not able to pursue, but not that it mattered. The alien raised her left arm perpendicular to her body and opened her palm. A crystal bangle around her wrist began to glow.

The rattling of metal drew Nikki's ears across the ship, where the discarded rifle trembled on the floor. In direct defiance of the laws of physics, the gun flew across the room and into the alien's open hand as though she'd launched an invisible tow cable.

**Holy crap, she's got a Mjolnir! That is so sweet!**

Then the rifle hummed to life and they were back to a familiar song and dance: Nikki flat on her ass and in the crosshairs of an alien weapon. *Please tell me she's not a scent-based tracker,* Nikki
pleaded, *because crap, all these alien guts over me must be like a big, fat targeting marker.*

They stared at each other across the weapon and, for some reason, the alien woman made her think of Audrey. *It's her stance:* back pressed against the medical stretcher, nostrils flaring out of control. *She's in shock,* Nikki realized.

"I'm - I'm not gonna hurt you."

She raised her open palms - *no weapons, see?* The alien only snarled and tensed behind her targeting scope. *She's not shooting,* Nikki reflected. Whether she was reluctant to miss and fry her ship's circuitry or if she was just too strained from injuries to aim properly, the warrior woman refused to shoot. Her eyes kept darting between the earthling stowaway and the medical intravenous dripping into her veins.

*That's my hourglass,* Nikki realized. The second the liquid was fully administered, the alien would rip off her cuff, clomp across the room and shred her. This was her ship and she, Nikki, was the intruder. For all this blue visitor knew, this peachy-skinned, blue-haired stowaway was a brainless beast - the equivalent of a bear cub prowling into your campsite or a raccoon scrounging through your garage.

*She has to know I'm sentient.*

They didn't speak the same language; they didn't even come from the same culture. With her luck, the Earth tradition of raising your hands in surrender would turn out to be a demonstration of superiority or a rude gesture.

They needed a common tongue.

Nikki squeezed her knuckles white. *I hope she doesn't think I'm trying to wreck her ship.* Breathing deeply, Nikki rapped her fist on the metal floor. The alien tilted her head at the hollow ringing.

Bang.

Bang, bang.

Bang-two-three.

Bang-two-three-four-five.

And again, counting eight, then thirteen and then the alien's eyes flashed with insight. "*Siska-to Chozra?*" she murmured to herself.

The alien raised her left foot and tapped the floor in return; Nikki followed every beat like it was the countdown to her execution, and when the count ended at twenty-one, she knew she'd been granted a reprieve. As fast as she could, Nikki rapped thirty-four, and the alien returned fifty-five. Nikki laughed. "You know the Fibonacci Sequence!"

They were speaking in math!

The alien's lips lifted in a smirk. *I hope that means she's amused,* Nikki gulped. The laser rifle was still trained at her head, but the Valkyrie's grip seemed to have relaxed. Removing the hand around the barrel, the alien made a downward gesture to her feet and began a new tapping pattern. Her left heel tapped once, then the right. A second round: twice on the left, four on the right. Three taps left, nine taps right.
Nikki scoffed - "perfect squares," - before continuing the pattern with four and sixteen to the alien's approval.

Another tapping pattern: one and four. Two and seven. Three and ten.

*So we're moving to algebra, eh?* Nikki tapped four and thirteen. "Three-X plus one," she declared. *This is kid's stuff! Let's see what you know about number properties.*

One, three, five, seven, eleven. The alien gave her another smirk and continued the pattern. Thirteen, seventeen, nineteen. *"Prop chi,"* she announced in her language. Prime numbers.

She served Nikki another volley: four, sixteen ... thirty-six?

*Crap, another equation,* and this time it was only the products. 4, 16, 36... Even numbers, multiples of four, an increasing pattern... The alien leaned forward and drummed her impatient fingers along her rifle. "Hang on!" Nikki snapped. If she didn't know any better, she'd swear the blue woman enjoyed seeing her fluster.

4, 16, 36. What if she divided them, or quartered them? While Nikki rubbed her temples and muttered solutions, the alien drummed her index and middle finger along the barrel of her gun. Nikki had suffered her fill of the taunting. "Would you just give me two sec-"

Two.

Of course!

Using both fists to speed up the count, Nikki clonked the ship's floor sixty four times and - for good measure - rapped the next number too: an even one hundred. "The square of two-X," she trumpeted. "And I didn't need any hints," she added, mimicking holding a rifle and tapping two fingers on its barrel.

Then came the moment of magic: the alien slapped her knee and laughed out loud. Her chin reared back and the cold air of the ship rang with a dainty, girlish giggling, the kind of tittering you expected from a young schoolgirl. Nikki found herself lost for words as the bloody and battle-worn soldier giggled herself into stitches, but a single thought did beat upwards from her chest. *That's ... actually kinda cute...*

A mechanized *ding* interrupted the revels. Both turned to watch the medical bot's silver cuff automatically unclip from the alien's arm, the leftover drops of black liquid dribbling on the floor. Nikki tensed as the alien rose to her full height - *please don't shoot!*

- and lowered her rifle onto the medical bed. *Phew!*

Nikki cocked an eyebrow. "Another round?" and she tapped on the floor in illustration. "Cause I could go all night at this."

The alien gave a cheeky grin but agreed that enough was enough. She rifled through a utility belt around her waist for some tech: earpieces that she inserted under her snow-white hair, and a black fabric collar she clipped around her throat. A square over her windpipe glowed red. *"Uma,"* she ordered. When Nikki continued to stare she pointed a gloved finger at her lips. *"Uma."*

"Speak! You want me to speak?" The alien made a beckoning motion so Nikki figured she was on the right track.
"Um, hi, I guess. Oh god, I had a whole speech prepped but now I don't know what to say. Well, I'm Nikki. Nicole Ann-Marie, officially - from the planet Earth." Stupid! "But I guess that's a little obvious seeing as I was here when you got here. I mean, here on the planet, I ... oh god, sorry, I'm just so scared an excited; I mean, I just knew there had to be life beyond this planet and that one day we'd meet someone like you, but I guess deep down a part of me realized it'd never happen to me, so ... wow. I mean, just breathing is a stretch right now."

The alien nodded. "This must be a remarkable moment for your species."

"Oh totally," Nikki continued. "I mean, you change everything we know abou-" Nikki stopped herself. The alien smiled. "We're talking. Together. We're talking together!"

"Yes. I thought this might be more effective than trading mathematical equations."

Nikki squealed. "You're talking English!"

The alien puckered her face in a cute look of confusion. "In-ga-lish? That is the title of your language, yes?"

Nikki had already sprung to her feet. "A translator! You've got some sort of universal translator in that collar and you've learned English!"

"That is partially correct. Structurally, your In-ga-lish is similar to several dialects spoken within the galaxy. My device is now calibrated to the closest equivalent."

"Huh." Well, this visitor was practically human in physiology. If two separate races could evolve similar bodies, was it so impossible that they had developed equally similar systems of speech? While she mulled this over, the alien's eyes turned to the floor and she stooped to pick up Nikki's discarded, bloody tissue.

"You brought me aboard my ship after I lost consciousness. I am most grateful." She smiled and Nikki suddenly found her eyes impossible to meet.

"Oh, it's um, no big deal..." she shuffled out. Noticing her filthy state, the alien tossed her one of the medical sponges to wipe her slime-encrusted face and hands. "Oh. Thanks, it was starting to get sticky. And um, thanks for blowing up that weird monster thing instead of me. Um, what do I call you?"

"I am Celeste of the Luvendass."

Nikki blinked. "Pardon?"

"Luvendass."

Well, that was forward. "Um ... hi. I'm Nikki of the Nevahbeenkizzed."

Again, that utterly charming giggle. "A pleasure, Nikkeeee," she slurped, then Celeste paused and retreated into that disbelieving stare she'd given on the beach. "Uncanny... Forgive me for asking but are you certain you've never encountered a being from beyond your planet?"

Internally, Nikki chuckled to herself. Darling, this sure ain't my first rodeo. Technically the honour of her "first" alien went to a pink-haired 'Love Fairy' named Jessie, but Nikki didn't like to dwell on that part of her recent history. All that existed now was this breathtaking saviour from the stars and she had to be honest. "I've never met anyone like you before."
Then the ship hit a patch of turbulence that sent them bracing against the walls. Celeste marched to the ship's bow to adjust their course. The vessel seemed to react to her presence; as she approached, the black monitors winked to life, control consoles slid from their compartments and a sturdy metal captain's chair hissed out of a floor panel. Nikki tiptoed behind Celeste's shoulder and gazed at the main screen's projection of a starry sky.

"Are we in orbit?"

"Not quite. In the event that I am disabled my Cognition is programmed to pilot the ship into an upper atmosphere standby. I am inputting landing coordinates so that we may return to the surface." True enough, Nikki could feel that stomach-heaving queasiness she got from riding in elevators. Oh crap. Deep breaths, Nik. Please don't barf all over the nice alien's spaceship.

A camera window popped on screen displaying the beach crash site, now swarmed by fire engines dousing the flaming cruiser alongside a red and blue swarm of police cars. Celeste frowned. "Do your law enforcement vehicles carry surface-to-air missile deterrents?"

"What? Oh god, no. We're not that advanced!"

Celeste nodded. "I will need to keep out of sight, regardless," and her fingers danced over the console keyboards to adjust the landing coordinates. Nikki tried to keep her jaw from hanging as she took in the awesome tech, but Celeste caught her hungry look anyhow. "I am sure you have many questions. Please proceed. This is an opportune time."

"This is so sweet," Nikki gushed. "Oh my god, where do I start? You're a carbon-based lifeform, right? Your cells use DNA - I mean, deoxyribonucleic acid - as an instructional base for replication, right?"

"I am, and they do," the alien replied in order. "An astute inference."

"Oh, I'm not inferring anything. One look and I had you all figure out!"

Celeste cocked an eye. "Indeed?" She seemed willing to indulge this line of questioning. "Tell me what else you observe."

Another test, Nikki realized. They were solid on math, but what could she demonstrate about biology? "Well, for starters, on my planet we'd classify you as a mammal. You're warm-blooded, you can regulate your own body temperature, and you give birth to live young and feed them."

The alien nodded. "Impressive."

"Oh I'm just getting started. You're a herbivore, or at least you evolved from a plant-eating ancestry. Your teeth - when I saw your teeth - they were flat and shaped for grinding, not tearing, and those horns," she made curly-cue loops around her ears. "Carnivores concentrate on teeth and muscles; they don't need extra ornaments for defending or for showing off to mates."

"Go on."

Nikki pointed at her head. "Your hair. Assuming that's your natural colour, you're from a colder, Arctic environment. You'd blend in perfectly with the snow and ice crystals." Nikki chuckled and watched her breath exit in a white vapor. "Well, that and the temperature's set kinda low in here."

Celeste smiled. "I hadn't noticed. Course you wouldn't, this is room temperature to you. "Is there anything more you can discern?"
Nikki wanted to end on something praiseworthy: *you're a soldier, you've got weapons training, you're not afraid to kill, and your arms and legs are ripped with scars from battle!* But the more she looked over those blue limbs crisscrossed with white ridges and slashes, the more her buzz faded. She wondered what cruelties had caused all that damage, and what else was hidden behind her dress and boots.

With a quiet concern she whispered, "You've been hurt."

Celeste stiffened and, tracing Nikki's sightline to the marks on her arms, crossed her limbs indignantly. "You assume too much."

"Um, sorry, I -"

"I will take up the interrogation now." Her face hardened back to the warrior woman who had mercilessly shot down a ship and blown up a lifeform. "You represent the dominant species of this planet, correct? Yes or no will suffice."

"Y-yes, ma'am."

"Have your people developed extra-planetary travel?"

"Y-yes."

"To what degree are you in contact with the galaxy? Be specific."

"Yes ma'am. Well, um, we've sent a man to the Moon - that's our satellite - and sent a bunch of probes through our star system, but that's about it."

Celeste nodded to herself. "An Idyl world, then." Returning to her screens, Celeste magnified a bird's-eye view of a vast, green canopy. "Is this forested area home to any sentient species?"

The nature reserve, with its hiking trails? "Well, there's a herd of deer I think, and-" Celeste's death-glare cut her off. "I mean, no." The ship lurched hard in preparation for landing.

"Your settlement, where the other ship and I crashed. What is the population?"

"G-Glenberry? Um, about a hundred thousand I guess."

Celeste whipped her head around. "One hundred thousand?"

"Y-yeah. It's not much; I mean, we're nowhere near the millions in New York or Chicago, but I think it's -"

"Your species has further settlements? Home to millions?"

"Well, yeah. We're pretty much all over the globe. Seven billion, give or take."

Celeste looked ready to tumble over again, but caught herself against the console. "Billions," she whispered to herself. "So many ... how could ... I mean, this must be an Idyl world but ..."

"You're trying to get back to that crash site without being seen, right? Um, maybe I could help ... or some-"

"Worrying about my welfare?" Celeste snapped with a rage that blew out of nowhere. She stalked towards Nikki with eyes full of madness. "How droll that you pity me now! I am not so weak that I need your help, Celar."
Then she caught herself, and sanity bled back into her eyes. Celeste backed away, terrified, and fumbled about her console for a button. The loading ramp hissed open.

"You should depart," she whispered. "I've broken too many protocols already."

Leave? A part of Nikki did want to run in terror - *the look in her eyes!* - but what truly terrified her was the thought of ending her alien encounter so abruptly. *This is it? Eighteen years waiting on a one in a trillion chance and this is how it ends?*

"Celeste, I can help you!"

The blue alien gave her a sad smile. "You have done enough. Please, I need to proceed alone."

"No, you don't understand. I-it's my job to help aliens like you. Be-because," deep breath, "I'm a government ambassador for extraterrestrial lifeforms!"

For a while there was nothing but Nikki's ragged panting to break the silence.

"What?" Celeste frowned.

*WHAT?* Her own brain screamed back at her.

"Yeah, you see, it's my job to meet and greet visitors from other worlds. I mean, why do you think I was the first at your crash site? I was monitoring your ships the whole time," *with a hand-held camera phone with a crappy zoom lens*, but the details weren't important. Nikki rifled through her pockets and handed over a business card to Celeste. "Nicole Ann-Marie, Earth ambassador."

The card read "GALAXY ARCADE PREMIUM MEMBER" but just because Celeste could interpret human speech didn't mean she could read their writing systems, right? All that mattered was that the card included a photo ID and a blue-and-green decal of the Earth in its background, and that looked like something you'd print on an interplanetary dignitary's identification, right?

"Pretty official-looking, right?"

Celeste frowned back at her - *oh crap* - but then exhaled her anger. "In that case, this was a fortuitous meeting."

Tapping on her glove's keyboard, Celeste activated some kind of wrist-mounted projector that displayed a holographic ID.

"Sergeant Celeste Luvendass, Special Operatives Division of the United Army of the Galactic Confederacy."

*That's a mouthful,* Nikki blinked, but she made a point of scanning over the alien notation as though it wasn't just chicken scratchings to her. She supposed an armed forces ID would include a grand, golden coat of arms at the top, and then there was the picture.

"Aww," she cooed. Celeste's photo ID was noticeably outdated, featuring a younger, chibi-fied version of the alien with big, globular eyes, short hair that frizzed with static and a frightened pout that was doing its best to twist into an angry sneer. "Is that little you? Because -"

"Kaba!" Celeste smashed her fist into the nearest console. The hologram flickered and updated with a confident, adult-sized mug shot. *Okay...* Nikki thought, but she worked quickly to suck the amusement from her face when Celeste looked to her.
"Well, uh, everything seems to be in order, Sergeant."

"The ship I was pursuing is a pirate vessel registered to a wanted felon. I need to know what became of him and his cargo."

"You mean those dog things from the beach?"

Celeste chose not to answer. "I require access to the crash site. You need to order your emergency responders to vacate the area. Under no circumstances must civilians be allowed near that vessel."

Nikki nodded thoughtfully, the way her coffee shop manager had taught her to respond to difficult customers. "Uh huh. Okay, I see what you're saying. I just kinda don't think that'll work. Yeah..."

"Explain. You are a government official, are you not?"

"Well yeah, but, here on Earth we kinda have a lot of um, levels of government and everyone's got different bosses to respond to."

"Bureaucracy." Celeste hissed the word like it was a hated rival.

"Yeah, what you said. So, um, I can send in an order for all the cops and emergency crews to leave, but it'll take some time to, um, trickle through the official channels."

"I cannot be seen by your people. The program has been disturbed far too much as it is."

"If, um, it's just a matter of checking out the crash site, I could go." Celeste stared her down. "I mean, you just want to see what's there, right? Count up the dead bodies 'n stuff? I'm totally tight with the police like that. Official ambassadorial clearance 'n stuff."

The deal sounded good in her mind, but Celeste only continued her dark and penetrating glare. Those eyes seemed to shred her lies as easily as clothing, and Nikki shuddered as the alien prowled around her in a circle, seeing her naked and exposed.

"What is the length of your planet's rotational cycle?"

A day? "Twenty-four hours. Um, I have a watch."

Nikki froze as Celeste snatched her wrist and inspected the time piece, noting the divisions of time and the pace of the moving hands. Motioning for another wall panel to open, Celeste pulled out a silvery device that looked like a high-tech lava lamp. Tapping at her eye - a follow me order - Celeste set the device on the ship floor and touched the rounded tip. Green light burst from the 'lamp' portion and a grid of fan-shaped lasers rotated over the room, tracing the walls with their finger-like projections. After several sweeps, the device powered down and Celeste touched a point near the base. A miniature hologram of the ship interior sprang from the lava lamp's head.

"It's a camera," Nikki realized, "except it takes three-sixty degree pictures." If Celeste was pleased with her quick learning, that praise was lost within her stern features.

"You will acquire a visual recording of the cruiser's cargo bay. I need to ascertain the exact status of the ship and its contents."

"Yeah, no problem."

"Half a cycle," Celeste instructed. "And then I will find my own way into that ship."

Nikki gulped as her eyes trailed to the laser rifle on the medical bed. "I uh, won't let you down. On
b-behalf of the government of Earth we thank you for cooperating through official channels."

"Tell the government of *Urth* that if I fail to receive my data, your kind will all be dead in several cycles."

Oh yeah, no pressure there.

"My ship will await you at these coordinates, Nicole Ann-Marie."

Nikki was drowning in too many thoughts to correct her name. The future of the human race depended on her convincing the paramedics, the police, the state troopers and - if the conspiracy-minded government acted as quickly as she feared - black suited agents from the FBI who would shut down the site and drag every last scrap of alien evidence to a locked warehouse at Area 51 to be reverse-engineered and exploited for the twisted, shadowy powers-that-be.

Trotting down the ship's exit ramp, Nikki giggled, a half-mad peal of terror you gave before a high school exam you'd failed to study for.

"I am so screwed."
Requests and Reconnaissance

Nikki liked to think of herself as a problem solver. As a gamer she was skilled at reading her opponents, analyzing for weak spots and developing tactics for maximum victory. Be it a staged fight against a pattern-following NPC or a meta-game joust against a rival human, she always found the solution.

*Break it down, Nik.* She had to get inside the crashed ship. She had to get past the inevitable emergency crew blockades, on to the crash site and inside the ship. Stealth gameplay. And for that, she'd have to call in a favor. No biggie.

"For the love of god, answer already!" Her fingers alternated between banging on the back service door to the university dormitories and clacking off rapid-fire texts. *Im downstairs! Hurry up! "Sure, take your time, it's not like you're gonna doom everyone on the planet!"

"Nikki?" A dark-skinned arm pushed open the door and ushered her into the service corridor. Though it was three in the morning, Anton DuBois was still smartly dressed in his collared shirt and jeans, with dreadlocks tucked into a neat ponytail. Anyone else would have been rubbing sleep from their eyes but Nikki's ex-'sorta boyfriend' was awake and alert. After all, his internal clock operated on gamer time and the dead of night was a prime stretch for level grinding and achievement hunting.

"Nik, what happened to your clothes? Are you hur-?" Anton's hands shot up as Nikki glomped his midsection.

"I took three buses to get here and you're the first person who actually asked if I was okay." God, how could someone be this nice? Besides Tiffany's mom, Anton was the only other person who knew she was gay and didn't treat her like a disease or an adorable sideshow animal. Her first and only boyfriend had every right to shun her (vomiting into their first kiss had kinda killed the magic) but once the dust had settled and she'd explained her feelings, somehow Anton still liked her enough to offer her the firm handshake of friendship.

So even if it was coming from the friend zone, she appreciated his arms wrapping around her shoulders and stroking her hair. She really needed a hug now.

"Nikki, what the hell happened to you?"

"Out jogging," she panted. *All the way back into Glenberry from the nature preserve, then across town to campus.* Her legs were on fire and her sneakers were chewed up rubber shreds, but that wasn't important now. "I'm so glad I found you. Anton, you're still doing that student co-op program with the city forensics lab, right?"

"Yeah, all thanks to your physics tutori … Nikki, is this mucus on your sweater?"

"Intestinal organs, actually. Anyway, you still have that little ID lanyard that lets you get into the secure labs and crime scenes, right?"

"Well yeah. Nikki, do you need a doc-" Anton stopped himself. "Oh sweet baby Jesus, you want to borrow my ID so you can sneak into that crash site that's been on the news."

Nikki put on her best puppy dog eyes. "Pretty please?"

The older boy massaged his temples. "Nikki, it's really adorable how much you believe in aliens, but this is really, really tasteless. I mean, have you been following Twitter? It's some sort of plane crash;
there's probably dead bodies everywhere!"

"Oh wake up! It's an alien spaceship and the media's already covering it up!"

"Nikki, I've worked in public service so believe me when I say there are no conspiracies! The government is just a bunch of regular people collecting their nine to five."

"Anton, it really is a spaceship! I was there! Look, I'll even show you the videos!"

"Enough." Anton pushed her away. "Let's go over what you're asking me to do. Whatever happened on Turtle Bay Beach, it's now the scene of an accident. You want me to lend you police property so that you can forge a government document and enter a restricted crime scene. You want me to be an accessory to identity fraud, evidence tampering —"

"I'm not gonna touch anything. I only wanna look. Pleeease?"

Anton gave a withering sigh. She could sense the arcade brawl going down in his mind: a three-round knockout between his nice guy tendencies and his better judgment. This internship meant everything to him. Back when they'd started 'kinda-dating', Anton's eyes had lit up whenever he'd told her about his dreams of working in a police lab, analyzing crime data, and bringing down the bad guys with the power of science. Thanks to her tutoring he'd passed his first term exam for physics and made the grade for acceptance into the winter program. Since then he'd been keeping the lanyard around his neck like a badge of honour.

And now that precious necklace was being fished out from under his shirt and lowered into her hands. Nikki's fingers itched to grab the tag. "So that's a yes?"

"It's a yes –" then he yanked it out of reach. "If you were my girlfriend. If this is a favour between friends, what's in it for me?"

Nikki cursed. "Aww, c'mon!"

Anton's hands slammed against the wall, pinning her between his well-toned arms. "You want my help, Nik? You want me to risk my career, risk doing jail time for you?" His eyes traced over her slimed clothes, her bare legs and the handbag she'd collected from home. "We both know what I want. I just wanna hear you say it."

So it's come to this. Truthfully, she'd prepared for this request, but it still mortified her to the point she had to stare at her shoes as she whispered, "I'm … I'm gonna give it up to you."

Anton growled his approval. "Follow me. We'll do this in my room."

Obediently, she fell into step behind the older boy, into the elevator and down the hall to his dorm. Anton took her wrist and marched her quickly. Residences were not co-ed and it was long past visiting hours.

Nikki had been in his single-room dorm a few times before and she tried distracting herself by taking in the smartly arranged furniture and gaming posters. The thunk of Anton shutting - and then locking - his bedroom door broke her reverie. "Sit on the bed," he ordered.

The springs groaned under her weight. Anton stood in front of her, tall and imposing. "Let me see it," he commanded.

Nikki sighed but she couldn't back down now. As she pulled down her zipper, her mind took refuge in thoughts of a smiling, blue face. This is for you, Celeste. "Just be gentle with it," she pleaded.
"Do it," Anton commanded.

Nikki shut her eyes, plunged past the open zipper and gave him the goods. "There! My original Japanese Super NES cartridge for Mother 3. First print. Are you happy?"

Anton squealed as he snatched the video game from her handbag and held it to the light. "With the original casing and instruction manual!"

Nikki massaged her temples. I never should've told him about my imported game collection. "That cost me like five hundred bucks on EBay," she warned him. "Be careful, okay?"

"Oh, I'll be gentle." He was already kneeling at his Nintendo console. "Let me just … slide it in."

This is what I get for hanging out with another gamer. "Do you really have to take my cartridge?" Nikki pleaded. "I mean, couldn't we just, like, have sex or something?"

But Anton was far too transfixed by the 16-bit glow from his television to reconsider. "Sorry, I don't do lesbians. Here's the tag." The lanyard fumbled through her fingers just like every football and baseball tossed her way in gym class. Smooth catch, Nikster…

Still, now it was all hers! Such a tiny thing, but it would open so many doors for her.

Such a tiny thing, and losing it would unleash a storm of trouble over Anton's head.

"Th-thanks," she muttered. "I-I'll bring over the rest of my collection if you want."

Anton waved her off. "Can't talk. Gaming."

Nikki couldn't help but smile. He's got a full day of work tomorrow and he's still button mashing. Now there was dedication! A splash of water on the face, a slick of deodorant under the arms, then a breakfast of pop tarts and energy drinks to force the body to endure the daylight hours. Her Anton truly was a full-fledged gamer!

So it was with a tinge of regret that she paused at the doorway to admire her friend. Anton was good looking, well-spoken and excelled in a variety of hobbies, not just video games. He was a kind-hearted boy who never looked down on anyone because of who they were or what they liked. Not even those dirty weaboos. He was a package of perfection, topped with a rugged but cool bow of dreadlocks and we could have been happy together.

All she had to do was endure a lifetime of being grossed out by her lover's body.

Nikki sighed. If she ever needed evidence that the universe hated her and wanted her to suffer, she had only to look at Anton's chromosome count and that dreaded pair marked XY.

Anton noticed her lingering. "You'd better get going, Nik. And heads up: I'm gonna need that tag back this afternoon. My supervisor's taking me out on a field case."

"Right! Thanks so much, Anton. I gotta go!"

The watch around her wrist warned she had only seven hours to finish her mission.

Eight o'clock in the morning, and Turtle Bay Beach was the site of an unusual rush hour crowd. The whole city was lining up to see what exactly had face-planted into their beloved beachfront but the
The police had been granted an entire night to prepare. Nikki took note of the various barriers. An ugly blue canvas had been staked over the space cruiser to hide it from photo flashes and camera recordings. Blue uniformed officers patrolled the sands from all angles. Staircases from the boardwalk to the beach were planted every block or so, but the police had cordoned off the nearest three with metal fencing and yellow warning tape. A third, chest-high perimeter fence had been planted halfway across the boardwalk to keep the crowds back, but every so often an idiot cameraman or dude on a dare hopped the fence for a closer look and was promptly dragged back by the patrolling boys in blue.

From her space in the crowd, Nikki stole a final glance at the tampered ID hanging across her breasts. A new name, a new face and a boatload of scotch tape declared her a crime scene investigator, and the white lab coat from last year's 'mad scientist' Halloween costume surely added to her air of professionalism, right? Celeste's alien scanner brushed against her hip from its hiding place in her travel bag, piled alongside the notepads and old textbooks she'd shoved in to make her look more like a student.

I'm an intern, so I don't need to be sneaky or try to make a break for it. All she had to do was walk up to one of the three staircase guards, flash her credentials and she was golden.

The officer manning the nearest entry point was a woman about her age. She posed like a hard-ass: arms crossed, glaring aviator shades and smacking her gum – but she was also short and slender; more like a ballerina than a police thug. Probably a rookie cadet putting on a front, she decided. This noob was her best shot at sneaking through. Just gotta match her swagger.

She had to put on her acting chops. She had to be bold, confident. This was a real life RPG and she was going to unleash her maxed-out charisma on this hapless town guard! You will let me into this restricted area! Nikki uncoiled her slouching spine, swung her arms like she was a fashion model and marched herself in front of the officer to show her who was boss!

"Yeah, um … hi. I'm with um, CSI. The um … the lab, I mean the crime lab, well they asked me to come down and collect some more uh … samples?"

The officer continued smacking her gum. The eyes behind her aviator shades were clearly unimpressed. "Uh huh?"

Wow, Nik. Just wow. EPIC FAIL! And now her hands were shaking. This was such a stupid idea. "Um, I should come back later…"

But when she turned to flee, the cop grabbed her shoulder and spun her back for interrogation.

" Hold it, bluebell. I know you, don't I?" Without asking she snapped up the tampered ID badge and pulled down her sunglasses for a closer look. Nikki's knees trembled like jelly. This was it! Game over, man! She'd notice the scotch tape holding down her old high school photo and she'd be face-planted into the ground and handcuffed and dragged into a black government van and –

"Well fuck me with a candy cane and call me a Christmas elf. You're Cheerleader's friend! The super dork! Dayum, how you doin' girl? I mean, besides rockin' the sexy scientist look? Seriously, that lab coat is noice!"

Wh-oh-what? Were cops allowed to talk that way? And how did you jump from badass to bubbly in the snap of a finger? "D-d-do I know you, officer …" she scanned her badge "Officer Jones?"

"Hells yeah! I used to room with your buddy Tiffany! Oh, and none of that 'Officer Jones' crap." She
whipped off her hat and glasses, revealing a brown pixie cut and set of mischievous green eyes. "Call me Kyu!"

"Wait … Kyu Jones? The Kyu Jones?" The roommate Tiffany kept running off from café nights to meet? "I thought you were made up!"

Kyu laughed (or rather, snorted like a pig). "That's rich! Yeah, I'm just a figment of your imagination, like aliens or fairies, eh?" and she ribbed Nikki's side like they were bestest buddies. Nikki forced a weak laugh.

"So you're a cop?" Didn't Tiffany say her ex-roommate was a therapist?

"And you're a crime lab intern! Funny how we all wear so many different hats. Well, enough girl talk, you're here on business. Collecting samples, huh?" Kyu leaned forward to get a closer look at Nikki's handbag; she quickly adjusted the alien scanner so it wouldn't poke out, flashing a smile and trying to act natural.

Tiffany's ex-roommate cocked an eyebrow and thoughtfully rubbed her chin. "Hmm..." Had she seen the scanner? She hoped she hadn't seen the scanner.

"Y'know what? I think I can help you out, champ." She whistled at an officer on the beach. "Oi, Dinglebells! Take over, will ya? Got a civie to escort here!" Then she lifted a latch on the fencepost barricade and gestured for Nikki to proceed. "After you, Doctor."

_Holy shit, it worked? It actually worked!_ As she scooted through the fencing, Nikki resolved to sneak Tiffany a big 'thank you' box of coffee shop gift cards for never mentioning her real work to this roommate. She was in!

Kyu escorted her down the steps, prancing like a little school girl and peppering her with questions: How was Tiffany? How was she getting along with her mom? Were they hanging out lots together? The sparkly-eyed brunette wanted every scrap of gossip about her old roommate. "She's such a sweetheart, isn't she?"

"She's, um, something," Nikki nodded, wobbling as her flats hit the hot sand. _Almost there._

"But enough about her," Kyu grinned, walking backwards so they could chat face to face. "How about you, champ? Finally figure out which team you're batting for? Me, I just love handling a nice hunk of wood, but there's something to be said about sliding your fingers into a tight little glove, am I right? Eh?"

Nikki's head was spinning. "I um, don't follow baseball. Sorry."


"Don't you mean 'by myself'?"

"Nnnnope!"

This Kyu character was a regular chatterbox. Maybe it was time to do some digging of her own. "So, um, have you figured out what crashed here?"

"Me? Hey, I'm just a beat cop. You CSI nerds are supposed to figure that out, ain't cha? Buuut, between you 'n me, word among the girls is that we might be dealing with a visitor … from ouuuter spaaace!"
Girls. Scanning the blue uniforms, Nikki noted that all the patrolling officers seemed to be young and attractive twenty-somethings like Kyu. *Weird, why would they leave this to rookies?*

"Course, that's just dumb rumors," Kyu continued. "Official report is it's the fuel rocket from one of NASA's old shuttles. Fell out of orbit and smacked down on our beach. Probably best that way. Humans have enough trouble getting along with each other; can you imagine how people would freak if they found an actual alien?"

*Typical self-righteous gatekeeper.* "People have a right to know the truth," Nikki countered.

"I dunno, champ. Much as I like to rock the boat – wink-wink, nudge-nudge – that's one shitstorm I wouldn't wanna disturb. Some of us are better off sticking to the shadows."

With that, they arrived at the canvased ship. Kyu lifted up a corner of the blue tarp and ushered Nikki under. She knew where to go from there, marching towards the huge gouges in the hull and carefully squeezing through the sharpened metal edges. It was dark inside, but her smartphone flashlight kept her from tripping over debris. Stepping to what she judged to be the center point, Nikki planted the scanner, hit the button and let the alien lava lamp trace the walls and contours of the smuggling ship. One pass, two pass, three and done! Nikki shoved the device to the bottom of her bag and tiptoed her way to the sunlight.

Outside, Kyu Jones leaned against the blue tarp, hands behind head and enjoying the sun. "Hey, pop quiz: let's say you actually met an alien. What would you do?"

Nikki didn't have to think twice about that. "I'd talk to her. Because compared to all the crappy, judgmental douche-nozzles on this planet, it'd be refreshing to talk to someone who didn't automatically treat me like garbage."

Kyu chewed her gum and nodded along. "Hey, wanna hear something funny?" She pointed to the crater left by Celeste's ship. "Some of the girls are saying there might've been a second space junk crash. But that's just silly talk, right? I mean, something that big smashing down from the sky? No way it could just pick itself up and fly off, right?"

Nikki's throat went dry. "M-maybe a whale beached itself but then got unstuck? Whales can make big dents like that, right?"

For a while, Kyu just went on chomping at her gum. Then, "Yeah, you might be on to something there, champ! A whale! Still, I bet there's a whole ton of people who'd like to know what made that second hole. Bet they'd be aaaaawful appreciative of anyone who could give them a clue."

She managed a weak chuckle. "Well, uh, good luck finding a witness. I'd better get going. Analysis stuff to do, 'n all that. Hope you find the clue you're looking for." *Not!*

Kyu gave a particularly toothy grin as she reached over and patted Nikki on the shoulder. "Oh, I think we'll find what we need, champ. I think we will."

Kyu's palm was oddly warm; odder still, that friendly pat was lingering awkwardly long. *Is she coming on to me? God I hope she's not coming on to me; way too much energy.* "Yeah well, gotta go. Bye!"

As she trotted away, mentally pumping her fists and singing the Final Fantasy victory theme, Nikki wondered if she owed Anton an apology. She glanced back at Kyu and the beach full of ditzy-looking girl cops who'd let her blunder into the greatest wonder humanity would never know. Maybe there really were no government conspiracies or secret societies, just well-meaning nine-to-fivers...
who were a little too dim for their own good. Maybe the only ones acting behind the scenes were people like Kyu.

Aliens were real, though, she reminded herself, and she had a rendezvous to keep.
As promised, Celeste’s ship awaited her at its original landing spot: the muddy bed of an old, dried-out lake in the middle of the nature preserve. Glancing at her watch – nine thirty – Nikki saw she had half an hour to spare, so she dropped the various backpacks and duffel bags she’d been lugging and took a breather. So people actually do this ‘hiking’ thing for the lulz? Kill me already! She’d changed into fresh clothes – cargo shorts and a baggy sweater – but she was so drenched in sweat she might as well have kept her blood-’n-guts soaked originals.

Nikki sipped from a water bottle and took a moment to ogle the ship. She’d originally classified it as a saucer-shape, but now that it was still and upright she noted that it took on a sleeker figure, tapering at its front and back like a football with two sickle-shaped wings thrusting forward from the rear engines. It looks a bit like her, Nikki smiled, noting that it even shared its owner’s icy-blue paint with a white dome.

Celeste had not been idle while she’d been gone. The ship was parked as close to the green canopy as possible and large, leafy branches had been hacked down and leaned against the ship’s exposed side to camouflage it from any passing planes or helicopters. Once Nikki trotted close enough, the drawbridge lowered to admit her. She stepped forward cautiously, a little nervous of what mood she might find the alien, and a little puzzled by the sound of pop music coming from within.

Help me if you can, I’m feelin’ down,  
and I do appreciate you bein’ round.  
Help me get my feet back on the ground.  
Won’t you please, please help me?

Inside, the ship was dark as a movie theatre, but by the illumination of the control console she could make out her rescuer in her pilot seat. Celeste’s monitors were split into sub-windows displaying Earth TV news reports and radio broadcasts. Is she listening to The Beatles? Nikki shook her head at this poor introduction to human culture. I’ve gotta point her to real classics. A list of prolific video game composers was already filling her head: Jun Senoue, Nobuo Uematsu; maybe some Crush 40 if she likes butt-rock.

Celeste did not acknowledge her guest but Nikki wasn’t surprised. She recognized the alien’s posture: back hunched, leaning forward in her seat with eyes narrowed and lips pursed. It was the same position Nikki assumed whenever she became mesmerized by a really intense video game. It wasn’t the Earth broadcasts that held her interest, however. Tiptoeing closer, Nikki saw that the object of the alien’s focus was a silver sphere in her hand, about the size of an apple and projecting ghostly images into the air. Flicking two fingers from side to side, Celeste advanced the pictures: a jagged mountain range, a snow-covered field, and then an orbital photograph of a planet frosted with white clouds. The alien lingered on this visual and a look of profound sadness claimed her face. Her fingers stretched out, not to advance the image, but to try and grasp the phantom projection, to touch it.

Nikki felt an overwhelming sense of intrusion. I shouldn’t be seeing this. She was about to back down the boarding ramp and make a show of stomping up loudly as warning when her head bonked into something metallic.

“Kos kan, Nikkeee-da.” Nikki yelped at the camera robot, which mirrored her startled leap back, blue lens wide in surprise. “Ki-Celeste, the ambassador has arrived.”

Blabbermouth!
“Nicole?” The blue alien straightened to her feet, cutting the hologram and stuffing the projector sphere into a drawer. “You returned.” It was hard to miss the shock in her voice.

“Well, yeah. I said I would.” Her eyes roved to the console drawer Celeste had just secured. “Was that your home plan-?” The alien took a side step and blocked the view with her body.

“I was monitoring your people’s audio-visual transmissions to assess the situation,” she explained.

“Oh.” Nikki would freely admit she had the social savvy of a peanut, but even she knew when a topic was being placed off-limits. The alien soldier had her guard up thanks to this surprise visit, and Nikki hunted for some words that would ease the tension. “Um, how’s your shoulder?”

“Functional.”

Dead end on that. Glancing around, Nikki noticed the alien rifle propped by the loading ramp along with a stack of field equipment. “Sorry I took so long. I guess you’ve been getting ready to go on your own.”

“Yes.” The longer they stared at each other, the more the alien’s face grew into a frown. “Your hair,” she said suddenly. “Why do you style it that way?”

My hair? Nikki’s fingers went to her simple bob. “I dunno, I think I’ve always just cut it short. Easier to handle, I guess.” Maybe this was her chance. “Have you seen aliens with this same cut?”

Celeste chose not to respond. Instead, she directed her steely gaze at the camera robot, which zipped to its master’s side on a roof-mounted rail track. As soon as it was in range, the alien seized its bowling pin body like she meant to wring its neck.

“Cogni, you update me after she boards? I ordered you to sweep a perimeter of 200 cha. Two-zero-zero!”

“Hey, command was confirmed,” the robot protested. Now that it was configured to English, Nikki could identify the lazy, feminine drawl to its voice, not unlike the airhead valley girls who always argued in the coffee shop. “I set perimeter scanners to a whole 2.00 cha. Two-point-zero-ze-” Cogni stopped itself, and Nikki saw its eye open in epiphany the same way her coffee shop bimbos drew back when she explained how to make proper change. “Ohhh. Decimal point. Sorry, Ki-Celeste.”

Celeste swatted it with her fist anyhow. The robot squeaked and let its body hang limp on its joint arm as it rolled away like a scolded puppy.

“I apologize. When a ship’s cognition is not regularly reformatted it tends to develop … quirks.”

“Quirks,” Nikki repeated. Alone in a corner, Cogni seemed to forget its scolding and began bobbing its camera body to the rhythm of an internal music track. Nikki cleared her throat and tried to remember how the droid had first addressed her.

“Um … kos kan, Celeste? That’s ‘hello’ or ‘welcome’, right?”

Alien eyebrows rose in surprise. “You learn quickly. ‘You are welcome here’ would be the most apt translation. I would, however, urge you to avoid modeling your dialect after malfunctioning cognitions!” Little Cogni went rigid, bracing for another swat. Celeste explained. “Among friends and equals, we say Kos kan. In formal meetings between strangers or separate castes, the full address is used: Kosoko kangai.”
“Oh,” Nikki nodded, a little crestfallen at the gap Celeste had planted between them. Her blue face was all business, the cheerful giggles of last night seemingly an illusion. *Dumbass! Just because you played some stupid math games did you really think you’d be all buddy-buddy?*

“Well then, *kosoko kangai na* Earth, Sergeant Luvendass.”

Celeste quirked an eye at her successful use of articles. “*Kosoko kangai na* Shikai-to Subasa, Ambassador. Welcome aboard *The Wraith’s Wings*.”

The space-warrior spread her arms and gestured to the ship; the lighting rose momentarily and various compartments and panels clicked their hinges like a cast of mechanical crabs snapping their pincers. The flourish felt like a show of power: *Observe all the little traps and tricks at my disposal, should you try anything.* Nikki tried to keep her excitement from showing.

“It’s pretty cool. I mean, impressive,” she added, seeing Celeste’s puzzled frown. *Gotta stay away from non-literal expressions.* “I uh, noticed all the branches you cut down. Is you cloaking device broken?”

“Visual refraction systems were banned across the Confederacy after the Telos IV incident, where a civilian vessel collided with a military spy ship and toppled a skyscraper. They are now exclusively used by criminals and mercenaries.” Then she muttered something like *‘If they can afford them.’*

Nikki scratched her neck sheepishly; all this small talk only seemed to irritate the alien. *Better stick to business, then.* “So, here’s your scanner, HEY!” Cogni had zipped into her face again, extending two mini-pincers from its body to snatch up the scanner and rip into it like a tin can. The droid fished through wires and circuitry for a flat disc, which it popped into an underbelly mouth compartment. *A disc drive?* “That thing just –”

“Cogni is assimilating the visual records in the memory unit,” Celeste stated. “The equipment is of no concern. Merely a disposable model marketed for tourists and amateur photo-artists.” Those judgmental eyebrows lifted again. *Did you really think I would send you off with vital alien technology?*

Cogni twitched and clicked its underside mouth like it was chewing though a piece of gristle. Its lens popped to green - success! - then it rode its roof-mounted rails to display the findings from the best angle.

A ghostly green replica of the cruiser cargo bay launched into the air. It was hard for Nikki to get a sense of what the room would look like properly – it was cavernous, with various containers and crates scattered by the crash, but the majority of the wall space was taken up by twelve standing cylinders with glass casing around their middle. Celeste strode into the projection like she was live at the scene, gesturing with her arms to manipulate her surroundings: magnifying select objects and rotating for angles.

It was the twelve cylinders that held her interest, each in a varying state of disrepair. On some, the inside glass had been sprayed with slime like they were microwave ovens whose contents had burst. Several were cracked and shattered, and one had opened properly on its hinges to reveal a padded interior like a cushioned container. *Or a cage,* Nikki realized.

“Five,” Celeste murmured to herself. The count of the shattered or opened tubes. “I thank you for your assistance, Ambassador. With this intelligence I’m able to update the threat level to your planet.”

“So we’re not doomed?”
“No, your planet is still very much lost.” Seeing her whimper, Celeste added, “But the odds have improved in your favour. Nicole, as representative of Earth, you have a right to know the threat your planet faces. Cogni: display mission datatracks.”

The little camera swiveled to project a new hologram into the center of the ship, and the sight made Nikki yelp.

“This is the pilot of the downed ship. This is Rondarr.”

A hulking lizard-man roared and snarled at her in a looped animation. Whereas Celeste’s species seemed mostly human, this Rondarr looked like a combination of reptiles grafted into a hunchbacked, bipedal form. He supported himself on velociraptor legs with meaty thighs, agile calves and sickle talons. His alligator tail swung like a thick club, and each digit of his bony hands brandished a black claw like a meat hook. His short-snouted iguana head was molded into a permanently devious grin, forked tongue flicking like a whip. He wore simple body armor with shoulder pauldrons and a metallic kilt; otherwise, the brown scales of his body served as a natural plating. This was clearly a predator species – a lifeform evolved to rip, rend and tear whatever it came across.

“Rondarr is a Slovarian hunter wanted in five systems for numerous trafficking offenses: transporting restricted narcotics; theft of endangered plant life. He takes personal delight, however, in hunting and selling protected species.” Celeste’s fist clenched. “Including sentient races.”

Nikki swallowed. “You mean he’s a slave trader?”

Celeste allowed herself a sadistic grin. “He was.” She waved at Cogni to advance the display, running through a holo-slideshow of the alien lizard, his weapons and his ship. “I have pursued Rondarr on several occasions but he has eluded me persistently. The Confederacy has placed a substantial bounty for his arrest – captured live or terminated. I’m pleased to say I fulfilled the latter.”

“But there’s his cargo.”

Celeste nodded, pleased she could follow her train of thought. “While Rondarr has never played an active role in galactic conflicts, his smuggling has provided warlords and criminal syndicates with the means to engage in biological warfare against innocent systems. After interrogating his contacts, I learned that Rondarr’s latest shipment had the capacity to cleanse an entire planet.”

Cogni’s lens projected the skinless dog from last night. “He was transporting garduk.”

Assuming the display was life-size, this new alien had the height and shape of a greyhound dog – a wide, barrel chest tapering into a bony pelvis and stick legs. Its skull was all jaw, with teeth so long its lips couldn’t curl around the two rows of spikes. If it had ears or eyes, they were too beady to make out. Another predator species, this one centered on its gullet. Nikki’s skin crawled just looking at the hologram.

“Garduk are native to the Sho-Tan system and have a unique reproductive method that involves laying eggs upon large, herbivorous co-species.” Celeste played her a demonstrative video of a large spider-alien covered in sticky pustules. Each pimple ruptured in quick succession and the space arachnid swiftly became a meal to the tiny dog monsters bursting from their egg sacs. Nikki’s stomach churned. Glad I skipped breakfast.

“In their natural ecosystem, garduk are common prey for several tertiary predators that have adapted to the venom in their bloodstream. When introduced to new ecosystems without such predatory checks, they have decimated entire systems.”
Cogni clicked over to an alien landscape and Nikki gasped. Shattered cityscapes, all rubble and smoke; open grasslands reduced to ash, and everywhere hordes of the skinless dogs surging through the wastelands like a flood tide. Now the hologram zoomed out to an orbital schematic of the planet, with red patches on the continents displaying the location of the invasive species. The infected sites spread across the globe like a blood stain.

“The sale and ownership of garduk is among the most reprehensible crimes in the Confederacy, and will earn sentencing equivalent to genocide.”

“Is that – I mean, that’s gonna be Earth.”

“Not if we act quickly. Garduk must fully mature before they are able to reproduce. What you saw last night was an infant, small and built for rapid movement. In this stage, a garduk seeks out fresh hunting grounds and grows strong devouring small, foraging species.” Rats and mice, Nikki decided. “When they have consumed sufficiently, they pupate.”

So they’re like pokemon. “How long until they evolve?” Nikki asked. Cogni took the lead on her answer.

“Ooh! Checking growth rates against Earth time units aaaaand … 500 planetary cycles.”

Nikki exhaled. Almost two years. “We’re good.”

Celeste scowled and tapped at the robot’s casing. Cogni froze, wide-eyed.

“Ohhh, right. Decimal point. Five cycles.”

It took a tremendous amount of willpower not to bang her head against the wall. “Lemmie guess, they’re also self-impregnating hermaphrodites, they lay dozens of eggs at a time and they all hatch in under a day?”

Cogni jolted back and turned to her captain. “She is a remarkable guesser.”

“Yeah, more like remarkably pessimistic.” Okay, they needed a game plan. “You already shot one on the beach so we just need to track the last four.”

“I will track the remaining four,” Celeste stated. “You will notify your world government of the threat and position your security forces accordingly. You and I have no further business here.”

Again with trying to dump her! “I can just text my bosses, and they’ll take things from there,” Nikki countered. “Besides, they already gave me orders that I should personally escort you.”


“But I can show you around this place! Look, I even brought all this stuff to help you out!”

Half mad, half upset, she tossed her knapsacks across the ship at Celeste, who seemed genuinely taken aback. “You brought me -?” As she unzipped and examined the contents, Nikki explained each gift.

“I brought some of my spare clothes you could wear to blend in. Oh, and I bought all this makeup and lipstick too since, y’know, blue skin and all that. Plus you can use the bags to store all your gear!”
Celeste frowned over one backpack, cold to the touch and with a strange rubber hose spouting from its compartment. “What is this?”

“It’s called a camelback,” Nikki explained. “You fill them up with water so you can drink on long hikes. I filled that up with ice. I thought you’d want something to keep you cool outside the ship. You’re a cold weather species, right?”

There was no response. Celeste’s lips parted as though to reply, but her words stuck in her throat. Very suddenly she stepped away, hiding her face and hugging the camelback to her chest like it was a precious gift.

“This is … remarkably considerate of you,” she said after a pause. “I am … unused to this level of hospitality in my travels. Thank you.”

Nikki wasn’t quite sure what to say. “Um, you’re welcome, I guess. I mean, I should really be the one thanking you. You came here to save us.”

“Save you?” Something between a sob and a laugh choked from Celeste’s throat. “I came to this system to collect blood money! My actions have endangered your entire world! Don’t you realize what I am?” All around them, the ship’s compartments began rattling with the alien’s heightened state. Cogni retreated to a corner and whimpered. The loading ramp shut, sealing Nikki in the darkness.

“I am no soldier; I belong to no army. I fight for no planet, no code; no cause except my own.”

The click of alien heels stopped before her and yellow eyes like lamplights bent towards her face. Nikki was caught between those piercing eyes and decoding the riddle. “Wait, you’re saying … you’re a bounty hunter?”

A predatory chuckle. “I am the scourge they call the Koru-Shi –”

“THAT’S AWESOME!”

A clatter like dozens of storage closets spilling their contents rattled the ship. The lighting rose and Celeste backed away, perplexed.

“What?”

“You’re a bounty hunter!” Nikki’s heart was squealing like super-heated tea kettle. “That’s so much cooler than a galactic soldier! Are you in a guild? Freelancer?”

Celeste kept backpedalling like an overwhelmed guest at a comic convention. “I … don’t understand. Your people, you revere bounty hunters?”

“Of course we do! I mean, they’re only the most kick-ass characters ever! Boba Fett, Samus Aran; heck, even the weaboos have Spike from Cowboy Bebop. Bounty hunters are just so awesome!”

The alien needed a moment to process all this gushing. “I see.” She quickly coughed and regained her composure. “We should not delay further. I will change my wardrobe and we can prepare our hunt. I assume you will assist me in navigating your planet?”

“ Heck, yeah!”

Then she smiled, and a tiny peal of that beautiful laughter escaped her lips. “Thank you, Nicole.”
Celeste took the bag of clothes to a far corner of the ship; probably the spot where she stored her own wardrobe because a privacy screen rose from the floor to allow her some modesty. Again, Nikki wondered about the second-rate nature of the technology on the ship. *Not very convenient; I mean, it’s just a flat screen so if you watched from the right angle you could still see behind. Plus it’s more of a frosted glass than a solid wall so you can still see shadows behind. Oh god, should I tell her I can totally see -*

*Fwump.* The dress over Celeste’s silhouette hit the floor. Nikki’s jaw followed soon after. *Oh wow…*

The hourglass outline stretched its arms above its head, happy to be free of the restricting fabric. “Nicole, could you begin packing the supplies by the ramp?”

Nikki jolted back to life. “Hey, um … I’m gonna start p-packing this st-stuff by the ramp.”

“Oh wow… Will this suffice as a disguise?” Nikki turned and had to grab her glasses to keep them from dropping.

Ever since she’d started shopping for her own clothes, Nikki had always dressed herself several sizes too big. She’d never understood the appeal of tight-fitting clothes; in her mind, skinny jeans and yoga pants continued the sad oppression of females dating back to corsets and bodices (and made everyone laugh at her flabby gut and call her “muffin top”). She refused to play the popular girl game of shrink-wrapping her body for fashion.

Looking at Celeste made her reconsider. *Is that what I could look like?* The alien modeled a pair of her dark jeans and a warm, purple turtleneck that fit her curvaceous body like a second skin; not a wrinkle or crease to be seen. She was fully clothed but Nikki felt like she was getting the same eyeful as that naked silhouette behind the screen.

Besides the clothes, Celeste had painted over her face with pale makeup and cherry lipstick; the smear lines were probably obvious to a trained fashionista, but combined with her white hair and golden eyes it gave her the look of a delicate China doll. Black gloves concealed her hands where makeup wouldn’t do, and her horns and hair were artfully tucked into an oversized gray beanie cap. She looked like a paperboy from a 1920s period movie.

A drop-dead gorgeous paperboy.

“I will need to use my own footwear,” Celeste noted, lifting a leg to show the thigh-high boots tucked under her jeans. *Made sense.* The flats of her feet were oddly small, like she was permanently standing on her toes or from a culture that practiced foot binding. “Will this suffice otherwise?”

“I uh, I mean uh….” Nikki shut her mouth and settled for a quick nod.
had a surprise that would guarantee speedy passage from here on.

“We call this vehicle a motorcycle. It’s pretty dangerous, but it’s fast.”

“How quaint! I have always wanted to ride an internal combustion vehicle.”

“Nothing quaint about this,” Nikki said, puffing her chest. “Here on Earth, only the most dangerous, gutsiest road warriors dare to ride motorcycles. This is a real woman’s transport!”

She hoped Celeste was convinced. The vehicle she’d rented this morning was, in fact, a vespa – a little two-wheeled scooter with wide, flat panels on which to park your feet, a windshield and side-mirrors for added safety, and a dorky basket behind the seat for storing cargo. Instead of hunching over the handlebars like a crotch rocket or leaning back into the saddle like a road hog, you rode with your back straight and legs tucked together like a proper lady. As far as badass transportation was concerned, vespas ranked a step above Baby’s First Big-Wheel Tricycle, but just barely.

It was also pink. Cheapest model.

As they loaded up the bags, Nikki froze with a sudden panic. Celeste would be sitting right behind her; she’d have to hold on to something to keep steady! Her brain overheated with thoughts of the hunter’s hands hugging her hips, or wrapping around her waist!

“All set.” The alien woman mounted up behind her, gripping the leather seat under her bottom.

Oh. A bitter pang fizzled through Nikki’s chest. Relief, or disappointment, she couldn’t say.

“Well, um, hold on t’your horns, cause we’re in for a wild ride!” Nikki squeezed the handlebars, floored the gas pedal and sent them flying towards Glenberry at a radical, rebellious 10 mph. Putt-putt-putt-putt. A group of marathon cyclists waved as they pedaled past the turtle-bike.

Nikki’s inner voice slapped its forehead. Super lame, muffin top!

“Does this handlebar adjust the drive setting?” Nikki squeaked as a gloved hand stretched over her own and pulled at the bike’s gear shift. The little vespa rocketed forward and momentum plowed Nikki back into a soft alien chest. Act cool! Calm blue ocean, calm blue –

Blue was not a good colour to calm herself with Celeste so close.

Focus on the job, she reminded herself. A real life NPC fetch quest: track and eliminate four hostile enemies somewhere on the map, and I’m the navigator. No sweat; they were dumb alien animals. Not like they had to deal with anything crafty or clever like that dead lizard guy. Behind her, Celeste seemed calm enough, humming the human radio tunes her ship had intercepted. Nikki filled the lyrics in her head.

Help me if you can, I’m feelin’ down,
and I do appreciate you bein’ round.
Help me get my feet back on the ground…

...Won’t you please, please help me?

The flick of a curved, reptilian talon dismissed the alien music and returned the cramped ship to a dark and silent cavern. Those suited to night vision would see the rise and fall of hulking scales and the snort of reptilian nostrils, all moving in time to the angry breathing of a beast like a great dragon.
Rondarr dragged his talons through the metal armrests of his seat. Barely a cycle and he’d already torn past the leather and dug deep gouges into the frame. The rational part of his brain scolded him for damaging the property, but the predator at his core needed something to claw at, something to throttle. Besides, a few scratches meant nothing compared to last night’s damages. Loathe as he was to admit, that blasted tendricite had pulled off a surprise attack worthy of the greatest Slovarian hunters: orbiting close to the planet’s satellite to keep off his scanners, then firing incinerator-class torpedoes that would trace his flight path no matter how erratic. 

*Surprise the prey, corner it; leave no chance to run. Not bad for a plant eater.*

Bad enough she’d forced him to fall back on an old tactic of his reptilian heritage: tear off a limb as distraction to save the whole. Eject the cargo hold and let the main cockpit escape. Now here he was, skulking in the middle of an alien world with half a ship, cloaking field set to maximum refraction while he licked his wounds and tallied his losses: loss of his vessel, loss of his cargo and contract; loss of confidence in his buyers. Rondarr struggled to control his breathing, to close his eyes and shrug off the anger like a coat of scales.

The calm was only temporary, but he felt sedate enough to try observing the local audio broadcasts again. No use; still the same drivel: spoken metaphors set to instrumental melody. Pointless sentimentality and screeching tones. Clearly this planet’s dominant species was mammalian. The visual broadcasts were no better, just the same hideous female behind her desk, beaming her abnormally white canines and recapping the same old story: strange debris crashing on the beachfront and the continued efforts to scavenge at his jettisoned cargo. No reports of a second ship.

A forked tongue flicked the dark air, grasping for a scent. *Where are you, hunter? Where was the demon all those superstitious cowards called the Koru-Shikai?*

He tallied the possible outcomes from last night’s high-speed pursuit. Dead and drowned? Incinerated on re-entry? Rondarr allowed himself an amused snort. No, like any good predator she would be skulking at the edge of his territory – probably hovering in the stratosphere and waiting to detect his take-off so she could put another missile into his fuselage. Horror stories from tavern lowlifes bubbled in his mind: *Once the Koru-Shikai is loosed, it will hunt you to the grave.*

*The next encounter will be our last, plant eater.* Revenge could wait, though. First he had to rebuild.

Rondarr swivelled his seat to examine the icy blue capsule ejected from the cockpit floor. A cryo tube – a lifeboat for wounded pilots, a way to preserve oneself via flash-freeze until the autopilot could navigate to a friendly orbital station with medical facilities. It held little purpose for a Slovarian who could regenerate entire limbs, but it did serve as a useful storage locker.

*Room for one specimen.* Rondarr tallied the profit numbers in his head. Several beacons from his garduk continued to transmit, but the market for an illegal, invasive species was rather limited. Cashing in a single beast wouldn’t cover his expenses by far. He’d have to hunt down an entire new herd just to break even.

Or, he could present a commodity so rare it had never been offered before.

Rondarr consulted his charts. The star maps had listed Sol as a dead system and he’d never bothered to investigate further, but here he was on a young and fertile blue planet teeming with lifeforms. An Idyl world, no doubt, another of the Confederacy’s attempts to mollycoddle primitive lifeforms by cutting them off from all outside contact. What foolishness! What squandered opportunities to harvest new medicines. What a misspent chance to recruit powerful beasts of burden.

What a waste of fresh meat.
“Cognition, activate exterior cameras.” Visual broadcasts were swept away in favor of real-time footage of a primitive metropolis. Lines of wheel-based transports chugging down vehicle corridors; throngs of biped mammals bustling down concrete walkways, sipping beverages at outdoor eateries and laughing gaily. Each one of them like sea creatures displayed in a restaurant aquarium, oblivious to the hungry patron eyeing and tapping at their tank.

Rondarr’s tail tapped idly at the cryo tube. *Now, which one to choose?*
Nikki craned her head into the sewer pipe, the shadow of her body eclipsing the bright sun from outside. "Anything?" she shouted. Her only reply was the gurgle of sewage runoff and the sloshing of Celeste's boots through the muck. Then,

"Yes, another sample. It appears they did enter this way. Will you bring a collection dish?"

"On it!" Nikki pulled her head from the waste pipe and wobbled along the rocky outcropping for their knapsacks. Not exactly a picnic on the beach, she grunted, surveying the industrial side of Turtle Bay. She squinted down the shore to the far-off touristy side of the beach. How incredibly human, she smiled, thinking about Kyu, the cops and the sheeple of Glenberry pouring over the beat-up space wreckage. So obsessed with big, shiny distractions that they miss the important details!

Like a trail of paw prints in the sand, or half-eaten jellyfish puked up along the surf. Nikki and Celeste had followed the signs of animal activity to the city's factory district and the chewed-up grating on this runoff pipe. The garduk must have smelled something edible and bolted into the sewers; one had even injured itself scraping past the sharp edges of the grate, leaving behind a green slime that Nikki was intimately familiar with.

Celeste waded into view with more of the gunk collected in her glove. Nikki passed a petri dish from the alien's supplies and Celeste scraped off the sample. "These tunnels run beneath your entire settlement?"

"Yeah, they're for dumping waste. Are we gonna … y'know, search inside there?" The stench was foul enough out here, and while she'd crept through plenty of JRPG sewers and catacombs she didn't know how she'd fare wading into the nauseous underbelly of a real city.

Thankfully, Celeste shook her head. "At half a cycle's head start they could be anywhere." She had a plan, though. Hopping across the rocks like a sure-footed mountain goat, the hunter rifled through Nikki's knapsack for a device like a silver hummingbird. The robot unfolded a tiny replica of Cogni's camera head and hovered into Celeste's face.

"Remote unit online, Ki-Celeste," the AI's voice chirped through a speaker.

Celeste held the sample dish up to the metallic bird. "Cogni, map out the settlement's waste network, scanning for this bio-substance."

The remote's lens dropped in a pout. "All of it?"

"Until you find the source or nesting ground. Now go."

The little bird shook its camera head but puttered dutifully to the grate. Bang! "Oops." Like an actual bird, it had some trouble detecting glass and thin metal bars but after two or three smacks, Cogni squeezed through. Nikki watched it disappear into the darkness, listening for the flutter of metal wings, the rush of water and the occasional dull bang! "Oops." Bang! "Oops."

"Is she gonna be okay on her own?"

"No, but the remote will keep her occupied. I've found it unwise to leave her idle aboard the ship."

"Ah."
"If the creatures are nesting below the surface, Cogni will locate them. We should concentrate our efforts on hunting any garduk that venture above ground. Have you found any new information?"

Nikki tapped at her phone but came up empty. "Nothing yet. No animal attacks on the mainstream news sites, and nothing's trending on social media." #UglyDog, #DogAttack, #MonsterSighting. She had alerts out for every hashtag variation that might describe the canine creatures.

"Your Twee-tar system is fascinating," Celeste remarked. "Each member of your tribe plays the role of watchman and informs the collective of dangers and developments. I admire how you work together in service of your herd."

Nikki suppressed a snort. "I think most members of our 'herd' use Twitter to service themselves." She made a mental note to never show Celeste her search history. #PandaYiff, #FlutterDashClopFics, #ZeldaxSamusRule34. Good times…

The clouds overhead broke to admit the sun and Celeste flinched at the yellow orb, ducking her head until she could retrieve a dark eye visor. "Your star is young and bright," she commented, and Nikki wondered if her species was nocturnal. Maybe she wasn't dimming the lights on her ship. Maybe a dark room is broad daylight for her.

"We can take a break," Nikki suggested. They seemed to have hit a lull in their search, and Celeste needed to catch her breath. Though winters in coastal Glenberry were mild, just short walks in the afternoon sun sent the alien into an all-out sweat. Nocturnal, cold climate; talk about culture shock! So they sat on the rocks, sipping water and staring at the endless expanse of blue.

"The water. How far does it extend?"

"You mean the ocean? To the other side of the planet. We named this place Earth after the land but technically we're seventy percent water."

Celeste shook her head. "I feel dizzy simply looking upon it. It's incredible."

"Not really," Nikki scowled. "Humans have really screwed up the water supply. There's like these huge islands made up of garbage floating in the middle of the Pacific, not to mention that we've killed half the food chains by overfishing and wrecked our coral reefs with oil spills."

Her pessimism didn't seem to daunt Celeste. "On my world, water must be harvested from underground springs or melted from ice. Your people are truly blessed to have water in such abundance."

Celeste seemed to be in a good mood. Maybe this is my chance. "Your home planet. What's it called?"

There was a long hesitation. "Tendricide," Celeste finally answered. "It is a small world in a system of four, the farthest from our star."

"So that makes you, what, a tendraling? A tendrian?"

"Other races refer to us as Tendricites in the same way that hyu-muns would be known as Earthlings." She smirked and looked off at the horizon. "We call ourselves Norai. In our tongue it means Enlightened Ones," and she added a mocking snort.

"Tendricide. I wish I could see it."

The hint did not go unnoticed and beneath her visor, Celeste's eyes flickered in debate. Very
carefully, she produced the fruit-sized orb Nikki had caught her staring at so longingly. Celeste's fingers traced an activation pattern over the projector. "Tendricide," she whispered to the circuitry and hologram vistas flew into the air.

Nikki engraved every image into her memory. Sharp, spiralling mountain ranges like rows of spikes; rocky islands jutting from permanently-frozen lakes; alien stars twinkling over fields of snow. Everywhere, snow and ice.

"Why's water such a big deal for you?" Nikki frowned. "Can't you just, like, melt huge chunks of polar ice with orbital mirrors or store it in heated reservoirs?"

Again, Celeste hesitated. "Long ago, I believe we did, but my people are no longer as advanced. Tendricide was once much like your Earth – ignorant of and ignored by the galaxy beyond. When other species made first contact with our world, the travellers were not explorers or diplomats. They were poachers."

The holograms advanced to the site of an ancient battle, gunships and metal shards lodged in the ice. "We were no match for the invaders' technology and my people were harvested. As slaves, as test subjects; as a protein source."

Nikki cursed herself for opening old wounds. "I'm so sorry."

The alien shrugged. "It happened generations ago. By the time I was born, the Confederacy had learned of Tendricide and had driven away the criminals and smugglers. We were declared an Idyl world, and all off-planet contact became restricted. We were saved, but the damage had been done."

"Our numbers had dwindled and we no longer possessed the experts or means to construct new technology. There were barely enough people to inhabit our cities. We regressed into smaller villages and tribes."

Nikki thought to all her wasteland apocalypse games and the fictional scenarios of humans living in the ruins of civilization. The fall into anarchy, makeshift camps made of scrap metal and salvaged technology; waging war against any outsiders who threatened your food or resources. Is that the world she grew up in?

Now Celeste looked to the skyscrapers of downtown Glenberry. "As children, the two of us used to sneak out of our village and explore the ruins of the ancient cities, playing make-believe and guessing at what the great towers had been used for." She spread her arms as though to embrace the city. "I used to imagine what the citadels looked like in their prime, filled with Norai and flying vehicles. Your world, Nicole, is like the city I saw in my dreams."

Dunno if I'd give Podunk Glenberry that much credit. "You said 'the two of us'."

For a moment, Celeste stiffened but then she turned with a wistful smile. "Yes. A dear friend. One I have not seen for many years."

"Did something happen to her?"

"I do not know. I left my planet years ago." Celeste seemed content to end the story at that, but Nikki's begging eyes prodded her on. "After we reassembled ourselves from a life as cattle, my people became obsessed with fertility and birth. Our elders insisted we regrow our population and regain our glory. We'd preserved much of our genetic technologies and used them to engineer 'ideal' younglings."

Celeste exhaled. "I was … defective. There was no place for me among my people. So I found a
Nikki frowned as she looked over the Valkyrie - powerful, resourceful and beautiful like no one she'd ever known. *If you're messed up, I'd like to see what they think is ideal!* She was about to blurt that out but the bitterness on Celeste's face shut her up. She knew that look, and she remembered how eye-rolling ridiculously her parents sounded whenever they'd tried to cheer up their precious 'Sweet bean' with an *it's not so bad* pep talk.

"I used to think I was defective," she muttered. "I was never thin or pretty like the other girls. I didn't play any of their crappy sports or dress in their dumbass clothes. I didn't —" she swallowed, "I don't like the people everyone says I should."

Then Nikki stood up and spat at the city. "But you know what? Screw them all! They're the ones who aren't worth it, following their stupid ideals like lemmings running off a cliff. I say it's better to do your own thing! And if I'm all alone and everyone thinks I'm weird and defective, at least that way I know who really cares about me."

Celeste didn't offer a reply but Nikki noticed one small change. She smiled, and that was good as gold.

Traffic was light thanks to the panic and preoccupation at the beach. The shopping district with its fashion boutiques was so empty that the pair settled for walking their vespa down the street. The slower pace gave Celeste the opportunity to crane her neck at all the sights and Nikki the time to introduce her visitor to vital Earth lore.

"I must say, for all the praise your people bestow on this Boba Fett, he seems remarkably incompetent. This hunter was knocked into a sand worm's gullet by a blind man?"

"Yeah, but he totally got out in the Expanded Universe. Trust me, he's seriously badass."

"Bad … ass?"

Right, another non-literal expression. "It means 'really impressive', but in a dangerous way. Head-shot three enemies with a single bullet? That's totally badass!"

"I see." Celeste tried mimicking the thumbs-up gesture Nikki had given along with the expression. "I will endeavor to remember that, Nicole."

"You can call me Nikki, by the way. All my friends do."

Celeste tried, but a horrible stutter came out when she got to the last syllable. "Nikkeeeeee." She coughed and tapped at her collar. "Pardon me. My translator appears to be malfunctioning."

"That's okay." She'd never cared for her full name or how her classmates always clipped it short - *How's it goin', Nic-hoe?* Coming from Celeste, it sounded nice. Like her name was too special to cut down.

"Then is that individual your friend?" Celeste inquired, and this time Nikki heard the shout of her name, along with the panicked clack of sneakers down the sidewalk. "NIKKI!"

*Glomp!* Nikki braced herself against the girl's flying tackle-hug. Any other day, getting a random embrace from a beautiful stranger would have been a fantasy, but this was real life and this girl was...
no stranger. Though she had traded her usual school uniform for skinny jeans and a checkered blue top, there was no mistaking the bounding blonde twin-tails and the concerned blue eyes of Tiffany Maye.

"Oh my gosh, I was so worried about you, Nikki. I've been texting you for days; didn't you get any of my calls?"

"Calls?" That's right, after the café disaster she'd been flooded with emoji-laced texts from the university cheerleader. She'd ignored them all. "I guess I was busy," Nikki lied. Tiffany seemed to have babbled on anyway.

"And then there was that huge crash last night and I was so panicked – like, what if it was a bomb or something – and I know how much you like aliens and UFOs so I was scared you might do something like sneak off to the beach and get yourself hurt!"

"Tiffany, I'm fine. Look, can we talk later?" Too well she knew that Tiffany was a paired item. Ketchup and mustard. Plusle and Minun. She had to leave before this became Tiffany Maye and -

"God-fucking-damnit, Tiff, slow the fuck down!"

Shit. A wild Bitch Queen appears!

Celeste's eyes widened in shock at the walking, talking boutique mannequin and her rattling collection of shopping bags. Where every other human had dressed for winter in sensible pants and sweaters, Audrey Belrose suffered for her fashion: a purple and black dress with a line of ribbons up the front, a ruffled bustle over the mini-skirt and long, kimono-like sleeves trailing down her arms. The diva with platinum-blonde hair skid-stopped at their group, coughing up a smoker's lung at the simple exertion.

"What the fuck, Tiff? Why'd you go running off like –" and then the crimson eyes under her purple bangs caught a whiff of blue. Audrey stopped dead.

"Oh. It's you." She emphasized the 'you' like it was a condensed form of all the nasty, creepy-crawlies of the world.

Nikki pushed free of Tiffany's embrace. "I'm leaving."

"Figures," Audrey huffed. "You get Tiff all worked up and now you ditch your friends to go play your shitty video games."

Friends? "No, I'm just going to spend time with people who don't treat me like a pile of crap." The diva quirked a confused eyeball. Did she have to spell it out?

"Oh." Audrey hit her eureka moment. "Ohhh, right. The café." Then came a strange transformation: Audrey cast her eyes to her feet, she fidgeted and played with her hair braid. "About that …" Wait, was Audrey Belrose actually working up the courage to apologize? Her brash voice was barely a whisper; Nikki had to step closer to hear.

But when she approached, Audrey flinched and hardened. "What, don't tell me you've been lying in bed all emo about that?"

That? How did you wrap all those vulgarities into a tidy little 'that'? "You called me a two-faced, lying little -"

"Cut the drama, Nik. Yeah, maybe I said some dumb shit. Whoop-dee-fuckin'-doo. If I started
sobbing and cutting myself every time some bitch called me a cunt I'd be writing crappy poetry with those Goth brats at the food court. Look, if you can't take a little ribbing from a friend then this town's gonna eat you alive, and not in the way you're hoping for. So can we chill?"

She glanced to Tiffany for approval but got only an angry glare. "What? I'm talking with her like you said. What more do you want? And is anyone going to say something about Tits Mcgee and her shitty newsboy hat? Um, we're having a private conversation, jackass, so take the sweater pups and kindly fuck off!"

Now all eyes were on Celeste, tapping at her earpieces and trying to decipher Audrey's foreign tongue. "Sweater … what?" Nikki jumped in for damage control.

"Um, guys, this is my … cousin! My cousin, Celeste! Celeste is visiting from the continent of Australia, and I'm showing her around because she's never been to America! Celeste, this is my friend Tiffany. The bitch over there is Audrey."

"Well fuck you too!"

"Your cousin?" Tiffany repeated. "I thought … Well, never mind. Um, g'day, Celeste."

"Greetings."

"You sure picked an exciting time to visit. Did Nikki tell you about the Fireworks Festival at the end of the week? We were just out dress shopping for the big night!" Tiffany jingled her bags as proof. "Hey, have you two had lunch yet?"

*Sitting down for a meal with Audrey? *"Sorry, but we need to be -"

"Actually, Nicole, I do feel famished. Since we have no current leads, would it not be prudent to take a meal?"

*I'd rather eat needles than eat with Audrey,* but when the Norai's stomach started growling in protest, Nikki reluctantly backed down. Tiffany gave a little cheer. "Great! Celeste, we'll fill you in on all the local hot spots and you can tell us all about Australia. I've always wanted to go and see the cute baby kangaroos. Oh, and Audrey will treat us all!"

"What? Do I look like I'm made of money?" But she backed off when Tiffany gave her a sharp scowl. "Oh fine. Put it on my card."

Nikki let the two blondes go ahead and secure a table. "Okay, Celeste, when we go inside let me do the talk."

"Nicole, I have traveled to numerous star systems and experienced many varied cultures and customs. I believe I can successfully blend in among your human comrades."

Another horrible, really bad feeling was sulking in Nikki's gut but she followed Celeste inside. They all took their seats at a window table and Celeste played her part admirably. She spread her napkin over her lap like a human would. She examined her cutlery and polished off the spots like a human would. She even made a show of opening the menu and pretending to understand their writing system. "Oh, how delightful!" Her eyes perked at the vase of flowers decorating the table and she brought a yellow daisy to her nose to enjoy the fragrance. "Ah…"

Then she popped it in her mouth. *Chomp.* "Mmm," Celeste hummed, nibbling up the green stem like an asparagus stalk. Tiffany was busy checking the menu but Audrey's eyes were wide and weirded out. Before her mouth could drop the waitress interrupted to take their drinks.
"Do you serve liquid water between a pH of 6.8 and 7.2?"

Sweat rolled off the pimply girl's forehead. "Uhh… it comes with a lemon wedge?"

"Water's fine," Nikki clarified, cringing as Celeste snapped up another daisy. "Um, she'll have the salad."

Celeste rattled the flowerless vase like an empty drink glass. "And more appetizers, please!" Now Tiffany joined in the wide-eyed starring, but at least she was diplomatic enough to change the subject.

"Soo… Celeste, tell us about Australia!" The Norai froze in mid-bite, flower petals dangling from her lip.

"Australia? Yes, my home continent, of course. Australia … Nicole, what was it I told you about Australia?"

"It's hot."

"Yes! Yes, the temperature is quite disagreeable, oftentimes venturing above the melting point of ice!"

Both girls looked to Nikki. "Um … My cousin is from the West Coast," she whispered, twirling her finger over her ear in the universal gesture for 'loose screw'.

"Oh." Tiffany nodded in understanding and spoke a little slower. "So, um, Celeste I was reading about these forest fires in the Brisbane area. Are you still going through a bad drought?"

"Indeed, we have been without snowfall for some time."

"Yeah, no snow in Australia," Audrey snorted. "What a surprise."

Nikki forced a chuckle. "Good ol' Westies, eh? What'll they say next?"

"Well," Tiffany continued, "I hope this year's rainy season improves."

"Ray… nee?" Celeste blinked stupidly and consulted her tour guide. Nikki whispered into her ear. The table rattled from the impact of Celeste's knee. "Liquid water? And it falls from the sky?"

Nikki turned to her friends for sympathy. "She's a Bogan." By some strange mercy, the waitress arrived with their food, putting the conversation on hold. Tiffany was too polite to say anything but Audrey, with every chew of her burger, kept a critical eye on Nikki's cousin.

"So, Celeste. That's a pretty sweet bike you got for Nikki."

"Indeed? I have yet to sample its flavor. Oh, and Nicole is the one who purchased the vehicle for our use."

Tiffany's fork clattered. "Wait, you're saying Nikki bought you that bike?"

"Yes, Nicole has been most helpful! Besides the vehicle, she also provided my clothing and makeup."

Tiffany blinked. "Really…"

"And you're how old?" Audrey butted in.
Celeste did the math. "In your years … thirty-two?"

Tiffany and Audrey exchanged glances. "Would you excuse us for a second?" The university girls stood in unison and marched to the far side of the restaurant to chatter and argue amongst themselves. *Now what're they up to?* When they returned, Audrey had her arms folded up in a scowl and Tiffany had the fakest-looking smile plastered on her face. "Nikki, I need to go to the bathroom. Will you come with me?"

"But I don't have to -"

"Oops. I spilled your drink." Audrey didn't even pretend to knock over the water glass; she just poured it in Nikki's lap. "Tiff, get the kid cleaned up. I'll keep the cousin company, m'kay?"

"Great idea, Audrey!" Tiffany swooped in to link arms and suddenly Nikki was whisked away to the restaurant washroom, where the blonde cheerleader smiled and dabbed at her wet sweater while elevator music crooned from loudspeakers.

"Your … cousin seems nice, Nikki. A little confused … but nice."

"Yeah, um, she's still got jet lag or something. Did I mention she's a Bogan?"

"Are you feeling okay, Nikki? I mean, about what happened … the other night." *My confession.* "Because I really am excited for you, honest!"

"Tiffany," As much as she wanted to drop this conversation, she had to know. "Did your mom tell you I was gay?"

The cheerleader looked horrified. "What? No! No, that was your secret! She'd never … well, I mean, when she drinks everything comes out like she's a sieve, but she'd never blab about an *important* secret-" Seeing her friend's weary gaze, Tiffany stopped herself and started over.

"It was after I heard about your bad date with Anton. You guys were just so perfect for each other so I figured … well, yeah. I didn't want to say anything until you did. Are you mad?"

"You stuck with Audrey over me. What do you think?"

"She doesn't hate you," Tiffany explained. "She's just been through a rough patch and it's a lot for her to take in."

*Oh, just because she's had a bad day I have to put up with her bullshit? *"Why are we even hanging out with her?" Nikki thought back to high school and the gang of girls who'd always trotted at Audrey's heels like trained puppies. "Maybe we're starving for friends but Audrey knows everyone in town! We walk away, she'll just promote two more of her groupies to café nights and homework duty."

Her proposal sounded perfectly reasonable but Tiffany met her with a steely-eyed rejection. "I understand if you don't want to see her anymore, but I don't give up on any of my friends."

"Well it feels like you've given up on me."

"Nikki, even if she can't say it, Audrey cares about you. That's the whole reason why we're here." The blonde put her hands on the gamer's shoulders and looked the girl square in the eyes. "Nikki, you don't have to lie about Celeste being your cousin. We know what she is."

Now it was Nikki's turn to freeze. Her throat swelled with the shame of being caught in a lie. *God, I*
was stupid to think I could hide an alien! "What gave it away?" The makeup. Had to be Audrey's eye and the lousy makeup.

"It doesn't take a great detective to see you've been through a rough time, Nikki. You tried to tell us something important and we weren't there for you. You were probably excited to find someone who'd listen to you. Someone who'd make you feel special."

Tiffany had her there. Being the local contact for an alien bounty hunter was pretty sweet. "But don't you think she's so neat? I mean, I wanna know more about her and where she comes from." I want to see her smile, she added privately.

"She's dangerous," Tiffany snapped. "The best thing you can do is report her to the police. She hasn't hurt you, has she?"

"No! I mean, well, she tried to punch me. But that was because I startled her while she was waking up. Y' see, she was lying on this table and I was taking videos of her and-"

"NIKKI!" Tiffany's face was ash white.

Oh. "That sounded bad, didn't it?" Her mind rewound for an instant replay. Yep, that sounded bad.

"Nikki Ann-Marie, are you listening to yourself? You need to get away from this woman before you get arrested or hurt! I'm going to ask you: do you know what Celeste is?"

"She's a hunter."

Tiffany nodded. "And she's out prowling for lost, lonely girls just like you so she can suck you dry."

"Wait, what're we talking about here?"

Suddenly, Tiffany was clasping her hands and looking deep into her soul.

"Nikki, Celeste is a gold digger and you're her sugar momma."

Nikki blinked, she swallowed and then her laughter howled through the porcelain tiles of the washroom.

"You thought I was … that we were -?" Her cheeks beamed crimson. "I mean, I don't even know if she's into girls!" Never mind interspecies girls! For all she knew Norai had a third sex, or were colony-based and only the Queen could breed. Hell, maybe they were hermaphrodites! Tiffany was beginning look angry so she quickly wiped her eyes and set the record straight.

"Tiffany, Celeste seriously is from out of the country. She's here on a job and I'm helping her get around. That's it!"

"The way you say it, I almost believe you. But she's gone now."

"What?"

"Audrey's been having a chat with Celeste while we were away. By now she should've convinced that awful woman that hanging around you is going to be extremely bad for her health."

Wait, Audrey's out there intimidating an intergalactic bounty hunter? Nikki clapped her hands and beamed. "She's gonna get her ass kicked! I gotta see this!" Nikki dashed off, wondering what non-lethal comeuppance Celeste would dish out. Black eyes? Broken nose? Maybe she'll knock out a tooth! Oh let it be a front one!
Neither she nor Tiffany were prepared for the shrill howling coming from the table.

It was laughter.

"And then, just as they were preparing to launch missiles, I activated the detonators and the compound exploded! Phoosh!" Celeste spread her arms with theatrical flourish. "Naturally, I was a safe distance away ... in their own hovercraft!"

Audrey shrieked and slapped her knees. "OhFuck, you got them good!"

"Audrey!"

The diva glanced up, chill and casual while her friend stood white-knuckled with fury. "Oh, hey Tiff. Change of plans – we're keeping her. Fuck, Nik, this chick you picked up is totally hard-core! Why didn't you tell us she was this outback bounty hunter?"

Nikki stormed straight to the alien. "Did you seriously tell her -?"

Celeste winked. "Only my profession. I needed to clarify our relationship. Your friend seemed to think I was part of a cannibalistic race known as Coo-Garrs, and that I desired to devour you."

Nikki fought back a blush and thanked the heavens for that oh-too-literal translation collar.

"Wait, Celeste, you're a bounty hunter?" Tiffany turned to Nikki. "That's like that character from that space game you like. Samus I-Am?"

"Samus Aran!" Nikki corrected. Jeez, get your facts straight, Mom!

"Yeah," Audrey chimed. "She's chasing this poacher guy who's selling these black market marsupials or whatever. Isn't that kick-ass, Tiff?"

The blonde pinched the bridge of her nose, probably wondering how she'd become the defacto adult of this group. "I'm beginning to understand the attraction here."

"... and after I broke his remaining digits, Xerbo decided it was best to come quietly. So you could say that the leader of the Sang-Xi syndicate found himself ... disarmed."

"Fuck yeah!" Audrey hooted, drawing stares from across the diner. "But shit, you Aussies name your stuff all weird."

Nikki scowled and picked at her melted ice cream. They'd been at the diner for a whole hour listening to Celeste's hunting exploits (carefully edited to exclude all extra-terrestrial references, of course). Tiffany was alarmed by the stories of crime bosses and high-speed pursuits but Audrey sat on the edge of her seat, cheering and clapping like she had front row seats to a rock concert. And every time the alien blushed and smiled at the diva's praise, Nikki bit her lip a little harder.

"Hey," Audrey chimed, "You know all this kung-fu self-defence, right? Can you teach me to fuck up a guy's shit?"

"Combat techniques targeted against the male sex?" Celeste hummed and made a quick consultation. "Nicole, do the males of your species carry their reproductive cells in a pouch beneath their frontal abdomen?"
"Um… yeah. We um, call them balls."

Celeste nodded and returned to Audrey. "Kick them in the balls!"

"Pff! I knew that already. What about some secret nerve pinch or pressure points? I mean, what if he's pinned you on the ground and you need to throw him off? What if he grabs you from behind and you're rammed up against a wall and he's so close you can't breathe and –"

Again, Audrey's eyes retreated to that glazed, mile-long stare. Celeste quirked her head as Tiffany took the diva's hand and rubbed her shoulder.

"Just a what-if scenario," Audrey coughed.

Then Nikki's phone buzzed and she perked at the Twitter update. "Celeste, we've got a hit." The hunter switched to battle mode, nodding grimly and rising for the door.

"Ooh, hang on!" Audrey scribbled her number on a napkin. "Call me after you catch this motherfucker. We should totally get high together!"

Celeste gazed at the napkin like it was a bar of gold. "Many thanks, friend Audrey. Conversing with you has taught me much about your Ear- I mean, American phrases. You are a very naughty donkey." Then she pointed her digit upward to show her approval.

Nikki glowered and yanked her out the door.

Tiffany frowned. "Did she just call you a donkey?"

Audrey laughed like a groupie at a rock show. "Fuck, yeah! And she flipped me the bird too! That bitch is one badass motherfucker! Man, I'd hate to be the guy she's coming after!"

Rondarr cursed and dug his talons into the metal floor, bracing as the cockpit shook once more. *Foul wind!* He'd landed his cloaked ship on the top floor of a half-constructed tower, assuming he'd have some piece of mind in an unoccupied building. He hadn't counted on the metal girders swaying so violently whenever the winds picked up. Did these primitives even know how to build properly? He checked the cameras for evidence of falling debris and zoomed in on the placards posted around the lot.

**CAUTION: DEMOLITION IN PROGRESS.**

Well, whatever the notices said, he'd picked a fortunate spot indeed. While examining the lower floors of the structure, a lone mammal had entered the premise, humming ridiculous songs to itself while setting up equipment from its satchel. Rondarr preferred the thrill of drawn-out hunts, but the speed with which he'd pounced on the creature amused him to no end. *An adult specimen, but they lift as easily as hatchlings!*

 Sadly, it proved to be a male and as a rule those always sold poorer on the market. *Too aggressive and testy.* If he wanted to impress buyers with this new species, he'd need a female.

Still, his first capture had proven useful in its own way. Rondarr activated his translation collar and practiced reciting the timid male's language.

"Oh, god, don't kill me! Please don't kill me!"
Rondarr shook his head. Too rough, too guttural. He needed to sound more like the locals if he intended to walk among them. Adjusting the settings for tone and pitch, Rondarr recited another phrase.

"She was right! It really was an alien! You were right, Nikkeeeeee."

Rondarr flinched. The circuitry didn't seem to care for the hard 'k' consonant, but now his voice projected just like the young male. On to the final step. Checking that the motion sensors clipped around his body were secure, Rondarr initiated his holo-cloak. The air shimmered as a three-dimensional projection of the male materialized over his body, limbs and muscles moving in time with his own.

Stomping over to the cryo tube, Rondarr rubbed the frost from the glass to make sure he'd properly copied the male's likeness. Dark skin, rope-like hair and an odd, plastic medallion hung around the neck. Rondarr smiled and brought the mammal's stolen communication device to his ear to practice one last phrase.

"Hey Boss, got to the site a little early. Call me when you can. Anton, signing off!"

Rondarr twisted his new face into a smile and peered at his flash-frozen mirror image, starring back in a hideous scream.

"Let's find ourselves a female, shall we, Anton?"
The wind lashed Nikki's cheeks as they raced into Glenberry's suburbs. Now that she had a handle for the bike's controls they were making good time and she wanted this time on the bike done quickly. Celeste chattered in her ear all the long ride across town. She chatted about Audrey. Wasn't it impressive how bold Audrey was, standing up to a stranger twice her size? Wasn't it inspiring how she asserted herself so boldly?

"And your friend is most inventive with her language! When she feared I would harm you, she threatened to assault me with her eating utensils in such graphic detail! When I next need to intimidate an informant I will be sure to borrow some of her expressions!"

Audrey this, Audrey that. Even over the bike's engine Nikki could hear her teeth grind. This news better be legit or you are so going down, Belrose. Stopping for a traffic light, she double-checked the Twitter update that had sent them running:

MadameButterfly @Q-T-3.14
Whoa, code blue! Some scary looking dog got into my neighbor's house on Sawmill Road! #WhoYaGonnaCall? #MonsterDog #SrsTweetNotaSexJoke

The stupidity of some humans made Nikki shake her head. Bad enough they mentioned their IRL address, but the tweet even included a picture of the bungalow with its house number for all to see. It was like they were inviting people to show up and rob them!

Number or not, the house was a dead giveaway thanks to the small crowd fretting about on the front lawn. A mother and father raving anxiously with a pack of neighbours, a small girl howling off to the side. She caught snippets of the conversations.

" – just barged through the back door and went after us!"

" – probably still locked in there."

" – paramedics! Where are the paramedics?"

Nikki parked her bike and jogged up to the crowd to gather intel. "Hey, what's going on? You guys call the cops yet?"

"Yeah, those two tried going in." One of the neighbours jerked a thumb at the pair of terrified police cadets huddled on the lawn. "Fat lot of good they were." Like Kyu, both girls were young and pretty, sporting fair skin and flowing hair suited for fashion models, not beat cops. One was lying on the grass and howling through tears while her partner wrapped a bandage gauze around her slashed leg.

"Deep breaths, Ginger. They said back up's on the wa-"

"Back up? What're they gonna do, Cicely, pheromone it to death? Bacchus' backside, I'm a relationship manager not a monster wrangler! I didn't sign up for this shit! Tell Trixie I am done! I am -" she fixed a dirty glare. "What're you staring at, four-eyes?"

Nikki averted her gaze. Why do they keep sending rookies to these huge crime scenes? Panic frothed over the crowd of neighbours, divided between comforting the shaken parents and trying to help the injured officers, and Nikki could feel the jitters infecting her as well. All these people hurt or panicked; where to begin?
At her side, Celeste appraised the crowd – the nattering parents, the useless officers – and she stormed around them all to get to the heart of the problem, kneeling before the sobbing girl they'd forgotten.

"Are you hurt, child?"

"Toby! The bad doggie's gonna get Toby!" She was barely five years old and wailing to the sky. "I wa-wan' my Toby!"

"Shh." Celeste patted the girl's head and let her sob into her chest until she calmed. Nikki remembered Tiffany saying something about 'getting on a child's level' as the best way to address them. "Who is Toby?"

"My kitty." Celeste looked to Nikki for clarification.

"A cat. It's a domesticated animal."

Celeste nodded and addressed the girl. "Child, have your parents told you the stories of the Koru-Shikai?" The girl was clueless but Celeste had her attention.

"The Koru-Shikai, the -" she searched for an easier translation, "- the Night Wraith. It is a creature from ancient fables told across the Corvalis system. The Night Wraith is a being of shadow: teeth like knives, twisted horns and eyes that glow yellow like the stars. Legends say that the Night Wraith listens for the prayers of young children who have been wronged. That it visits the wicked in their sleep and spirits them away. Once the Night Wraith is loosed, it hunts its victims to the grave."

Celeste placed an arm on the child's shoulder. "Has Toby been a good kitty?"

The girl nodded, and then gasped as Celeste lifted her cap to reveal her horns.

"Then I will bring him back to you."

Celeste fixed her disguise and marched to the father. "Have all humans been evacuated from the premises?" Her phrasing weirded him out but the authority of her voice didn't give him room to argue.

"Well, yeah, my family's all out here. It's just my daughter's cat that we missed."

Celeste nodded. "Take the crowd and move everyone across the street. I will need security clearance to access your dwelling."

"She wants your house keys," Nikki clarified.

"What's going on here? Are you people from animal control?"

Then he and the entire crowd drew back as Celeste reached into her bag and removed her folded-up rifle, snapping it to full length like an umbrella.

"I am the exterminator."

Nikki followed Celeste through the back door, quietly and with the laser rifle leading the party. She moved and stopped on the Norai's signals, keeping ever so cautious even though their prey was anything but subtle. Vicious barking exploded from the basement, followed by the yowl of a
distressed cat and the clatter of glass.

Celeste had a second hummingbird remote that she flew down the stairs as an advance scout, piloting it directly with her keyboard glove and displaying its camera sightlines from her wrist-mounded projector. The basement's impressive home theatre lay in ruins: a cracked big-screen TV, chewed up leather couches; the handiwork of a feral animal. A whip of motion came from the DVD bookcases. Celeste adjusted the camera and centered on the garduk, every bit as hideous as Nikki remembered with its see-through skin and its steak knife teeth twisted in a bloody grin. The alien monster prowled and pawed at the bookcases while, at the top, a growling puffball of a cat hissed and spat at its predator.

"Guess they're not much for climbing," Nikki mused. Pity the garduk didn't realize this. It clawed and leapt at the shelves for a purchase and, though its paws failed to hook in, its weight was enough to get the unit wobbling and crashing to the ground. At the last minute, Toby leapt to the adjacent shelf, scrambling to drag its fat bottom to safety. Only two shelves remained upright. Just watching the video standoff got Nikki shuddering.

"It learns quickly," Celeste noted. "I believe Audrey would declare it a clever son of a bitch."

"That was a jest," Celeste explained.

"Don't. Just don't. You sound wrong saying that."

Celeste quirked an eyebrow. "Have I angered you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm fine. I mean, sorry for not being spectacular or incredible like Audrey."

"Nicole, I am –" but then the garduk toppled another bookcase, leaving their lost cat on its final ledge. Celeste stripped off her gloves and handed them over. "Remain here. I will deal with this.

I bet you'd take Audrey with you, Nikki sulked. "You're not gonna splatter it all over the floor, are you?"

"No," Celeste replied, dialing down the humming gun to a soft 'stun' setting. "I want this one intact."

"Be care-" but then Celeste gave the signal for silence and inched down the stairs, shutting the door behind her. Nikki balked at the indignity of being left out until she remembered the glove.

Wearing Celeste's oversized glove made her look like a kid trying on mom's clothes, but she quickly found the keys needed to rotate the hovering drone, backing it up for a nice wide shot: on one end, the stupid, slobbering garduk clawing at the bookshelves; on the other, Celeste creeping down the final step and locking the beast in her sights. The hunter adjusted her scope, steadied her weapon and took a deep breath. She and Nikki exhaled in unison.

A bolt of plasma struck the garduk off its feet, knocking it across the floor and behind a torn-up couch. Celeste paused, listened for its winded breathing, and then marched across the room to finish the job. Game over, bitch, Nikki fist-pumped.

With an angry roar, the garduk leapt over the couch and tackled Celeste to the ground.

Nikki yelped and her fingers jerked at the keyboard, spinning the camera wildly. Cries and snarls
erupted from below but she couldn't see what was happening! God dammit, crappy cameras even screw up real life! Nikki mashed at the keys until she got a proper angle, and what she saw turned her pale.

Celeste was pinned against the floor, her rifle held two-handed like a combat staff and jammed between the garduk's snarling jaws. It took all her strength to fight back the press of teeth and all the while the monster's claws were sinking into her shoulders and scratching at her legs.

Oh god, what do I do? "The remote!" Maybe she could zoom in close, distract it! "Hey, over here! Come get me!" The garduk's translucent flesh magnified in and out as she drove around its head like a horsefly. She even took a page from Cogni's book and rammed the flying camera into the dog-monster's skull.

Furious at the tiny metal mosquito, the garduk snapped its jaws at Nikki's screen. The image fizzled out. From downstairs came an alien roar, the sharp thwack of metal smacking flesh and a canine yelp. Then quiet.

"Celeste?" Nikki mashed at the keyboard but the remote wouldn't respond. "Celeste, are you okay?" She scanned the kitchen for a weapon, grabbed a rolling pin and tore open the basement door. "Celeste, I'm coming!"

Dark. She hadn't realized the basement lights were off; the remote must have been set for night vision. She had just enough light from the staircase to see outlines of the winded combatants: Celeste, panting on her back, the garduk whinnying on its side; her rifle and several knocked-out fangs between them.

The stairs creaked under Nikki's weight. The garduk's nostrils twitched and its broken, bloody jaws honed in on the human at the stairs. It leapt and Nikki found herself back on the beach, staring into an abyss of teeth and tongue.

Then the lunging jaws snap-stopped and slammed to the ground. Nikki and the garduk turned to stare at its hind leg, snatched up in a blue fist that had shot out from the shadows. A monster with twisted horns and yellow eyes loomed over the beast.

"Not her," it snarled, eyes dark and furious. "Not ever."

Once a fierce predator, the garduk now whimpered like a terrified pup, clawing and scrabbling at the floor as the Night Wraith reeled it in into the shadows like a fish on a hook, yanking it into the air and squeezing hands around its neck. Nikki hid her eyes, but her ears heard it all: the clenching of powerful muscles, the choking and gagging of a desperate animal, and then the sharp crack of bones.

When her eyes opened and noticed the light switch, electric bulbs drove away the monsters. The garduk's body lay limp on the floor and Celeste was curled up against the wall, her berserker rage traded for tired panting.

"Celeste, are you --"

"Medical kit," the Norai grunted. Her sweater had been clawed up around her stomach and three parallel slashes raked into her flesh. Only surface cuts, but enough to begin seeping dark blood. Nikki raced to deliver her knapsack and the hunter wasted no time gathering her tools: A strip of metal to clamp between her teeth, a medical laser to burn each wound shut.

Nikki could feel her heart beating in her throat. She hadn't lifted a finger in battle but tremors still ran up her arms. And there was Celeste, casually cauterizing her own wounds like she was tying her
shoelaces.

*Audrey would get her a bottle of booze for disinfectant. Heck, even Tiffany could help out with first aid.* This made twice she'd been save by the hunter. She needed to do something useful. "I'll get the cat," she offered.

The gray puffball was huddled in a corner, where it hissed and raised its hackles as Nikki knelt and offered her palm. "Hey guy, it's oka-HEY!"

Nikki jerked back her fingers, gaping at the red marks dug by cat claws. "What the heck, I'm trying to –"

*To help? Well three big cheers for you, Nic-hoe! You can't even get a dumb cat to like you; no wonder she likes Audrey more than you!*

She had to be brave. Celeste had just snapped the neck of a wild animal like it was nothing. She couldn't break down over a little cut; she couldn't let her eyes well up. She couldn't -

The sobbing came quick and hard. A scratch; a god-damn scratch broke her and now she was crying and curling in a ball like a soft and whiny pre-schooler! She really was pathetic!

But for some bizarre reason, Celeste didn't ignore her in disgust. She could hear the alien scooting across the floor and sitting at her side; heard her tear a strip from her sleeve and felt the unexpected warmth of a hand grabbing her own to wrap a makeshift tourniquet around her fingers.

"You need to apply pressure," Celeste instructed, calm and in the moment.

Nikki wrenched her hand free. "I can't do this. You were right, I shouldn't be here! I'm just going to screw everything up and drag you down!"

She expected Celeste to slap her across the face, give her an *'I told you so'* and walk away forever. Instead, Nikki felt a powerful arm caressing her shoulders, then pulling her back and off-balance until she rested gently against the alien's body. Celeste nestled Nikki's head against her shoulder, inviting her to cry.

"The first hunt always shakes us."

*So warm.* Celeste's arm around her shoulder felt so powerful and secure, like nothing in the world could shake her. She didn't deserve this.

"I lied to you," Nikki whimpered. "I'm not a government ambassador. I don't work for any special agencies or know anything about aliens."

Celeste nodded. "I suspected as much." Nikki looked into her golden eyes that somehow found a way to smile through the pain.

"So why didn't you call me out on my bullshit?"

"I've used your tactic far too often to criticize it. Not all the galaxy is as admiring of bounty hunters as you humans. There's a reason I'm called the Night Wraith and not the Ashito Tai – the Blessed Savior."

"Besides that," she added, suddenly avoiding eye contact, "I was curious about you."

*Curious?* Probably just a novelty, she reasoned. What interest did a puny human barista hold for a
bounty hunter who'd journeyed across the stars? Nikki let the comment slide and they sat a while longer. Then Celeste's curiosity prompted her on.

"How did you access Rondarr's ship without government documentation?"

So Nikki told her about the favour she'd called in, the last-minute disguise she'd thrown together and once more she found a way to make the alien laugh.

"You are a resourceful woman, to accomplish all that on your own."

"I'm nobody," Nikki refuted. "I serve drinks at a crappy café and I can't even do that right."

"You are observant," Celeste countered. "Calm when under pressure. Aboard my ship you found a means for us to communicate. When we lost our quarry you accessed your human networks to continue the hunt." She pointed to the chewed remains of her camera bird. "When I found myself overwhelmed, you provided the distraction I needed to escape the beast. You are capable of so much, Nicole. Never belittle yourself."

"I guess..." Darn it, now she was starting to smile. Cuddling up against Celeste felt so reassuring and right, like she had slipped into a blissful bubble bath and could shed all of her worries. *I have such a crush on you.*

"Crush?"

Oh god, had she said that aloud? Nikki stuttered about for a course correction but Celeste's only reaction was to chuckle at her strange flailing.

"Rest assured, I'm in no discomfort from your grip."

Ah. Right. Non-literal expressions. *Saved by the bell, Nic-hoe.* "Maybe we should get going."

But before she could rise, Celeste's fingers slipped around her wrist and tugged her close. Heat spread through Nikki's cheeks. *What the -?*

The older woman traced her fingers over Nikki's tiny digits, and though the touch electrified her brain, her muscles went limp as putty. Easy clay for Celeste to mold into a fist. "Always present your fist when you approach a strange animal. Better to take a blow on your knuckles than your digits."

Oh. Yeah, the cat. Nikki received a little push forward - *Try again.* Taking a deep breath, she knelt and offered her closed fist for Toby to sniff. The cat growled, but then took a cautious whiff of her skin, and then rubbed its head over Nikki's hand, purring affection.

"I did it!"

The smile Celeste gave was like sunshine after a long night. Nikki ducked her head sheepishly and pretended she hadn't glimpsed the hunter hissing and baring her teeth to terrify the uppity cat into submission. Her stomach fidgeted restlessly, hungry for that smile to continue.

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When Nikki stepped out of the house with the cat curled to her chest, she exited into a hero's welcome. Much to her discomfort, the parents and neighbours crowded around, peppering her with pats on the back and excited questions. In the ensuing chaos, her cat ward squirmed from her grip, bounding across the lawn and into his little owner's arms.
"Toby!"

Then Celeste exited and her slam of the door killed the festivities. One arm dragged a knapsack with her protruding gun, the other hefted a black body bag over her shoulder. Each onlooker fell silent and backed from her path like a repulsed magnet, instinctively knowing not to cross her.

Everyone except for the injured police cadet, embarrassed and furious that a civilian had stolen her thunder. She pushed aside her fretting partner and limped over to confront Celeste.

"Where do you think you're going? Put that down, that's official police evidence!"

Celeste turned slowly, bringing her near six-foot frame to bear on the pixie-sized rookie. The alien's clothes were still tattered, her scars on full display and her eyes beamed out a look of simmering irritation, the kind of glare an exhausted mother gave when being nattered at by young children. Do you really want to try my patience?

Hit with the full blast of Celeste's glower, the girl whimpered.

"Or, I mean, you could hold onto it, I guess."

The rookie hobbled away fast as a marathon runner, while her more level-headed partner tiptoed through the crowd and offered Nikki a pat on the back and a winning smile.

"We appreciate the back up."

Like Kyu, her touch lingered awkwardly. Nikki excused herself from her admirers to help Celeste secure the bag on the vespa's storage rack.

"So they'll pay you for the body?"

"Three thousand datari for exterminating an invasive species outside its ecosystem. As proof, heads or torsos are preferred."

Nikki spared a glance at the police cadets, now grandstanding at the assembled neighbours and telling them to "move along, all clear" like this was their victory. Another arrow in Anton's 'no conspiracies' quiver. These Barbie doll bimbos couldn't manipulate their way out of a paper bag!

"I'm guessing you don't get a lot of thanks for your work."

Celeste gave another 'I'm used to it' shrug. "Among the Confederacy races, there are many stories extolling the brutal deeds of the Koru-Shikai, praising them for the justice only they could deliver. The stories all end in the same manner: once a Night Wraith has accomplished its bidding it is driven away, cast back to the shadows."

Didn't that tune sound familiar? Hey, Nikki, wanna partner up on this project? Hey, Nic-hoe, you're smart; help me with this math question! Then, Um, excuse me, who gave you permission to sit with us? The losers' table is thataway.

"Assholes." She was beginning to understand why Audrey's praise and attention had meant so much to the hunter.

"We should depart," Celeste informed her. "Three garduk still remain."

"Yeah, just a second. Just gotta check my phone." Nikki turned her back and put her impromptu plan into motion. It wasn't fair, the way Celeste gave so much and got so little in return. She deserved
more. To make that happen, maybe she had to call upon a Night Wraith of her own.

*Hey Audrey, Celeste wants to hang out tonight. Text me your plans.*

The reply was instantaneous, as though the she-devil had been hovering over the phone to pounce.

*F--k yah! We gonna par-T hRd 2night!* Mephistopheles wasted no time drawing stray souls into her web.

"You are smiling," Celeste observed as she tucked away her phone and straddled the bike.

"Just got a good feeling about tonight," Nikki replied, gunning the engine and steering them into the city core. In the vespa's rear-view mirror, a little girl ran to the curb, squeezing a helpless cat to her chest and waving them off with all her might.

"Thanks for saving Toby, scary lady!"

Tilting the mirror ever so slightly, Nikki confirmed that Celeste was smiling too.
"Hey man, you feelin' okay? You're lookin' a bit wobbly."

The dark-skinned university student leaned against the nightclub exterior to steady his wobbling legs. Underneath the hologram, Rondarr bared his fangs at the interloper. On Anton's face, it translated into a nice enough smile. "Quite all right. Just a little unbalanced."

Unbalanced was an understatement. To properly blend in among these 'hyoo-muns' he'd been forced to lash his tail against his spine and the lack of his anchoring limb made simple walking a chore. How these hair-bag mammals kept themselves righted was a mystery.

His interrogator glanced over him skeptically. "Okay, bro but if you've been pounding back the sauce, I'd stay outta Lusties tonight."

Oh, but this Luss-tees was precisely where he desired to be. Night had descended over the backwater world, beckoning the youthful members of the settlement to gather in the entertainment complexes and try their luck at attracting mates: imbibing fermented liquids, gyrating their bodies rhythmically; typical mammal prattle. A sizable line had already gathered outside this venue. What an ideal hunting ground to scout potential samples!

Licking his fangs, Rondarr's tongue seized up on a familiar whiff of blood. Impossible! He flattened himself against the wall, head darting for the source. There! Arriving in front of the club on an odd, two-wheeled speeder. She'd coloured her skin and assumed local clothing, but the stench of Tendricite blood was unmistakable. The Koru-Shikai.

The holographic Anton jammed his hands into his pockets. Beneath the cloak of light Rondarr was readying his blaster. By the Seven Stars, to have tracked him so quickly; she truly was a demon!

But after a moment Rondarr found he could relax. The bounty hunter's glare swept over the pounding night club and the line of mammals. She didn't notice him, didn't seem aware of his presence. Wait, was this all just a ridiculous coincidence?

No, he realized, this was a marvelous opportunity. 'Anton' stepped forward, trigger finger ready. It ends tonight, plant-eater.

But he wasn't the only one targeting the Night Wrath. A female in baggy garb trotted up to the hunter and, as the two began speaking familiarly, his holographic mouth dropped in exclamation. That hair! Blue as the seas of Slovar Prime! In his patrols around the settlement he'd documented black, brown and straw-coloured individuals but this girl was something rare! Tiny and heavy-set, perhaps, but worth her weight in datari. What luck - he could take his revenge and his prize all in one fell swoop!

As he slunk forward for a clear shot, the blue-haired human turned his way and locked eyes. She squinted and then waved happily at him!

Rondarr darted into the closest alleyway before she could alert the Koru-Shikai. Too close. Damn that Tendricite for snatching up such a jewel! Loathe as he was to retreat from such a treasure, he couldn't risk exposure. He would have to find another hunting ground for tonight.

"Is something the matter?"
Nikki shook her head. "No, never mind. Just thought I saw someone I knew," but there was no way Anton would freak and run from her like that.

Celeste said nothing; her focus was on puzzling out the two-story brick building with its pink spotlights and throbbing dance music. "What is this place?"

"Lusties Nightclub," Nikki explained. "Your mileage may vary, but Audrey says it's the best party spot in the whole city so I figured you'd like it too."

Celeste continued to stare, her question still standing. "I thought we were continuing our hunt. Why did you bring me here?"

Nikki looked to the concrete sidewalk. Here we go. "Well, I kinda thought you deserved a chance to unwind. We got one of those garduk already, maybe we should celebrate. You know, enjoy some revels?"

Her tongue-lashing was severe. "Nicole, in several cycles your world will be overrun with parasites. We have no time for 'revels'. Besides," she added, shifting awkwardly, "I should not be in such a crowded area. I tend to stand out a bit..."

"Your makeup's fine," Nikki reassured her, and without thinking added, "They're not staring because they think you're an alien; they're staring because they think you're hot!"

Alien eyes drew back. Oh crap!

"Hey, Celeste! Celeste, over here!" The fangirl yell cut off the awkward conversation and Nikki trotted towards the skinny hand waving them forward through the line-up.

"Hey girls," Tiffany chirped. "Glad you could make it!" The cheerleader wore a short and sparkly white cocktail dress with spaghetti straps, while her usual pigtails fell loose over her back in anticipation of the party to come.

"Fuck yeah," Audrey hooted. "You Aussies ready to get crazy?" Again, Celeste drew back at the sight of Audrey's wardrobe, this time little more than a leather corset, fishnets and a frilly skirt like a ballet tutu. All in black and purple, of course. Ever since she'd dyed her hair platinum, Audrey had worn nothing but royal purple, declaring it the new 'in' colour. It baffled Nikki how someone could toss out their entire wardrobe to satisfy a fleeting fashion trend, but at least this phase wasn't as head-scratchingly bizarre as the time Audrey had started dressing like a dainty Catholic school girl and putting on airs of being a 'sweet young thing'.

Celeste continued to gape, but not over clothing. "You all came to celebrate with us?"

Audrey gave a mocking laugh. "Uh, yeah! Someone's gotta show you a kick-ass time. I mean, it's bad enough you're letting Nikki dress you."

Celeste inspected her human disguise. After the skirmish with the garduk, they'd stopped by Nikki's apartment to find her some non-torn clothes and to deposit her hunting trophy. Celeste assured her that the body bag was airtight and vacuum sealed, but Nikki still had panic attacks of her landlord barging in over odor complaints and finding a dead dog in her shower.

"It is comfortable," Celeste said of her replacement turtleneck – black, this time.

"Ugh, must be an Aussie thing. You two coming?"

Celeste thought it over. "I suppose one evening wouldn't be overly detrimental." Her eyes followed
the crisscrossing laces over Audrey's bare back. "Yes, we could stay and ... partake in the sights." Nikki's pulse stopped. Was she checking out Audrey?

At any rate, Audrey high-fived the bouncer a wad of bills and they were in, escorted to the VIP booths at the back of the club. While Celeste admired the sights, Audrey ordered appetizers.

"Nachos for my girls," she barked. "Sorry, Nikki, but they don't serve tacos here."

"So Celeste," Tiffany coughed, "Do anything fun this afternoon?"

"I exterminated an invasive species in your settlement's suburban residences." That earned her a whoop and a high-five from Audrey.

"Kickass! So, Nikki showed you around outside of the city? Had a gay old time enjoying the open cunt-ry?" She flashed an evil grin at the gamer. "Well good for you. So Nikki, is Celeste into blowjobs or she a muff diver?"

"Audrey," Tiffany scolded.

"What? I'm reading the shooter menu." That was right, Lusties had all sorts of disgusting names for their drinks – sex on the beach, deep throat. "I'm ordering the first round, so what'll it be? I know Nikki wants a coke; can't wait to get her lips around a pussy drink."

Nikki snatched up the menu and stabbed at her choice. "Get me a dirty hooker. That's your specialty, isn't it, Audrey?" She meant it as the blackest insult but the corseted diva only cackled gaily, as though the shots they exchanged were harmless pellets.

"Ooh, someone's feeling extra butch tonight!"

"I'll have what Nicole orders," Celeste added.

Nikki had no stomach for hard liquors but she wasn't about to submit to Audrey's constant ribbing. Down the hatch in one swift gulp! Tiffany was sweet enough to bring her a glass of water, but she never expected to see Celeste gag on her shot and guzzle down the chaser first. Was Earth alcohol really that potent?

Audrey slammed down her three consecutive shots. "Okay, let's get up there!"

Tiffany nodded. "You've gotta show us those Down Unda dance moves!"

"I'll endeavor," Celeste nodded, game for something new. But she paused, noticing Nikki firmly rooted. "Nicole, are you not joining us?"

She shook her head. "I don't dance."

"Oh," the Norai seemed disappointed, but Audrey dragged her off too quickly for it to register. Nikki pulled out her phone and entertained herself flipping through old Candy Crush levels. Dance clubs are dumb, she reminded herself. Just a bunch of horny, boozed-up perverts writhing around to a rhythmic thumping that barely qualified as music. And does anyone actually stop and listen to the lyrics? All the songs were about drugs or binge drinking or gangs shooting up each other. She might as well dance to a song about punching women.

"Whoo, shake it, kangaroo girl!" On the dance floor, Audrey gave Celeste a playful bop with her hip; the Norai grinned and returned the favour and soon their little exchange grew into an all-out grinding.
Nikki diverted her gaze to the nachos, shoving them in her mouth by the fistful. *And those moves* – it wasn't even real dancing, just a bunch of random swaying and ass-shaking. Everyone called video games cultural garbage, but compared to this cesspool of sweaty, stupid bodies she was surrounding herself with high art!

She could still hear Celeste laughing alongside Audrey. *Good for you; enjoy the night out. I'm better off without -*

"Nicole?"

She startled at the voice. "Celeste, you're back?" Wait, why was she grimacing and propping herself against the table?

"A fellow dancer collided with my side," Celeste explained. She massaged the tender spot where the garduk had slashed her belly. "I need to sit down." Nikki winced sympathetically, thinking back to the September she had returned to school with a sunburn and the painful slap-across-the-back greetings her classmates had delivered. The alien scooted into the booth, sliding over the cushions until they were side by side. Nikki felt grateful for the company but the moment didn't last long.

"Nicole, this music is causing a migraine. Could we relocate somewhere quieter?"

There was a patio out back for the smokers, and once they shut the door on the thumping bass, Celeste seemed to rest easier breathing in the night air. "My head is still ringing," she winced.

Nikki remembered the bloody head wound from her crash landing and she cursed herself for texting Audrey. *You idiot, she doesn't need bright lights and loud noise, just peace and quiet. "We don't have to stay," she offered.*

"No, I don't wish to be discourteous. I'm honoured that you would go through such trouble for me." The alien took a deep breath intended to calm her nerves. "A moment's rest is all I require," but just standing quietly made the Norai wince and clutch at her temples.

"Speak to me," she pleaded, bracing through a fresh wave of pain.

"A-about what?"

"Anything. Just … something to distract me from this … ringing. Tell me about yourself."

Nikki doubted her life story would make for a soothing lullaby but if she insisted. "Well, I just turned eighteen. Last year I finished high school and I'm glad that joke's over. Oh, um, here on Earth we have mandatory education. Did you have schools on Tendricide?"

Celeste shook her head. "Our tribes were too small and scattered for formal learning academies. Children were apprenticed in their family trade."

"I hated school," Nikki continued. "You spend all you day in these cramped, boring classrooms being lectured at and doing mindless exercises. Of course, no one actually goes there to learn. It's all about being popular, showing off for your friends and making fun of those who don't fit in. It's –"

"- Suffocating," Celeste continued. "To be trapped in an isolated community, forced into the mold of what is 'proper' and 'acceptable'. And when you show any deviance, any defects, they shun you and your sickness." Her hands were fiddling with that precious projector sphere again. "However much you miss it, it's a relief to be free from that-

"- that cage," Nikki finished. They smiled, two musicians passing a melody back and forth. "Yeah, it
feels good."

"And now?" Celeste asked. "How do you enjoy your freedom?"

Nikki gave a cynical snort. "By jumping into another prison, I guess. I work at this café making fancy drinks for yuppies with too much time and money. I wouldn't call it a trade or anything; it's just a job I work to pay the bills."

"And what do you aspire to do?"

Nikki squirmed like she'd had snow dumped down her shirt. No one had ever asked what she wanted from her life. The future seemed too vast, too dark to quantify and just thinking about life a year down the road made her shiver uncomfortably. "I dunno. I guess if I had enough money I'd just stay in, play video games and blog." Feeling terribly small with that confession, she added. "But I do like drawing."

Celeste perked up. "You are an artist?"

"Artist? God that sounded pretentious. "I guess? I mean, it's not like I've actually sold any of my drawings. I just draw for myself and post stuff online." Her hobby seemed to captivate Celeste anyhow.

"When I was young, my most cherished possession was a pair of vid-lenses. Like your eyeglasses," she explained, "only they could record holographic images and films. I scavenged them from the old citadels and spent months searching out the materials to repair them."

She fell back in reminiscing. "I used to wear them everywhere, documenting all my journeys and explorations. I still enjoy partaking in photography. Whenever a bounty brings me to a new world I take time to record images." Nikki smiled, imagining Celeste beating down an alien criminal, then pausing for a selfie.

"I find it comforting to record my memories this way, knowing I might never return; that I could lose everything in an instant." Again, that look of immense sadness she'd spied on the ship this morning. Nikki had to know.

"Celeste ... are you dying?" Incredulous eyes drew back in shock. Nikki pressed on. "I mean, you keep talking about being defective and how your home world never wanted you. You're not sick with a disease, are you?"

Celeste howled with laughter, and once she'd dried her eyes she swept in to address the confusion. "Dying? No, you needn't be concerned. I am quite healthy and considered physically ideal by my people; the pride of my family. No, being sleiba is no physical defect."

"Sleiba?" Nikki repeated.

The Norai waved it off with a grin. "A derogatory term among my people. It means 'one who lies with her own sex'!"

"Wait, so you ... You like girls?"
"Decisively so," the alien answered with an unabashed grin. "You might imagine how my people, with all their obsession with fertility, took the news poorly."

Nikki only half listened, her thoughts obstructed by the sinking feeling in her stomach - half excitement, half dread. *Celeste was a lesbian. Celeste was attracted to girls!*

"I um," Dammit, her hands were shaking! "Wow, I've never heard anyone just come out and say that."

"It is who I am," Celeste affirmed, folding her arms behind her head, "and I make no apologies. As you said this morning, if the world will not accept me then I will follow my own path."

"That's good. I'm glad for you." Deep within her mind, a voice hammered for release.

I'm like you! I like -

"And what of yourself?"

"Me?" Nikki sputtered. Her cheeks boiled over with red. "Oh, well, I don't really date and that's more of a private thing here and --" Argh! She reset. "So, how's that headache?"

Celeste's smile dimmed for a second, but then she stretched and popped her shoulders. "Better, but I do feel dehydrated. May I?"

She was pointing to the black, carbonated drink Nikki had carried out with her. She handed it over, and the alien sniffed it cautiously. "Is this another alcoholic beverage?"

"No, it's Doctor Pepper, a soft drink."

Celeste nodded. "Good. My species traditionally subsists on a diet of simple roots and vegetables. Our metabolisms are poorly equipped to process alcohols." Celeste tipped her head back and chugged the drink until the ice cubes lay bare at the bottom.

"So alcohols really mess you up, then?"


Sweat dropped down her neck. "I'd uh, have to check…"

"No matter. I think I would like another."

Twitching nervously, Nikki followed her back into the club. *One drink*, she reasoned. One drink couldn't be that bad, right?

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*Glug, glug, glug.* Celeste raised her throat to the ceiling, pounding down her latest drink like an industrial pump, and with a satisfied, rip-snorting "AH!" the alien woman slammed her tumbler on the table, reacquainting it with its half-dozen compatriots.

"Serving wench!" she hollered, waggling a wobbly arm for attention. "Another round of this … wha' was th'name? Ah yes, this Mountainous Dew!" There was still some green liquid at the bottom of her glass and she gazed at it in awe. "I have never seen spring water irradiated to such an unnatural shade, but it is quite delicious!"
A male server with a fresh pitcher stopped by with a smile. "Can I fill your cups, ladies?"

The Norai gave a naughty giggle. "You may try!" Then she leaned into Nikki's ear. "Psst! Nicole, I think he wishes to copulate with us!" The server's hand jerked, spilling drink over the table as he went goggle-eyed.

"Celeste, when you whisper you have to be quiet."

"Ohh..." the alien gasped, a revelation. "That is so clever, Nicole!"

_Oh boy._ She'd heard of happy drunks and mean drunks but Celeste was something else. 'Happy' didn't do justice to this sugar high, she was _manic_. Little comments were suddenly laugh out loud hilarious; every stray noise made her dart her head like a squirrel and whenever the houselights changed colour, it hypnotized her. Celeste was currently lasered in on Tiffany and Audrey, twisting her head sideways trying to comprehend the shorter diva's clothing.

"So many knots ... how does she put that on?" Her gaze went devilish. "I wonder how it comes off."

Nikki yanked the alien back into her seat. "Yeah, let's not." _I've created a monster._ She'd lost track of Celeste's drink count because she'd been caught up in her own thoughts. _I should tell her_, her better half argued. _I should be able to say it just as bold – "Hey, I'm gay too."_

Her more negative voice shushed down that rogue thought. _What does it matter?_ Her sexuality was her own business; nobody needed to know. _I mean, it's not like it's gonna change anything._ To think that Celeste would ... no, just thinking of that was arrogant.

Now the Norai was tugging at her sleeve like a little kid. "Nicole, Nicole - we should go dance!"

"Celeste, I told you I don't dance."

"But it's fun," the drunk alien pouted. She was pulling quite forcefully now, standing up in the booth and trying to drag her out.

"I said, NO!" Nikki yanked her sleeve free and watched the domino chain she'd kicked off begin its slow and horrifying breakdown.

Celeste lost her balance and flailed backwards out of the booth, arms sweeping the table clear and shattering glasses over the floor. Skidding over the shards like a goat on ball bearings she ploughed into a passing boy, who stumbled into a friend, and that clueless bystander went flying face-first into the dance floor, saving himself from a fall by grabbing the nearest girl's shoulders.

_Audrey's shoulders._

The diva lost it. She screamed like a cornered beast and her fist cracked across the boy's face. "Don't touch me! Nobody touches me!" Her eyes were wide and feral; nothing but animal instinct.

The guy tried apologizing - "What the fuck, I just tripped!" – but Audrey heard none of it. Consumed by that same hollow-eyed look of terror from the restaurant, she brandished her house keys between her knuckles like punching daggers. "Nobody touches me! Nobody touches me! Back off or I swear I'm gonna cut your face! I'm gonna –"

Choking off a sob, she bolted through the crowds, Tiffany in hot pursuit. "Audrey, wait!"

The onlookers very quickly traced the conflict back to the tall girl in the turtleneck, still flat on the
"Yo, four-eyes, your friend's seriously drunk! Get her outta here!"

It took Nikki a minute to register the complaint; she was still mesmerized by Audrey's raw outburst. "I'm sorry!" she finally gasped. "So sorry. We're on our way out." She could already see a bouncer wading through the crowd. Time to vamoose before she got carded. "C'mon, Celeste." Taking the Norai's wrist, she was easily guided to the front doors. Nikki scanned for her university friends – they ought to know they were leaving.

Sobbing. In a quiet corner by the washrooms, Audrey had buried herself in Tiffany's shoulder. "He won't go away," she pleaded. "I want him out! I want that fucker out of my head!"

Tiffany hushed her friend and drew her into a hug. "Shh. You're safe now. I've got your back, Audrey." Spotting the bluenette over Audrey's shoulder, Tiffany scowled and shooed them away. Not now, she mouthed.

Nikki tugged Celeste outside before she made any inappropriate comments. "Let's get you home, okay?" She had to remind herself that this wasn't an alcoholic daze, it was a sugar rush. "Keep moving. You're high right now but pretty soon you're gonna –"

Whump.
"Crash..."

The scrape and click of keys in a slot, the twist of a knob and Nikki greeted her apartment butt-first, walking backwards and dragging a groaning, inebriated alien across her front step.

"Too quickly…” Celeste muttered through her fever dream. "Nicole, your planet is rotating too quickly."

"Don't talk," Nikki hushed back. The elevator had been out of service – of course – and she'd just dragged a woman twice her size up the stairwell, listening to those tiny feet clunk against four floors worth of steps like they were lead weights. What's she keep in those shoes anyway, bricks?

"I think there wuz caffeine in tha' ... wet thing y'gave me…"

"The drink?"

"Tha's it," Celeste nodded. "Iss hurting the … bobbly thing on m'shoulders."

"Your head?"

Celeste chuckled. "Yur shmart."

"I'm just sober."

Even with a sugar crash fogging Celeste's brain, her irritation was noted. "I ruined your celebration. I'm sorry…"

"Meh, it was crappy to begin with," Nikki shrugged. "I don't even like Lusties, but I figured you and Audrey could have fun there." They were in her room now and the final hurdle was lifting Celeste onto the bed. She'd play the dutiful host and curl up on the living room floor, naturally. "C'mon, time
for bed."

Celeste kept up her half-lucid mumbling even as she was being dragged onto the mattress. "Why don' you dance, Nicole? I wanted t'dance wi' you."

"I don't dance," she repeated. "Dancing is a primitive, obsolete ritual that I have no time for." End of discussion.

The Norai may have been drunk out of her skull, but the scowl on her face told that she could still smell out bullshit. Nikki sighed.

"I'm no good at dancing," she confessed. "If I get up in front of a bunch of people they'll all just laugh at me."

"I wouldn't laugh." The older woman staggered onto her feet, her wobbly hips setting a natural beat. "Dance with me," she offered.

Nikki rolled her eyes – if it'll get you to sleep – and gave a token waggle of her arms and knees. "La-lala-lala. There, I'm dancing and I look stupid. Are you happy?"

Scoffing, the Norai grabbed her sweater and pulled their bodies together. "Dance with me," she clarified.

Oh.

Nikki felt a familiar rush of heat as the alien woman took her wrists and placed them over the curves of her hips. She blushed and tried sliding up to the safer stomach zone but Celeste only pulled her back down before settling her fingers atop Nikki's bare shoulders.

Close, Nikki gulped. Close enough to see the rise and fall of the hunter's breasts, blue lips smiling under half-lidded eyes and humming an off-key alien melody. Celeste was too unsteady for anything fancy so they just bobbed from foot to foot. Okay, maybe some dancing's not that bad...

"You have such wonderful hair," Celeste murmured.

"Head and Shoulders," Nikki croaked out. "I buy it on sale."

The older woman nodded, or maybe she was just idly bobbing her drunken head. "Nicole?"

"Uh huh?"

"How am I attractive?"

Nikki nearly dropped to the floor. Wh-wh-what?

"Outside the club, you told me that I was being observed because I was attractive by your people's standards. I am curious: what traits do humans find desirable?"

"Well uh, I uh –" while her tongue stuttered and spluttered, Nikki's eyes raked over every gorgeous inch of Celeste's body. Where do I begin? "I mean … um, you have nice eyes."

The comment seemed to take Celeste aback. "That's kind of you to say so. Sadly this colour is commonplace among my people."

"Well it isn't here. To us," to me, she thought, "you're one of a kind."
Nikki suddenly realized that their dancing had stopped. They were no longer two people moving to a musical rhythm, but simply two people holding each other. A nervous heat was creeping over her body, making her hyper-aware of every stray sensation on her skin: The warmth against her palms, radiating through the denim that separated her from Celeste's hips. The icy brush of Celeste's fingers on her bare shoulders; the goosebumps down her chest as those hands explored and slipped under the straps of her bra. The shiver down her neck as alien fingertips slid past her ear to run through the blue hair they so admired.

She risked a glance up and Celeste's half-lidded eyes shone on her like a harvest moon – golden, radiant and so much closer than she remembered. Nikki started rambling to distract herself.

"You're amazing, you know that? You're strong; you never let anyone push you around. You don't care if the world looks down on you or if you're all alone. Me?" She gave a mocking laugh. "Well I'm spilling my guts to a half-conscious drunk. How's that for courage?"

Celeste's hypnotic eyes drifted closer; the closer her lips approached the more time seemed to stretch and dilate, the faster her heart jackhammered against her breast.

"I'm gay," she continued, teardrops shuddering down her cheeks. "Do you know how hard it is for me to say that? I like girls. And I like you, Celeste. I really, really like –"

A whisper of sugary breath over her mouth froze Nikki. So close, came the beat of her heart. So close. So close that stray locks of silver hair tickled her skin. So close. Their noses brushed with every heated exhale. So close, and Celeste's soft, blue lips drifted closer still, parting.

Her tongue flicked over Nikki's mouth.

Nikki sputtered. "What're you doing?" Her mind reeled for her to fall back; stagger away. Celeste smiled drunkenly at these adorable antics and licked her again; slower this time, tracing her wet tongue over the contours of Nikki's lips until her jaw melted in a frightened gasp.

The caresses continued along her face, tongue sliding up and down Nikki's cheek in long, luxurious strokes that sent an electric tingle down to her toes. She had to grip the older woman tight to keep her body from going limp. "Unh…"

She gasped, her body shivered as the older woman teased higher still to her earlobe - a single flick set her body on fire - and trailed back to her open and inviting mouth, unbearably slow. More, Nikki moaned. Please, just once mo-

Clunk.

Like a sleeper waking from a magnificent dream, Nikki very reluctantly opened her eyes to find Celeste's head dropped on her shoulder, her body limp and heavy as a sandbag.

"C-Celeste?" Nikki tapped the alien's head, gave her body a shake. She tried standing the floppy mannequin upright and gravity sent the alien crashing onto the bed, eyes lidded and throat claimed by a loud and immediate snoring.

"Huhhh-zzzzz, Huhhh-zzzzz…"

Nikki blinked dumbly at the sleeping alien, the heat in her cheeks and her core furious for an outlet. She took a step back. Then another. The she ran to the door and slammed it behind her, sinking to the floor and gasping in confusion, a single thought rushing forth among the dizzying pulse of her heart.
What the hell was that?
When Nikki's breathing settled to a point where she could close her eyes, she was assaulted by wave after wave of bizarre video game dreams. In her latest, she was trapped in a Donkey Kong level. Literally – someone had shut her up in one of those floating, wooden barrels used to spawn sidekick characters and she was waiting for player one to bust her out.

Through a peephole in the wood she spotted her saviour: Celeste – looking absolutely delicious with that crimson DK tie draped over her breasts – who knelt before her prison and teasingly traced a finger around Nikki's little opening. She had to fight the urge to snap up that digit like a hungry fish at a baited hook. The alien woman tantalized her ears with a low purr. "Are you coming, Nicole?"

"No? Let me help."

Then she started wailing on her barrel with a crowbar. *Whump, whump, whump!* Nikki's brains rattled like canned corn. Seeing no progress, the bounty hunter picked up her wooden prison and started bashing it against the ground. *Whump, whump, whump!*

She needed a minute to register that the pounding against her head was somebody pounding on her front door - *whump, whump, whump!* – and it kept getting louder. "Hang on, hang on…" Nikki muttered. *Man am I stiff.* No wonder: she'd curled up on the hallway floorboards, little better than a bed of nails. Shuffling like the walking dead, Nikki unbolted the front door.

The visitor on her front step made her wish life came with an 'undo' button.

"S'up, bitch!"

The smiling teeth outside her door were pearly and white and every bit as monstrous as a garduk's grin. *Audrey.* The diva was freshly primped for the day in a frilly purple mini-skirt (did she *ever* wear pants?) and a black T-shirt featuring a rabid, rainbow-drooling unicorn. Shopping bags dangled from one arm, while the other held a tray of coffee cups. Audrey tried to force her way in but Niki pinned her arm across the entryway.

"What're you doing here?"

Wasn't that the stupidest question ever? "Why do you think I'm here? Twelve o'clock on a Sunday? I'm checking on your fish, stupid!"

Nikki needed a minute to process. That's right, it was Sunday, and she knew for a fact Audrey had been visiting weekly to "make sure you haven't murdered another pet"; apparently the little princess actually knew something about raising sea animals. After her breakup with Anton they'd started talking about fish and Audrey had encouraged her to start a fresh aquarium under her supervision. There was just one thing she couldn't understand:

"What are you doing here?" As in, *why do you keep showing up if you hate me so much?* Audrey didn't seem to register her exasperation.

"Like I need a reason to hang with my girl Nikki? Now c'mon, let me in."

Nikki refused to move. "I don't feel so good, Audrey."

"Oh, like you've got better things to do! C'mon, I brought coffee," she added, offering one of the mystery cups. "And it's your favorite," she sing-songed.
Coffee, the perfect Trojan horse to lower her defences. Craving the caffeine rush, Nikki backed off and let the monster in.

"You like spiced latte, right?"

"Spiced cider," Nikki corrected.

"Right, that one." Audrey snatched back the paper cup and exchanged it with a tray-mate. "Knew it was spiced something so I just bought one of each." Clacking her heels into Nikki's kitchenette, she dumped the remaining drinks into the sink. For her own morning pick-me-up, Audrey uncorked the flask in her purse.

"Phew, you stink," she declared, wrinkling her nose and fanning the air. "Get all hot 'n sweaty last night?"

Nikki opened her mouth to bombarding the diva with F-bombs, but then she too whiffed up the unfamiliar scent. My clothes? She inhaled from her sweater – a rich, intoxicating musk tingled her nose – and immediately breathed in another round. The heaviness of sweat with … lavender? "Must'Ve picked up someone's perfume from the club," she reasoned. Where can I get more? She wanted to wrap her sweater over a pillow and rub her face all over that opulent aroma!

Audrey was less than enthused. "So?"

"So what?"

"Um, sorry for ditching you last night, Audrey? Bad enough you just sit in the booth like a lump; then you sneak out behind my back without even saying goodbye!"

Nikki frowned. You weren't exactly in any condition to hear a 'goodbye'. But just as quickly as she flared up, the diva settled again.

"Well, I'll let it slide this time." Then she stepped close and flashed a gossip-hungry grin. "After all, I heard you grabbed Celeste on your way out last night. You get any?" When Nikki only stared blankly, Audrey raised her fingers in a V-salute and flicked her tongue between the arches. "Hmm?"

The memory of tongues made Nikki flush. "You are so gross," she snapped back. Audrey shrugged off the insult.

"Ah, I'm joshing you. I guess it's a bit much to expect. Bet your 'cousin' only puts out for the best." She laughed, marching to the fish tank on Nikki's kitchen counter to begin her inspection. "Y'know, last night your girl was getting pretty freaky on the dance floor. Thought she was going to hump my leg off!"

The horrid image of Audrey and the hunter made Nikki dig her nails into the coffee cup. She had to change the subject. "So what happened with you last night? You know, after that guy fell on you?"

"What did you see?" Audrey's eyes narrowed to razor points. It wasn't a question, it was an interrogation.

"Um, well you hit him. Then you were yelling, and then you ran off?" The response seemed to satisfy Audrey.

"Ugh, don't get me started! Wasn't that asshole just the most disgusting bastard, trying to feel me up like that?"
He tripped accidentally, Nikki frowned.

"Well, I got that bastard good. Pretty sure I broke the motherfucker's nose. Anyway, I wasn't putting up with his crap so I ran off and got the bouncers. A whole pack of 'em grabbed that asshole, took him out back and beat the shit out of him."

"Uh huh…"

"I was still super pissed," Audrey continued, "but fuck, those security guys were hot. One of them started talking with me after, checking if I was okay. Anyway, he wasn't bad looking so one thing lead to another and I went back to his place, gave him a good 'thank you' lay."

"Uh huh." You were sobbing like a baby, Nikki glared internally. Crying for mommy because some guy accidentally touched you. On the arm! She was beginning to see Audrey Belrose in a brand new light, and now she wondered exactly what kind of inbreeding had spawned this spoiled and hypersensitive prima donna.

"Anyway," Audrey shrugged, "your tank looks fine. I guess you have gotten a little better at cleaning."

"Then we're done here." Nikki positioned herself behind Audrey to force her towards the door but the platinum blonde spun away.

"What's your rush? Don't we always play your video games after I do my check-ups?" More like I play games while you watch and text.

"And look – I got you these!"

Nikki recoiled from the shopping bags thrust into her chest. "What's this?"

"Um, clothes, duh! Since your cousin's taking after your awful fashion sense, I picked up some outfits for you two! I had to guess on some of the sizes, but when in doubt, smaller and tighter, am I right? Ooh, you gotta do a runway show for me!"

Oh god, was that a Victoria's Secret bag? "Audrey, I really –"

"I'm gonna grab some juice, kay?" Pushing the paper bags into Nikki's arms she waltzed to the fridge. "Ooh, quiche! You make this?"

"Not me," Nikki stammered. Wait, where did that pie come from? More importantly, why was Audrey insisting on hanging around? It was like she was stalling for time.

"Y'know," Audrey mumbled through a mouthful of pie, "It's no wonder you like chicks, 'cause you've got some balls on ya, Ann-Marie."

Nikki blinked and Audrey took it as permission to go on. "I always pegged you as this wimpy little pushover, y'know? Never rocking the boat, never speaking up even if you didn't like things. So when you came out to me and Tiff … well…"

Audrey's eyes swept the linoleum and she occupied herself with eating until she could work out the words.

"Well that took a lot of guts. Coming out like that, especially when people can be all uptight and judgey. I thought that was cool," she added. "Being honest with yourself. Not everyone can do that."

Was this supposed to be an apology for all the rotten things Audrey had said to her? The speech tossed around Nikki's head like a hot potato. She didn't know whether to be insulted or astonished.
Through clenched teeth she finally squeezed out a line.

"Thank you."

Audrey melted with relief. "Hey, any time. So we're cool, right?"

Nikki smiled. "No."

Audrey's jaw dropped like a trap door. "No?" Her face was outright incredulity.

"No," Nikki repeated. "You hurt me, you made me feel like trash. It pisses me off just breathing the same air as you!"

"But … I'm apologizing. I'm being nice to you!"

"Nice to me?" Wasn't that the most absurd joke ever! "Ever since I came out you can't go a minute without picking on me; making little jabs about how I'm this girl-obsessed freak show! Why're you so scared of me?"

"I am not scared!"

"Oh, so what, you're worried that just because I'm gay I'm going to fall in love with you?" She advanced on Audrey. "That the Amazing Audrey Belrose is just so fuckalicious that the lesbian girl can't resist grabbing and stroking her?"

"Do not go there, Nicole."

"Why, you think I'm gonna push you down? Have my way with you?" She laughed. "Like anyone would ever touch a rotten bitch like you."

"Don't talk like you know me, Nicole!" Audrey was back on the offensive, her skinny fingers jabbing at her chest. "You waltz out with this secret confession; what am I supposed to think? How am I supposed to trust you?" She was tugging at her platinum locks in frustration. "Do you know how much sleep I've lost these last months? What I've had to put up with since that jackass tried to -"

Audrey caught herself, and her voice was suddenly quiet and tired. "Look, can we just drop this? Forget everything I ever said and go back to normal?"

Nikki spun away, shaking her head. "I just don't get you, Audrey. One minute it's like you wanna spit on me, the next you're obsessed with being besties. Why do you need to be friends with me? Go hang out with Tiffany and all your other friends from university!"

Audrey averted her eyes. The tiniest of gestures, but it was enough to tell Nikki everything.

She laughed. It started slowly but grew strong and mean until she was bending over and hugging her sides to keep them from bursting. "Oh, this is rich!"

"What's so funny?" Audrey snarled.

"You," she howled. "You've got nobody else. You burned all your bridges; you pissed off everybody you ever knew and now you've got no one who'll put up with your shit but me!"

Karma. That was the one word ringing through Nikki's mind as a lifetime of misery spilled from her open mouth in a wicked cackle, a howl that enveloped and penetrated the stock-still Audrey. All the pain, all the social isolation, Nikki laughed every last memory out, and when she was dry and empty,
she gazed down upon a brand new punching bag with platinum blonde hair just begging for a test run.

"Well fuck you, Audrey Smellrose. I don't need you. Go home and cry to mommy because nobody here gives a damn about you!"

The glassy look in Audrey's eye, the quivering mouth on the precipice of crying. Was that what I looked like, all those years in high school? No wonder everyone had hounded her so relentlessly; it was intoxicating!

But the platinum devil still held a last spark of fight. "You think you're so goddamn smart, Ann-Marie?" she barked. "Well you just made the biggest mistake ever, Nic-hoe! I was helping you! Getting you out of your crappy apartment and away from your crappy games, but now you're nobody! Nobody's gonna look out for you! Nobody's gonna notice you when you curl up and die because you'll be all alo-"

"Nicole?" The bedroom door creaked open and Celeste dragged herself out, still rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Mmh, what time is it?"

Audrey went dead silent. Her eyes twitched – a crackle of static across a faulty monitor – and she ran wordlessly out the door, too upset to even slam it behind her.

Nikki gladly supplied the angry slam. Goodbye and good riddance, Audrey Smellrose.

Then she turned to Celeste, still groggy and shielding her eyes from the morning sun. "Was that Audrey?" she mumbled, and the hopeful lilt in her voice got Nikki's teeth grinding.

"It was nobody." she answered. It was odd, but the joy she'd felt at over throwing out the diva was draining quickly, leaving a hollow chill to run through her body. Eager for warmth, she stepped towards Celeste, cheeks flushed and hands folded together.

"Um … hey."

A sniff of the air jolted the hunter awake. Celeste's breath hitched and she backed away, covering her mouth and nose. No surprise on the source of the offending stench.

"Well sorry for having B.O.," Nikki snapped. "I suppose you want me to shower?"

Celeste nodded as she turned away. "Please … do so."

This was just a misstep, Nikki reassured herself as she dragged the garduk's body bag from the shower stall. No, this was for the best. If she was going to have a conversation with the woman who … kinda-sorta-maybe kissed her, she needed to look her best. Nikki scoured every pore clean, squirted a generous lather of shampoo over her locks, (Celeste liked that smell) and put on her best jeans and tightest t-shirt. She paused at her sock drawer, lingering over a case of lipstick and vial of lilac perfume.

Jessie had bought those for her, and she had cast these items into a dark corner after her falling out with the love fairy. But today was a day for extra measures. She squirted her neck and armpits, smeared her lips bright red and trotted out to show herself off for Celeste.

The bounty hunter had seated herself at the cheap dining table, fingers drumming nervously on the
plastic top. Her free arm was fiddling with her rifle – releasing it from a height, then freezing it above the floor with her magnetic crystal bangle and levitating it back into her grip. It seemed to be a reflex exercise - drop and catch, drop and catch like a yoyo - but Celeste's focus was shot. The gun kept clattering on the ground.

"I left the safety on," the alien assured her after the latest loud clatter. "Please, sit down."

_Gladly_, Nikki smiled, sashaying over and pulling the remaining chair close to Celeste's. The sharp gasp as the hunter's eyes roved over her felt oh so gratifying. "Kos kan, Celeste."

The alien scooted her chair back. "Kosoko kangai."

Nikki's stomach lurched. _No, don't worry. I must be crowding her. People need space sometime._

"Nicole, my memories of the previous night are … unclear. I remember imbibing your people's caffeinated beverages. I remember falling…" Trembling eyes caught her own. "Nicole, did I injure someone?"

"No! No, everything's fine!" Was that what she was worried about? "Nobody got hurt. In fact," she added, "I think a couple people had a pretty good time.' She flashed a winning smile that the Norai didn't seem to register.

"Nicole, are your lips swollen?"

"Wha? No, it's lipstick." She glanced aside. "D-do you like it?"

The hunter offered no reply. "After the club," Celeste prompted.

"Oh, after that I carried you back to my place. It was kinda scary riding with you on the vespa, what with all the wobbling you were doing but we made it okay." Celeste urged her onward. "Um, so I dragged you up here to get some rest, but you weren't exactly sleepy. You, um, wanted to dance some more. With me." Her cheeks were on fire. "And, after we danced for a bit, well, you …"

Celeste's eyes were wide and horrified. _"Pa na isho…"_ her voice trembled. _"Ta rashi jikku?"_ She covered her mouth and gulped wild and frightened gasps of air.

"I am so sorry."

_Huh?_

_"When you awoke, I assume you noticed a peculiar aroma?" _Celeste continued. _"The previous night I was … scent marking you. My people, when we wish to designate our ownership over possessions or … individuals, we coat them with scented pheromones from our glands." _Celeste swallowed. _"And our saliva."

Nikki's mind travelled back to the neighbourhood cat from when she'd first moved in to her apartment. Every night when she'd returned from work it would curl and coil around her legs, purring as it rubbed across her shins.

"So, you were marking me. As your territory."

_"I was intoxicated," _Celeste pleaded. _"I was not in my proper frame of mind. Nicole, what I did was inexcusable. Please believe me, I would never do anything like that to you."

Her inner voice filled in the blanks: _I would never touch anything as vile as you, Nic-hoe. That cat,
purring so friendly and caressing her legs so lovingly, had no affection for her. Just a piece of property to stamp with her signature.

"I wasn't hurt," she blurted, searching for some words to bandage this crumbling conversation. "I mean, it was a little weird — It made me feel so good. "- but I —"

Why are you even trying? How stupid she must have looked: fidgeting with her thumbs, clownish lipstick smudged over her face, rolls of tummy fat oozing from her jeans. She'd skipped out on a bra, thinking she'd look so desirable; now she hugged her chest to hide her sagging lumps; to keep her heart from bleeding out.

Audrey was right. Why would this goddess, this Valkyrie, ever stoop to her level?

The alien was chewing at her fingertips, waiting for a response, waiting to be absolved of her shame. Well, she knew what Celeste wanted to hear and she'd give it. "Last night was a mistake," Niki choked. "We should forget it ever happened."

Celeste immediately slackened and eased back into her chair. "Thank you," she exhaled. "This means the world to me."

It meant the world when you held me!

The thought was interrupted by another pounding at the door. Whump, whump, whump. Again? What, was Audrey crawling back to beg forgiveness? Nikki stomped over and wrenched the door open, ready to lash the blonde bitch raw with insults.

All she could manage was a frightened gasp.

She heard Celeste walk up from behind to see what had fazed her host. She could imagine the hunter puzzling over why such ordinary, unassuming humans produced such a stunned reaction: a pear-shaped, forty-something woman with brown hair cut identical to Nikki's. A balding man with a thick moustache and hairy workman's arms. They made a triangle at the door, reflecting an uncanny resemblance in their eyes and faces; even the eyeglasses each wore were eerily identical.

The woman coughed. "Sweet bean, who's this?"

When Nikki failed to answer, Celeste took the initiative, mimicking the human gesture of offering hands. "Greetings, I am Celeste, Nicole's biological cousin." Then she puzzled over why the visitors wouldn't reciprocate.

"Celeste, that's my mom and dad."

"Oh…" The hunter still managed a dexterous recovery. "Please excuse my bizarre speech. I should apologize in advance if I appear clumsy or ignorant of social etiquette. I am, regrettably, Australian."

"Celeste, my mother emigrated here from Sydney."

"Oh … Sydney is an Australian settlement, yes?"

"Yup."

"Ah." Celeste coughed and scratched her neck. "This presents a problem."

"Oh yeah." Staring into her parents' eyes, Nikki was hard pressed to think of a more unfortunate soul in the galaxy right now.
Whump… whump… whump went the sound of Rondarr's holographic face against the food court table. It was the sound of a sentient being pushed to the utmost limits of despair. The humans ignored him, of course, like the hypocritical mammals they were. Making such grand speeches about living "for the herd" but then abandoning the sick and the old at the slightest inconvenience. From the table at his back came a small sample of the inane pratter that had assaulted his ears all morning:

"Like, oh-em-gee, I don't care if grandma is coming over for dinner. I'm staying out! She's just gonna bitch about my nose ring again."

It was no use. He simply could not find a suitable specimen. Just a glimpse of the blue-haired female from last night had thrown his assessments into disarray. The targets he'd scanned since seemed pitiful and ordinary in comparison.

"Well put my plate in the fridge and I'll nuke it. I told you: I'm hanging at the mall today, so get your hearing checked, you deaf bitch!"

Now, all Rondarr could think of was fire. Setting fire to this barbaric, backwards world and the Night Wraith who had cost him so dearly. It would be an act of mercy upon the galaxy – ridding it of another insufferable species of mammal and their weak, watery sentiments!

"No, I will not 'watch my language, young lady'. Gawd, why do you always have to try 'n censor me?"

And by the black void, did they have to screech so loudly? Bursting to his feet, Rondarr marched over to the rear table to deliver a piece of his mind. A holographic fist slammed into the tabletop, demanding attention!

"Hold on, just a sec." Sharpened nails punched a button to pause the conversation. A flash of pink bubble gum and two disinterested eyes gave him a quick scan.

"Um, yeah, you need somethin'?"

And the holographic Anton drew back in stunned surprise. "T-time," Rondarr stammered, tapping at Anton's wrist-mounted chronometer, the best excuse he could muster.

"Like, time to get a new watch, buddy but what-ever. Twelve thirty, eff-why-eye." The way she drewled out her syllables made her sound like a malfunctioning cognition. Her attention shifted just as quickly, returning to her heated communicator conversation.

"Th-thank you." His comment garnered an eye-roll and an irritated huff, but no matter. Rondarr shuffled back to his seat, pretending to check his own handheld communicator but actually looking over the screen at the girl.

Skin as white as bleached bone, set against twin-tails of ebony hair as dark as the vacuum of space. Black was the motif of her clothing as well – leather leggings squeezing her shapely legs and a partial top cupping her ample mammary glands. The way her shoulder straps fell carelessly down her slender arms … he wondered if she was with brood and prepared to nurse at a moment's notice. No, too young, too thin. Just preening, then.

The pieces of metal shoved through her nose and exposed belly were intriguing, as was the skull insignia stamped onto her lower torso. A cattle brand? Was she property? The other females he'd observed made such fuss about appearing proper and desirable; this one slouched idly with her legs in a lazy spread.
She was ... different, he'd credit her that much, but still paling in comparison to that blue-haired specimen. And yet, that smell! She looked like rotten fruit but smelled of the sweetest confections: exotic syrups and sugars and honeys from across the stars blended into an irresistibly fragrant lure. Rondarr chanced letting his tongue flit through the holographic barrier. He had to lap up every last pheromone particle, feeding his nostrils and shivering in delight.

*To think I'd taste that scent out here in this wasteland! Could it be?*

Rondarr stood and approached the female again, his mind settled. "You there. What is your name?"

She frowned, suspicious and confused. *Good survival instincts,* he thought. It was almost disappointing how easily she gave up her name. "Um, Lillian?"

"Lillian…" He flicked the syllables across his fangs. "You seemed rather distressed, Lillian." He gestured to her portable communicator – jet black and studded with small spikes to match its owner.

"Ugh, my mom," she gushed. "She just like, thinks she owns me, or whatever. Like, just because you raised me doesn't mean you like get to control me, bitch! Y'know?"

As a fact, Rondarr didn't y'know. "My mother died when I was a youngling," he explained.

"Oh," Lillian deflated, sensing a faux-pas. "Like, um, sorry? Or whatever?"

"It was entirely her fault," Rondarr assured her. Only the most foolish Slovarian females lingered at their nests during hatching. "May I accompany you, Lillian? I would like to hear more about your mother."

Lillian's pencil-thin eyebrows popped up in exclamation. "Wai-wait. Shut the front door. You're a guy?"

"Yes?"

"And you *want* to hang out with me and listen to me bitch about my mom?"

"Was I unclear?"

She blinked her eyelids stupidly. "Holy shit, that was easy!" Then she coughed. "I mean, I guess we could chill. You seem pretty legit, uh -?"

"Anton."

"Well, Anton, I'm gonna get me some ice cream and eat it in front of the try-hards at the gym. If you wanna come," she shrugged her shoulders with indifference, "like, whatever."

"It would be my pleasure," he lied. *Anything to breathe that aroma.*

The human designated Lillian collected her bags – all black, of course – and they departed side by side.

"So, like, what was your mom like, Anton?"

Rondarr grinned. "In a word? Delicious."
Memories and Monsters

From her spot on the bed, Nikki watched her mother pace up and down the floorboards, picking up stray pop bottles and candy wrappers that had fallen short of the garbage. She rolled her eyes. Normal people coped with stress by chewing their nails or pulling their hair. When something weighed on her mother's mind, the poor woman started cleaning.

"I hope you found the quiche we left yesterday," her mother hinted while frowning at the microwave meal containers in the trash can. "There was no one home when we stopped by yesterday. I didn't realize you were out entertaining a ... friend."

From beyond the closed door Nikki could hear the shuffling of plastic chairs as the pair barred from this mother-daughter conference shifted awkwardly. At least she wasn't the only one suffering – her conservative, church-going father forced to make conversation with a tall, athletic lesbian who could bench press him as a warm-up.

"So … Celes, was it? You're from out of town?"

"Indeed. My homeland is a cold and desolate wasteland, but I still treasure it."

Her father nodded back. "Huh… so you're Canadian, eh?"

The bedsprings sagged under her mother's added weight, breaking Nikki's concentration. She scooted as far away as she could, not that a few inches would spare her from what was to come. Nikki knew the warning signs: isolate the target, put on a friendly guise and then strike. Yup, her mother was going to give her a talk.

"So … how did you meet your little friend?"

"Her name is Celeste, mom. And she's gay, so you can go ahead and hate her too."

A weary exhale. "Sweet bean, when I said that wasn't a conversation for the phone -" Nikki jumped as her mother's arms flew around her, "- that was because I can't hug my baby over the airwaves."

Nikki squirmed like a burrowing grub, mortified that the door might fall open. That was just what she needed – Celeste sniggering at a grown human being coddled like a baby. "Maa!"

"Nikki, your father and I will always be proud of you, but we worry. You're not going to school, you're not planning a career –"

"I've budgeted, Ma. I don't need a big house or fancy stuff; I'm living within my means." Well, except that renting a vespa and buying food for two was putting a dent into her delicate savings. Not that her mother cared; all she worried about was nagging. Holding up a measuring tape of perfection and noting how far her little girl fell from the mark.

"- and you've always had a hard time getting out of your shell. Nikki, when you told us you were …" she hunted for a polite phrase, "that way, your father and I were terrified for you. You know how some people feel about ... Well, that's not important. If this is who you are, then we'll support you. We love you so much, sweet bean."

Her mother was … okay with this? Nikki's muscles loosened a bit and she allowed herself to sink into her mother's embrace, but cautiously. It can't be that easy. There's gotta be –
"It's just that …"

_I knew it!_

Her mother looked around, maybe seeking an invisible angel for strength. "Nikki, what are you doing with this woman? She's twice your age and you've known her for … a weekend? You might as well be from two different worlds!"

_Hit the nail right on the head there, Ma._

"We're not dating, Ma. We talked about it; she doesn't like me that way."

A smirk; a condescending smirk from her know-it-all mother. "Your mouth says 'no', but your lips say … well, I don't think my baby started putting on lipstick for herself, did she?"

"What do you care?" Nikki reached for her tissue box and started scrubbing the colour from her mouth. If her mom wanted her back to regular old ugly, she'd show her.

"Sweet bean, this isn't going to end well, and I don't want to see my little girl hurt. You've been through enough, haven't you?" She scooted forward, licking a thumb to help remove a smudge from Nikki's cheek.

"Nikki, let her go. Tell this woman she needs to leave."

A scowl of teenage fury hardened Nikki's face. "So, what? I can be gay so long as it's on your terms? You have to chaperone and vet all my dates?"

"Sweet bean, she's going to hurt y-"

"Celeste!" Nikki snapped. "Her name is Celeste, and she's been a whole lot nicer to me than you or dad or anyone else ever has." She pushed off the bed and wrenched the door open. "You and dad need to leave."

The elder Ann Marie sighed and rose from the bed, knowing when she was up against a brick wall. In the main room, Nikki found Celeste in rapt attention as her father waved his arms in an animated speech.

"So these frat boys, they had every toilet in the entire house completely backed up! They threw up and shat so much the whole system was clogged! I tell ya, I earned my overtime on that job!"

Celeste shook her head in disapproval. "Absolutely irresponsible. It saddens me how such people could squander their water supply."

Her mother coughed, and the party was over.

"Leaving already?" her father inquired. "Eh, well, good talkin' with ya, Cel. See you around, Nik!" Nikki squirmed as her father tussled her hair, slapped her on the back and added, "You sure can pick 'em, kiddo."

"Daaad!"

"Emmet, we're leaving."

Freshly chastised, her father plodded outside, while her mother gave the home-wrecking Celeste a final, disapproving look-over. Falling on Nikki, her eyes went soft and pleading.
"Call us, sweet bean. I feel like I barely know you anymore."

Again, Nikki slammed the door on another unwelcome guest. Behind her, Celeste's mouth was a wall-to-wall grin of amazement.

"You never informed me that your father was responsible for your settlement's water management!"

"He's a plumber, it's not like he's a god-damn superhero!"

The alien drew back. "Nicole, are you -?"

"I'm not okay," she snapped. First Audrey, then Celeste's rejection; now her parents had the gall to humiliate her in front of a real-life alien! "Humans are horrible, disgusting creatures! They wreck everything they get near, they only care about themselves and they don't care who they hurt so long as they get their way. I hate them!"

Celeste tilted her head and touched her earpiece. Nikki realized her words were probably coming too fast and wild.

"Look, I just wanna be alone for a while. There's um, food and water in the fridge. The white cabinet thingy," she clarified.

"Very well. I have work to attend to."

That was how Nikki found herself in her bedroom, mashing away at her controller and letting the flashes and booms of a Touhou bullet-hell shooter wash over her like a soothing bubble bath.

Then an unknown roar blared up from the bathroom.

Nikki paused her game. It sounded like the whine of a buzz saw, and – she gagged – the stench of rotting meat? Her legs pounced to the floor and she pounded outside. "Celeste, what the heck are you doing?"

The alien looked up from her work in the bathroom. She'd removed her make-up and was kneeling outside the shower with a laser wand in hand, a plastic apron covering her clothes and a surgical mask over her face. The garduk lay belly up in the stall with its organs and ribcage on full display. Celeste tilted her head, not quite picking up on the faux pas of butchering a dead animal in your host's bathroom.

"An autopsy," she stated matter-of-factly. "By examining its stomach contents we can determine where the creature traveled."

Nikki looked from the Norai to the corpse to the green blood sopping into her shower tiles. "That is so awesome! Can I watch?"

Smiling, Celeste pushed aside her toolkit and motioned for Nikki to join. She powered up her laser pen once more and continued cutting until she could shove her gloved hand into the jellied insides of this alien piñata. It became Nikki's job to hand trays for retrieval, and to try help puzzle out the half-digested contents. More jellyfish slime, foil potato chip bags, a dead frog, and a whole pile of gravel. They were getting into a happy rhythm when Celeste spoke up.

"Your parents care for you very much. You're fortunate to have them."

"They're a pain in the ass," Nikki grunted.
"I envy you," Celeste went on. "When my parents learned of my sexual preferences, I became … distasteful in their eyes. They were never unkind or abusive," she clarified, "but they became distant; never speaking to me, never calling on my assistance. Like being served a plate of kofield mould, I was something they tolerated, but never enjoyed."

*Great, thanks for making me feel like a piece of shit with my first-world problems.* "I guess my parents are okay," she conceded. "My dad's all about building stuff and sports so I'm never athletic enough; my mom's a librarian at a Catholic school so I'm never well-read enough, and don't get me started about church. It's like they're always disappointed with me."

"They challenge you because they wish to see you grow," Celeste pointed out.

Nikki only shook her head. "You always manage to look on the bright side, don't you?"

"I prefer dimly lit environments, actually."

That unintended joke earned Celeste a playful shove. "Never mind. Non-literal expressions."

They smiled, and the moment felt so good. In a way, Nikki reasoned, there were some perks to being rejected. If they were just friends, then she didn't have to walk on pins and needles around Celeste; she could ask the alien any manner of question and not worry about sending mixed signals.

"So, Celeste, you've been to a lot of planets, right? Are there other species that are, um, *sleiba?*

Celeste let her laser saw wind down. "It is not an isolated phenomenon," she assured her. "Most cultures I've encountered display some variety to their couplings. The *Mabar* and the *Shen-to* are both known to form pairs among same sexes. The *Chu'rai* are a hive culture centered on a matriarch. Only this dominant female is fertile, but among the 'drone' population the impulse to mate remains … quite potent. The worker females will lay with each other; some even with outsiders."

There seemed to be a story behind that but Nikki pushed onward.

"Was … being *sleiba* something you had to figure out?"

Celeste chuckled. "Growing up in my village, I was oblivious that a coupling between females was possible. It was never discussed by my elders. As I matured, I found I had little interest in the males of my tribe. My friends dismissed this as pure aloofness; that I was too exacting in my standards.

"Then once, while I was exploring the ruins - I would have been … twelve by Earth years - I found a functioning data tablet in an ancient library. It was a tale of passionate and physical romance between two Norai females. I couldn't comprehend the words, of course – the dialect was ancient – but the holographic illustrations made the contents quite … explicit."

They shared a smirk. "So wait, you figured out you were gay after reading ancient alien bodice rippers?"

"Afterwards, it was as though I'd been gifted the missing component to activate a view-screen; I could see everything, and I fully understood my behavior. My distaste for males, why my body reacted while disrobing among my female peers; why I delighted in being near *her.*"

Nikki swallowed a cold lump in her throat. "*Her?*" she inquired.

"The friend I spoke of previously? The one who explored the ruins with me? Her name was Celara, and I was enamored with her."
Celara. That name sounded familiar.

Celeste smirked, her eyes drifting into cherished memories. "Celara was a sickly thing. There were errors in her genetic modifications and she was born snort and frail; defective in every sense. Her eyesight was so feeble that the engineers had to replace them with prosthetic camera orbs." Celeste chuckled. "She was so self-conscious of her eyes; always glancing away when someone looked at her, and when she became startled her implants would make this whirring noise; it was simply precious!"

"So you two were close, huh?"

"I always kept her by my side. Our peers tormented Celara for her frailties and I took it upon myself to defend her. I wouldn't let her be scorned for her appearance. They mocked her small stature but she could still climb though the deepest ruins with me. One night, we became trapped in the old citadels during a storm. We were forced to hide underground. Unable to build a fire, we held each other to keep warm."

Celeste's smile faded. "I confessed to her. I told her how much I adored her and how I would care for her regardless of what our tribe saw as 'pure' or 'ideal'. I was fourteen."

The Norai rubbed her cheek as though soothing a phantom sting. "Celara … did not share my personal defect. Afterward, she began avoiding my company. When we passed, she would duck her head as though terrified. She must have revealed my nature to other females because soon the entire tribe knew what I was and shunned me." Celeste hissed. "My peers barred me from their rituals, called me Cel-aiba in mockery."

*She's had it a hundred times worse than me.* Every girl Celeste had known had been bad as Audrey. Nikki wondered if she should offer some comforting words, but a darker part of her wanted to move off the topic of Celara altogether.

"So how did you get off planet?"

"Idyl worlds such as Tendricide are garrisoned by Confederacy ships. It's meant to discourage outlaws and poachers who would once again take advantage of the more primitive civilizations. The warships are meant to patrol from orbit, but the work is unimaginably dull. The soldiers would come groundsie, to hunt game or trade with the villages. Celara and I, we used to scavenge artifacts from the old cities to trade for the soldiers' food rations."

Nikki vaguely thought back to history class and the European fur trade.

"When I could endure no more intolerance from my village, I ran away to the nearest landed ship. I asked the soldiers to recruit me."

Joining the galactic army. That must have been where she'd picked up her combat skills. "So why'd you leave to be a bounty hunter?" *I mean, besides it being completely awesome?*

"I was dishonorably discharged from the academy," Celeste smiled proudly, "for fraternizing."

"Frater… huh?" Nikki had to look up that term on her phone. *To associate closely with* - "Oh," she exclaimed. "Oh!"

The hunter giggled at her slow uptake. "You must pardon my use of non-literal expressions." Celeste was inspecting her directly with those half-lidded eyes that still got her stomach fluttering. Was she waiting for a comment?
"So I guess you've um … been with other off-planet Norai?"

The light dimmed from Celeste's golden eyes. "Tendricide was pillaged for decades, Nicole, and the more criminally-inclined star systems still find Norai useful as laborers and slaves. The ones I've encountered beyond our home world are either clones bred for docility or the offspring of slave families. They are sad and broken creatures; a shadow of what a Norai warrior should be. They cannot comprehend life without a master's orders – living and deciding for themselves. Though we may be of the same species, to them, I am as alien as a Slovarian or a Chu'rai."

She sat back on her haunches. "I am a Norai living off-world of her own accord, without a master or owner. In a way, I am the only one of my kind."

*Shit.* "I'm sorry; we can talk about something else."

"No, please do not concern yourself. It is rare that I'm able to share such stories. It is … comforting."

The moment felt so pleasant and warm; Nikki hated to break it but, "Celeste, do garduk usually have flashing lights inside their bodies?"

Celeste turned and saw the rhythmic, red pulse from behind the monster's organs. It wasn't coming from inside but flashing through the see-through flesh on its back. Celeste flipped over the corpse and started cutting and ripping at something silver on its back, until a furious yank sent a clunk of metal against the linoleum.

Nikki knelt over the dissection. It looked like a metal scorpion - four silver legs that clamped around the ribcage in an X-cross, and a metal tail running down the back.

"What is that?"

"A slave bracer," Celeste stated. "A device used to control hostile animals."

Nikki looked at the long tail meant to fit along a spinal cord. "You mean mind control?"

"No, nothing so sophisticated. A slave bracer administers electric shocks if the wearer steps outside boundary areas or fails to move in a designated direction."

A shock collar, then. "So what's the problem?"

Celeste showed her the device's underside and the blinking light at its center.

"It's been activated."

The drip of water, the hum of air conditioning. Niki tried to make her voice speak over the ambient noises, to offer an explanation far less horrid than what she realized. "I mean, maybe it's a glitch or –"

"Impossible. They would have been deactivated when the garduk were frozen for transport. The bracers only respond to a master control device carried by the captor." Celeste looked her square in the eye and whispered out the horrible truth.

"Rondarr. He's still alive."

That was when Nikki's Twitter feed exploded.

"Like, what's got you snickering?"
Rondarr turned away from his ashen-skinned companion lest she notice that Anton's fingers were pressing through his skin to the wrist-mounted slave remote beneath. "None of your concern," he stated. "Simply envisioning how miserable a certain colleague will be today."

"Ah, firing off some hate tweets; I gotcha. Can you believe my high school actually suspended me for sending those? I mean, I was just being ironic when I told that fat bitch to 'go kill yourself', but like, some people can't take a joke or whatever."

Sensing another long rant, Rondarr butted in. "Where are we proceeding?" He'd spent hours with this hairless ape on her daily routines: purchasing black garments and shoes, listening to her horrid 'screamer' music and flipping through convenience mart magazines to criticize their attractive female models. He felt ready to gouge out his eardrums just to save himself from her insufferable drawl!

"You said you had something to show me. I trust we are proceeding closer?"

It wasn't just his guide's mannerisms that put him on edge. Rondarr was painfully aware that they were being monitored. Several blocks ago, a blue-uniformed security officer had begun trailing them. She was a tiny thing – female, barely five cha tall and built slim like a dancer – but her visor-clad eyes followed them with robotic persistence. The last thing he needed was to be halted by local security for identification, not when he was so close!

"If this takes any longer I may have to depart."

Threatening to leave - that put the fear back into her eyes. "Y-yeah, almost." Again, Lillian stole a glance at her spike-studded communicator. "We're almost there. I've just gotta talk to a friend like, super quick. Can you wait here a sec?"

Without even waiting for his reply she jogged up the block and turned into an alleyway. Rondarr leaned against the building, tensing as the pursuing officer came close and clicked her tongue at him – "Eyy, homie," – and then followed Lillian down the alley.

Scowling, Rondarr marched to the lip of the tunnel and listened.

"So, what, you're a cop now?"

"Meh, call it cosplay. How ya holdin' up, Oreo? How's my favorite little client?"

"In literal fuckin' hell, Kyu! Like, where've you been these past two days? You said you'd help me pick up a guy and then you don't even answer my texts! Like, congrats, you just beat my shitty-ass mom for BPH - biggest phony ever!"

"Yeah, about that… I kinda had to deal with a pair of T-2021s, hostile extra-planetary intruders. Sooo, I had to prioritize between getting you laid and, oh, I dunno - saving the entire fucking planet!" The conversation paused while the officer panted out her frustration. "You got any candy? I really need some candy right about now."

There was a crinkling of wrapping paper and the officer gave a delighted sigh. "You are a gem, Oreo. My boss has got us all running major overtime trying to clean up this mess."

"That bad, huh?"

"Hella bad. This weekend some 'out of towners' decided to crash the party you guys call planet Earth. The girls and I had to scramble on damage control. I haven't seen a case this bad since that crap in Roswell…"
"Anyway, enough about me! I'm on break, so let's talk about that tall, chocolate beefcake you're cozing up with!" A girlish squeal. "I can't believe my little Oreo's picked up her first stud! Neptune's nutsack, you blink and they're all grown up!"

The annoyance on Lillian's voice was palpable. "His name's Anton, and I don't know what the hell to do! He like, just came up to me at the mall and said he wanted to hang."

"No sweat; I've seen this guy before. Anton's what we in the love business call a *chique geek*. Even though he cleans up nice and knows how to talk to people, deep down he's obsessed with dorky video games and nerd crap. And get this: the last girl he dated? A closet lesbian! We're talking kaiju-levels of devastation on his heart!"

"Oh my gawd, Kyu, do you see how many shits I give about his sob story? Just tell me how to get with him! I mean, do you realize how *pissed* my parents would be if I brought home a black guy? Like, volcano meltdown!"

"Yeah, because when I'm ogling my next lover you know what pops into my head? My wrinkly-ass parents, that's what!"

"Ky-uu, I'm serious!"

A sad sigh. "Okay, you want this playa for a date? You're gonna have to go all the way with this."

Lillian sounded puzzled. "Is this the part where I show him my boobs?"

"Hmm, I like your thinking, Oreo, buuut a guy like Anton calls for something more subtle."

"So… just one boob, then?"

Rondarr could hear this 'Kyu' sigh and shake her head. "Get out there and tell him how you feel. Don't gush," she added, "but tell him you had a nice time. Get his number and ask if he wants to meet up at the fireworks festival next weekend."

Lillian continued to squirm. "What if he says no? Can you like, come with me? Hold my hand?"

This was his chance. Making a show of coughing loudly, Rondarr stepped into the alley. "Lillian, is everything all right? Who were you speaking with?"

"No one," she blurted, a hint of red colouring her bleached cheeks. True to her word, the alleyway was empty, the officer vanished. "Just had to answer a call," she explained, raising her spike-studded phone. Her remaining hand fell stiff at her side, fingers curled as though clutching an imaginary pole. Or a hand.

"Hey, Anton, I wanna ask you -"

"So beautiful."

"HUH?"

"Beautiful," Anton's voice restated, wiping a tear from his eye. "You've done such an amazing job, Lillian."

He advanced slowly, arms outstretched as though framing a masterpiece canvas. "Lillian, until I met you this world made no sense to me." Primitive and isolated – all signs of an Idyl World, and yet the species ran unchecked in numbers.
"I'd lost everything, and wandering through your city only filled me with questions." Why had the Confederacy allowed these hyu-mons to reproduce so rampantly? And where were the monitors? Even an ice block like Tendricide warranted a warship garrison, and yet this fertile *Urth* lacked a mere observation satellite.

"Then I discovered you," *and your scent*, "and I understood: there was a higher power at work here. A species that could avoid detection by the Confederacy; a race that would profit from such populous and primitive livestock."

Lillian's face scrunched in confusion. Anton smiled at the empty air next to her. "Isn't that right, Cupidaemon?"

With lightning swiftness his tail ripped free from the hologram, thrusting at the air like a rapier. He felt his stun baton impact against a soft, vulnerable stomach and a young girl exploded into sight, writhing under an electric current.

Anton's teeth glistened under the rod's crackling sparks. "Mistress Kyu, I presume?"

Lillian screamed. The uniformed girl collapsed on her backside, sizzling with pain but still functioning. A purple vial flipped into her hand. His tail whipped the glass against the alley wall. Quickly, before she could phase-shift, Rondarr jammed the stun baton under her ribs again, digging the electrodes in for the count of ten.

When he released and stepped away from the black smoke, her body was scrambled – hair half white, half pink; her clothing a patchwork fusion of blue security uniform and pink undergarments. Anton bent over and breathed in the candy fragrance at its splendid source.

"A real live cupidaemon," he purred, loosening his translation collar to release his guttural growl. One of these so-called 'fairies of love'. Lifting her blackened shirt, he confirmed the half-formed icicle wings along her back. Just as the stories said.

"A little … kinky … for the first date … bub…"

Did she think her taunts would distract him from the message she was typing into her pink communicator? Rondarr stood and stamped down on her wrist, relishing the shriek as he ground her palm into the glass shards.

"You're going to make me rich, monster."

A bloody glob of saliva crackled against Anton's holographic face. "Fuck you, shithead." Craning her neck, the fairy locked eyes with the trembling girl behind them. "Lilly? Sweetheart, you need to run. Run and don't st-AAAAH!"

This time, Rondarr dug in the baton until her eyes lolled back and her body went limp.

Victory. Rondarr scooped the creature into his arms, bridal style, while his thoughts cackled with fantasies of galactic riches. The collectors who would kill to add this legend to their zoos; the scientists who would murder for the chance to dissect this beast! He would have the galaxy eating from the palm of his hand!

A whimper. *Ah yes.* Rondarr paused and turned to his black-haired 'date', huddling amid a pile of garbage cans. Such a precious thing, guiding him to the source of the pheromones she'd accumulated. Didn't every good tracking dog deserved a reward?

Anton's head distorted like elastic taffy as he tugged at his holo-cloak, stretching further and further
until it finally popped. His scaly, crested head bent to meet her pinprick pupils.

"Thank you," he purred.

Lillian screamed and ran.

Standing straight and fixing his mask, Rondarr adjusted the fairy to hang off his shoulder, as though intoxicated. He wanted to tear off his disguise and sprint for his ship, but the construction site was at least a thousand t'chas distance and he refused to be caught at this critical moment. A leisurely stroll through the town, he grinned. I trust you're enjoying the playmates I've left for you, Night Wraith.

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GingerSnaps @SassafrasG
Another of those dog monsters showed up. Dawnwood Park. #MonsterDog #Alert #FuckMyLegStillHurts

TheTrixieOne @D-BellsT
Stay out of Dawnwood Park. Rabid dog on the loose! #MonsterDog #Alert #GoCalltheWahmbulanceYouBaby

Police guarded the park entrances but Celeste simply vaulted over the perimeter fence. Nikki scrabbled up after her. The garduk was easy to spot at the end of a trail of seagull feathers and squirrel guts. It heard their feet pad across the grass and managed to glance backwards before Celeste's rifle burst its head into green jelly.

"I thought you needed the head for your reward," Nikki pointed out.

"We are beyond the time for trophies," Celeste snapped, mopping the sweat from her forehead. "We move or your people die!"

A leather strap was caught in the garduk's paws and Celeste tossed it at her. A dog collar.

"The next sighting?"

Nikki shook herself from her stupor. "Um... the supermarket on Third Avenue." Wait, "that's all the way across the city!"

Celeste tore open a plastic packet with her teeth and shook a purple powder over the corpse. Another blast from her rifle lit the compound and blue flames ate the body down to ash, bones and all.

"Then move!"

Nikki squeaked as Celeste scooped her into her arms, supply pack and all, and sprinted them to the vespa and their next target. Nikki grabbed the hunter's sweater and held tight, hoping they weren't too late.
Touch and Trespassing

Shoot, kill, burn, drive. Dawnwood Park, the third avenue supermarket; now the frantic Twitter updates had brought them to the final garduk.

MadameButterfly @Q-T-3.14
Not again! Crazy, killer monster dog at the botanical gardens! #MonsterDog #Alert #GTGMeetingAClient

Police had set up a perimeter but, as usual, there was a dumb rookie girl who left a blind spot in the fence that she and Celeste could just waltz through. The incompetence made Nikki seethe. What if a kid or some dumb teen snuck through? Good God, when this was settled she was writing up these police girls in the nastiest blog rant ever!

She shadowed Celeste into the greenery of a tropical hothouse, watching her step, listen and sweep her trembling rifle over the foliage. It wasn't caution that made the Norai move slowly; she kept pausing to mop the sweat trickling down her forehead. There'd been no time to reapply makeup so she'd simply tied a scarf around her blue face, and now her breathing came in heavy gasps. When the monster lunged from the bushes, it found her an easy target to tackle.

A sharp kick from Celeste's tiny foot sent it flying. It's huge! Nikki exclaimed. The other monsters had been the size of greyhounds but this one was approaching tiger size, its back covered with dark ridges like hardened lava. The garduk charged a second time but then skidded to a halt in mid-dash, limbs spasming and head cocked as though catching an invisible whistle. It turned about-face and bolted, never changing course from its straight-line path, not even when it was forced to smash through the greenhouse glass.

"Have to … pursue," Celeste panted. She tried to stand but wobbled to her knees. "It'll lead us –"

She buckled over and vomited.

"Celeste!" Nikki knelt and cupped the hunter's forehead. Her hand jerked back like she'd touched a hot stove. "You're burning up!" This was bad. She hadn't packed any water or ice – no time – and they'd been running for hours in the scorching afternoon sun. How stupid can you get, muffin top? With Celeste smothered in a turtleneck, jeans and now a facial scarf, she might as well have been wrapped in a layer of tinfoil to cook.

Gotta find water. Nikki dragged the hunter out of the hothouse to a water fountain, soaked up the alien's cap like a sponge and squeezed the cool liquid over her face. Celeste coughed and opened her mouth to catch the drizzle on her tongue. Nikki repeated the process until the alien was lucid enough to sit up on her own.

"You should've told me you were overheating."

"No time. Next target. Had to … eliminate the target."

"Celeste, this last garduk was different. Bigger; it had like a shell on its back."

"Hardened carapace. It's pupating. Preparing for adult metamorphosis."

Metamorphosis. That's right, these creatures changed form and, fully grown, they would lay eggs and multiply. "How much time does that leave us?"
"Twenty four hours," Celeste calculated. She tried pushing off the ground again but only collapsed into the gravel. Nikki flew to her side, fighting the ache in her chest. It hurt to see the hunter so weak and wasted.

"You need to rest," she protested. "You try and fight that thing now, you'll get yourself killed. Then who's gonna defend us?"

Dizziness, muscle weakness, nausea and vomiting. This was obviously heatstroke. Nikki rifled through her file-like memories for treatments, pulling up the night she'd helped Tiffany study for a first aid course. Fan the victim with air, apply ice to their neck and armpits; immerse them in water. Great, like I've got a huge tub of water just waiting around the corner.

Wait a sec. Nikki flipped out her smart phone and checked the garden's location against Google maps. Her neighbourhood's not even five minutes away. With everything to lose, Nikki toggled over to her sparse contacts list and brought up a more recent entry. I hope she's not 'working', she winced as the tone dialed, or this could get awkward fast.

The voice that answered was low, seductive and never failed to send a hungry shiver up Nikki's spine. "You've got my attention, darling."

"Miss Jessie? Hi, it's Nikki."

A delighted chuckle. "Oh, hon, I have been dying to hear from you. My Tiffy told me all about your new lady-friend. Really, hon, you should have told me you had a thing for mature women. You've got me dripping with jealousy."

If this were a video chat, Nikki might've properly conveyed her horrified, "do not want" face. Over a phone, stunned silence would have to do the trick. Seriously, you're my best friend's mom! I know you're a porn star, but come on!

"Sorry, force of habit. What's your pleasure, hon?"

Nikki was pretty sure that was also innuendo, but she soldiered on. "Are you busy tonight? Do you think I could bring my, um, 'friend' over to your place?"

"Mm, this is getting interesting."

"Ugh, it's not like that. I just want to use your pool, that's it."

"Whatever you say, hon. Though, and this is just me, if you've got a thing for water, you should really try it in the bathtub first. The chlorinated stuff really kills the lubrication."

"Jess-ie!"

"All right, all right. I've had my fun. Give me ten minutes, darling. I'll pack myself an overnight bag and visit a friend. You and your lady can have the run of the house, sound good?"

"Thank you."

"Just make sure you put the sheets in the laundry, oka-?"

Click.
It was slow going carrying Celeste to the vespa and then driving to Miss Jessie's bungalow. Celeste slurred and muttered to herself, but offered no resistance. Nikki poured on the speed. There was nothing cute or drunkenly adorable about how Celeste's head wobbled onto her shoulder. This was her body shutting down from overheating.

Nikki scooped the key from underneath Miss Jessie's door mat and led them inside. First stop was the kitchen, where she forced Celeste to guzzle down their host's supply of bottled water and pressed ice packs to her head and chest. Celeste's breathing seemed to stabilize but her eyes kept wandering vacantly. She didn't stir until Nikki guided her to the back yard and the scent of water wafted to her nostrils.

"Wa… ter?" Her eyes launched open. "A water reservoir?"

"It's a pool. We use it for swimming. Swimming is when you –"

"I understand the term," Celeste interrupted, stepping to the pool as though magnetized. "You have personal water basins for recreational use? I can use this?"

"Yeah, we can stay as long as we want. I just have to check on the dog next door."

Celeste herself trembled like a dog before an offered treat: tunnel-visioned and fighting to control her impulses. She looked down at her clothes. "My garments. Is it acceptable among humans to bathe in the nude?"

Nikki's brain broke trying to process that question. "Um, um, um…"

Celeste seemed strangely pleased with her stuttering reaction. "Perhaps I should borrow some alternate attire from our host?"

"Y-yeah. Bedroom's down the hall to the left. I'll go look after the dog."

Miss Jessie's neighbours lived one trailer short of a trash heap and kept a scrawny little terrier tied up in their yard all day and night. "They're always out," Miss Jessie had pouted, "and I try to sneak over and make sure the poor thing has water in his dish. Lord knows those people won't check."

The grass next door was tall enough to hide wild Pokémon and served as a scrap pile for junked appliances, including an old laundry machine and several rusted bikes. The poor pup was all bones under its matted fur, and did nothing but whimper and cower as Nikki filled its dish from a hose. She didn't want to think about what its owners did to make it so terrified. Next door, the sharp clack of Celeste's heels on the walk accelerated towards the pool, punctuated by a cannonball splash into the water. Peeking over the fence, she saw Celeste surface with a marvelous gasp, and Nikki was sure that some of the droplets running down her face were tears of joy.

"Nicole, this is stellar. You must join in!"

Swimming in the pool with Celeste? She wouldn't be able to withstand that torment. "I don't have a swimsuit," she called back.

As if on cue, her phone chimed with a text message from Miss Jessie.

=Like the package? More importantly, is your friend enjoying it? ;D XOXO=

Package? Nikki remembered passing a brown paper parcel in the middle of the hallway, but she'd had more important concerns. Returning, she noticed her name stenciled over it in black marker. Ripping through the packaging and the paper underneath, Nikki froze up.
Three triangles of yellow fabric attached by a length of string. No, she did not just buy me a – Nikki looked for a dark hole to stuff the scandalous swimwear into when a follow-up text chimed through:

=Try it. I wanna see pictures or I'm coming home with a bottle of wine.=

Nikki imagined sitting down for drinks with a sloshed Miss Jessie, of Celeste politely nodding to her tales from the porn industry while whispering for clarifications. "Nicole, what is a vih-bray-tore?" She very quickly found herself taking bathroom selfies in her new yellow string bikini. This is so embarrassing, and she knew Miss Jessie would hold this over her head forever. Oh god, what if she shares them with Tiffany?

She had a swimsuit, yes, but there was no way she could go out in this swimsuit! The cellulite on her thighs jiggled like jello moulds, and stray hairs peeked out from between her legs. No way, no how. Desperate to cover up, she rifled through Miss Jessie's closet and added a red Hawaiian shirt and an ankle-length sarong to her ensemble. There, nothing embarrassing to see. Modest once more, she tiptoed outside, hanging around the screen door. Celeste beckoned her to the pool's edge.

While she walked forward, Celeste waded out to meet her at the shallow end, and the sight of the older woman rising from the water like an alien Venus de Milo made Nikki shiver with longing. Celeste's wet hair fell down her shoulders, exposing the curved horns above her ears. And her clothes! The Norai had borrowed a familiar white Hooters T-shirt from Miss Jessie's closet but one dive into the water had dyed it skin blue and shrink-wrapped the fabric against her wet body. Nikki jealously followed the droplets drizzling down the curves of her chest, beading and lingering over her breasts like crystal kisses. Wait, is that all she's wearing?

A rakish grin split Celeste from ear to ear, as though she could read every desirous thought in Nikki's dropped jaw. Then, abruptly, she stopped as well, eyes goggle-wide. "What are those?" she demanded.

"What's what?" Nikki scanned her body, finally realizing where Celeste pointed. "My feet?"

"Your lower appendages, yes!" Nikki now stood at the edge of the pool, and Celeste ran over for an up-close inspection. "I've never observed digits so small, so adorable!" Her hands reached out for those feet like they were little infants to be cooed at and stroked, but she caught herself. "Could I … examine them?"

"Huh? I mean, I guess." Nikki sat down, flinching as water clung to her sarong. She tried not to stare at Celeste's chest but the dark tips pressing against her cotton shirt were hypnotic. The alien immediately scooped up her right foot and started poking and wiggling her toes, prompting Nikki to squeak. "W-watch it, they're kinda ticklish."

Celeste flushed and dropped the foot. "Forgive me," she blurted. "I hadn't realized feet were a human erogenous zone."

"Eroge…?" She thought that – Nikki took her turn to blush furiously. "No! I mean, it's not like you were … it – it's not that. I just get ticklish. You know, when you laugh?"

Celeste took her foot again, testing a slow and deliberate stroke across the soles of her feet. "Is this acceptable?"

A lavish foot rub from a sexy alien bounty hunter? "Oh yeah, that's good."

Nikki tipped her head back and tried to remind her unsteady heart that this was purely scientific observation. Celeste just wants to check out some alien anatomy, that's all. She's not interested in
you; she's doesn't mean to make you feel so good. Celeste seemed especially fascinated by her toes and slid her fingers in between them to test their reflexes and grip. "Like an infant's fingers," she gushed.

"I don't get it, do humans have smaller toes compared to the rest of the galaxy?"

"Not precisely." A playful grin danced over Celeste's face and she pulled herself onto the poolside. She raised a bare leg from the pool with a playful flick of water, turning it sideways planting it by Nikki's thigh for display.

What the -? At first, Nikki thought Celeste was an amputee and that her leg ended in a blackened stump. Then she saw the dark tips wiggle and she looked closer: a bony segment ringed by fur and split into two oversized nails. "Wait, you've got hooves?" No way, so that explains it. The heaviness of her bones, the tiny flats of her feet; not to mention running combat missions in high heels. Her feet were naturally raised to walk on cloven toes. Anticipating her urge to examine closer, Celeste stretched her leg across Nikki's lap and let her go to town in analysis.

"This is so cool," Nikki cheered, holding and appraising the foot like it was a priceless antiquity. "Cloven, split into two nails. Tendricide must have a lot of rough, mountain terrain if you evolved these feet."

"They do assist in navigating the heights."

Nikki's fingers wandered up past the raised ankle. "The snowbanks must get pretty deep too. You've got hair growing back in, but it's all concentrated below the knee." Nikki imagined the day-old stubble at its shaggy full length. Like fuzzy boots, she smiled.

"Our hair does maintain warmth in deep snowdrifts," Celeste nodded, "but I have always preferred to keep my legs bare." Moving to the back of Celeste’s legs, Nikki’s fingers brushed across a strip of clipped fur. Celeste had left a thin band of hair running from her ankle to the back of her knee.

"I like it," Nikki nodded. It was like a strip of white lace, or the seam on the back of a sexy blue stocking. Racing lines drawing in your eyes; daring your fingertips to trace the path up those smooth, delicious -

Bad thoughts! Had to keep things scientific. She wasn't stroking Celeste's calf, she was recording its texture and touch as notes on alien biology. Celeste wasn't looking at her with smoldering eyes, those golden orbs were just tired and half-lidded. The rumble from Celeste's throat was harder to contextualize. All her brain could interpret was a deep, feline purr of approval, the growl of a well-pleased cat urging human fingers to continue.

Nikki let go of the leg and scooted aside. "So, that last garduk…"

Celeste startled as from a dream and slid her leg back into the pool, looking away as she spoke. "It was recalled. You saw how it stopped in mid-attack; defying its instinctive hunger even though I was vulnerable?" Nikki nodded along. The thing had flinched like it had stepped onto hot coals. "The slave bracer embedded in its back received new coordinates, and electric shocks compelled it to leave."

"I thought Rondarr wanted them to kill you."

Celeste shook her head negative. "The garduk were merely diversions. You observed how they all appeared at opposite extremes of your settlement? They were being triangulated to keep us from Rondarr's location. Perhaps he had to complete repair work on his ship, but whatever the purpose,
he's likely gathered up the remaining garduk and left the planet." The hunter lay back on her palms, visibly deflating. Nikki scrambled her brains to think of some solution.

"You're sure the garduk is gone? Hey, your collar! It translates languages, right? So if we hooked it up to the bracer from the one we picked up –"

"It won't translate computer signals," Celeste butted in. "Even if Rondarr remains, his ship will be cloaked and untraceable. He'll release the garduk only to cover his escape."

"So we blew it." Well, the planet was safe, right? "So now what? Do you have to go chase after him?"

"Where would I begin? Even if I kept the search to criminal systems, the terrain would be too vast to investigate blindly. Besides," she added, "I have more pressing concerns here."

*Um, something more important than hunting down a galactic poacher and slave trader? "Like what?"

Celeste slid over, closing the gap between them. "To begin with, you never answered my question from the previous night. How am I attractive?" She smiled and continued in a whisper. "I've observed you examining my body, Nicole. Surely you admire more than just my eyes."

Nikki suddenly found her throat super dry, and she had to force herself to swallow. "I thought you couldn't remember last night." She scooted away, but Celeste matched her movement.

"You are difficult to forget," she purred. "As to my question, I'll understand if you are poorly versed in anatomy. If you wish, you could indicate my desirable qualities with your hands."

Celeste's fingers were tracing circles up her leg but Nikki pushed them away. "Why do you keep making fun of me like this? You said … you said last night was a mistake!"

Celeste drew back as well. "I assaulted you," she stated in all seriousness. "I became intimate without your permission. My actions were inexcusable."

"So it wasn't -? "But you like Audrey!"

"Audrey?" Celeste made a stink face. "I admire her; I wish I had had her same fierceness when I was younger, but I don't *desire* her. Her figure is thinner than a *kloi* tree and she smells like engine exhaust."

“Doesn’t she?” Nikki sniggered. Deep down, she was breathing relief. "She's like, Audrey the human chimney stack!" Together they giggled themselves into stitches, and when they settled, Celeste's fingers rested over her palm.

"I realize we have known each other briefly," she prefaced, "but I admire you deeply, Nicole. Your intelligence, your resourcefulness; your body. You are remarkable." The words tickled her ear with a hungry whisper, scrambling Nikki's ability to reply.

"I ... I mean… You're neat." Her brain shrieked. *Neat? Is that all you've got? "I mean, same here. You're really, really neat."

Celeste didn't seem to mind the sudden brain-death of her communication skills. She kept drawing closer. "May I touch you, Nicole?"
You want to -? Nikki covered her mouth and squeezed her legs together, fighting the butterfly warble spreading from her stomach. "If y-you want," she mumbled.

Free to move, Celeste's fingers glided through her blue hair, eliciting a shared shudder. "Wonderful," Celeste murmured, inhaling the soapy scent of her shampoo. Wonderful, her thoughts exactly.

"Will you let me hold you, Nicole?" Celeste slipped back into the water, bringing them face to face. A tiny nod sent two warm and callused hands around her back, and the cool touch of Celeste’s horn resting against her cheek. Trembling, Nikki placed her fingers on Celeste's shoulders. She would have been happy to stay in that embrace forever but Celeste wanted more. Her breath accelerated as Celeste's nose traced across her cheek and she tasted the warm caress of a tongue across her lips.

"Oh wow." Butterflies fluttered to the very tip of her toes. "Wow..."

Celeste leaned in again, and this time Nikki opened her lips to meet Celeste's tongue with her own. They touched, gingerly at first, jumping back from the explosive current racing down their nerves, but then coming together again: a touch, a lick, and then Celeste reached out boldly to claim her tongue in loving circles.

Nikki wanted to cry with joy. I'm kissing a girl. Not just any girl, but Celeste, and it was wonderful. She broke away to catch her breath.

"You're really good at this scent marking."

"When my people embrace, it is a message: To others, possession. To the receiver, desire."

"I think I got the message. Loud and clear," Nikki grinned, surrendering her lips to another loving tongue-lapping. Through the fog of pleasure she was vaguely aware that callused hands were sliding up her thighs to unknot the sarong around her legs.

Hungry for more, Celeste's tongue trailed from her gasping lips to her chin, while her fingertips dug ridges through that beloved blue hair. She growled like a predator. Every taste of salty skin spurred on the Norai till she was lapping at her neck like she was a fast-melting ice cream cone. Nikki couldn't help but giggle.

"-Puppy!" Nikki broke off their embrace, hit with a revelation. "Puppy dog! I mean, the dog next door! Celeste, the slave bracers don't just work on garduk, do they?"

Still fogged up in arousal, Celeste was slower to join in. "They will configure themselves to any organism with a central nervous sys-" Then she understood. "The signal."

Together they dashed for the fence, peering at the miserable mutt still lashed in the neighbour's yard. "Substitute an Earth animal and follow its path back to Rondarr. Nicole, this is brilliant!"

A nagging doubt interrupted Nikki's high. "It won't hurt it much, right?"

Celeste appraised the starved pup. "No more cruelty then what the poor beast has already endured. I will retrieve the animal. The bracer is with my bag in the refresher room."

"Bathroom, got it." Nikki turned to leave but felt her body jerk to a stop. Celeste was holding on to the hem of her Hawaiian shirt, a wicked smile over her face. Nikki tugged again but the Norai's grip and teasing look only intensified. There was only one way she was getting free.

A mix of sheepishness and excitement filled Nikki's cheeks as she undid her buttons and let Celeste strip away her shirt. In her rush to the fence her sarong had also peeled off, leaving her embarrassing
bikini fully exposed. Oh god, she can see everything. Her tummy fat, the soggy cellulite on her butt and thighs. Nikki turned away, hugging her chest.

Celeste, oblivious to her imperfections, made another feline purr of approval. Then she bent down and licked Nikki between the shoulder blades. "We will finish this later," she promised.

When Nikki shut the bathroom door behind her, the goofiest grin had spread over her face. Celeste … Celeste liked her. Really, really liked her! She wanted to spend time with her, wanted to be with her, to hold her! The gamer girl’s head grew dizzy thinking of the possibilities that would branch out from this moment.

What if she- ? Nikki’s hand trailed down past her navel. I mean, would she even want to -?

Concentrate, her science brain scolded. The slave bracer. Celeste has scattered her human clothes over the floor, along with her rifle and camouflage duffle bag. Where was it? First-aid boxes, ammunition pouches… Holding the bag upside-down and dumping the contents was a little hasty but it succeeded in flinging the metal scorpion from its hiding place. The torture device clattered to the floor, and along with it fell a silver, apple-sized sphere, bouncing and rolling to a stop at her feet.

Celeste's projector sphere. Nikki held it to the light, admiring the cool, metallic texture against her palm. It looked like a fancy paperweight but this unassuming marvel held a record of every planet Celeste had visited. A gateway to the galaxy, a visual encyclopaedia of incredible alien wonders!

A little peek couldn’t hurt, right?

"You imbecile, come here!" The shout was followed by Celeste's clomping hooves and the yip of a fleeing dog. Yeah, she had time.

The device was touch activated, but that was hardly a problem. Nikki rewound through the weekend to yesterday afternoon on the rocks. The school counselor had told her that she had a photographic memory; that she could look at anything once and imprint it into her brain like a heated brand. Once she focused on the moment it was simple enough to mimic the pattern Celeste's thumb had traced over the sphere. An inner light from the projector warmed her hands. Victory!

"Tendricide," Nikki whispered and the snow-covered vistas flew into the air, transitioning as she swiped her fingers through the cone of light like a wizard casting a spell. Celeste must have tagged the pictures by location, or sorted them into albums to be called up using voice commands. Well she knew a few key words of the galactic language.

"Celeste." A slideshow of selfies against alien landscapes flashed through the air. Off the job Celeste looked relaxed, at peace.

"Night Wraith." Nothing. No, wait - "Koru-Shikai." The light formed into alien newsprints and criminal mug shots. A list of bounties she’d captured? Awesome! What else could she conjure? Had Celeste let slip any further incantations that would summon the spirits from this prism?

"Cel-" She stopped herself. Was this going too far? No, Celeste had shared the childhood crush story; what harm would it to search up a picture? "Celara."

The screen swapped and Nikki's giddy smile fell to a cold line. A full-body hologram had been conjured from the databanks, looking down on her like a restless ghost. Nikki lay the view-sphere on the floor so that she could face the life-sized model directly.
A Norai girl, taller only by the virtue that her hologram was hovering off the ground. Like Celeste, she was blue skinned with horns and white hair, only hers was short, plain and cut into a no-frills bob. Like my hair. Her brown jumpsuit had been designed for a taller, fuller figure and hung from her limbs like loose skin. My sweaters, she gulped, reflexively touching her glasses as the scan took her to Celara's face. Protective goggles were strapped over her artificial eyes, an unnatural metallic silver with tiny glass pupils. The hologram played in a short loop – Celara would blink and her pupils would unfold like aperture lenses. They made Nikki think of a fish's twitching gills and she immediately despised them.

Nikki could have rattled the rest of Celara's features off by heart: a short, button-like nose primed for bullies to flick; shoulders that slouched timidly, huddling against a cruel world, and slender fingers that played nervously in her lap. Unimpressive breasts and a lower body that was far too chunky around the stomach and thighs.

They were the features she saw every day in the mirror.

"Nicole, have you retrieved the –"

Light flooded the bathroom, but not enough to disperse Celara's ghostly projection. Celeste froze at the door with the horrified look of a woman who'd been stabbed in the back.

Nikki turned around, and result was a pair of twins facing the Norai hunter. One ghostly with blue skin and white, horned hair; the other solid flesh that gone deathly pale.

"Why's she – Celeste, why does she –?"

"What are you doing?" The hunter barged in and scooped up the view-sphere, clutching it like a newborn. "You don't know how this operates; you could have deleted everything!"

Nikki barely heard the stinging words. "Why does she look like me?"

"You had no right …" Celeste was absorbed in her own shock, and Nikki had to press on to be heard.

"Why am I the same as her?"

For a second, Celeste paused. The shot had pierced through.

"You think I'm her, don't you? You were never looking at me, it was always her!"

"Nicole, you weren't supposed to –"

"Celara. That's what you said to me on the beach. The first word out of your mouth. You said her name again after we landed and you got upset. And my hair. You kept asking about my hair or saying you liked it. It's her hair!" The tears streaming down her cheeks burned like rivers of fire. "Am I just some clone you can have a second chance with?"

"Nicole, no!" She tried moving closer, tried hugging her. Nikki slapped away her repulsive hands, whipping the view-sphere to the ground with a thud. Uttering a horrified cry, Celeste dove after her precious treasure. After her precious Celara.

"How dare you?" A dent had lodged in the outer shell. "These are my memories. They're all I have left of my home!"

"I hope it's broken," Nikki choked. Memories of pink hair flashed through Nikki's mind. "You're just
as bad as her. As everyone else on this shitty planet."

Celeste snatched her wrist and marched her out of the bathroom, slamming it in her face. A sob was working up her throat but Nikki balled her fist and bit down on her knuckles. She wouldn't cry, wouldn't give her the satisfaction of crying.

She was not alone outside the bathroom. The neighbour's dog watched her with hesitant eyes, as did a further pet: a silver hummingbird with a security camera head.

"Cogni?"

"Kosoko kangai, Nikkeee-da. It was difficult pinpointing your location."

"What's going on, you're supposed to be searching –" Nikki stopped herself. "You found it. You found the garduk nest."

"Affirmative. They were gathered at an abandoned lot set for demolition. A Shi-bessen transport cockpit is also stationed there."

"You mean Rondarr's ship?"

Cogni's camera flew open in a Eureka moment. "Ohhhh, the vessel we attacked in orbit. Ki-Celeste, I may have discovered –"

The bathroom door flew open, and the AI shut up. From the darkness, the Night Wraith strode forth. Dressed for battle, Celeste was transformed. A skin-tight purple combat suit with metal body armor. The shimmering fabric stretched down her arms but left her scarred legs bare and limber for movement. Metal gauntlets around her forearms held wrist-mounted lasers; grenades encircled her belt. Her front zipper was still opened down to her navel and, catching Nikki's stare, she yanked it up to her chin with a scowl.

There was no face to be seen. With the uniform's attached hood flipped over her head, Celeste had disappeared into shadow. All that escaped the cowl were yellow eyes, curved horns and stray silver hairs like billowing cobwebs. This was the monster of galactic myths; this was the Koru-Shikai.

The bounty hunter pitched a wadded-up ball of human clothes at Nikki. "I am done with these garments." Nikki let them fall to the floor.

"Then I'll just burn them."

"I am leaving to hunt Rondarr. I am taking your vespa transport." Her outstretched hand gave no room for argument. Nikki surrendered the key, and when their fingers brushed in passing the hunter jerked away like she'd touched a slimy toad.

"After I apprehend Rondarr, I will depart this planet."

"Good, you go do that. I don't ever want to see you again."

Celeste slung her duffel bag and her rifle over her shoulder and marched off with Cogni in pursuit. At the door, she hesitated.

"I live aboard my ship," she began. "I keep moving, never remaining in one system. Whenever my work takes me to a new world I remind myself that those I encounter will fear and loathe me, the monstrous Koru-Shikai. I remind myself that there is no one there for me."
"I convinced myself you could be different, Nicole Ann-Marie. I was mistaken."

The door slammed, the vespa roared away, the house fell into utter stillness. Alone. Free to march back to her apartment, to play her games, to surf the web, to blog and rant to her heart's content.

Nikki fell to the floor. Free to cry.

It took five rings before her mother answered the phone. "Sweet bean?"

"Mama?" she sniffled, "You were right. You were so damn right it hurts."

When she'd let out the worst of her sobbing, Nikki croaked out an edited version of her falling out with Celeste. "This girl in her pictures, Mama, she looked just like me. She thinks I'm her!"

Her mother offered no sympathy. "Nikki, how could you do that? Looking through her private photos?"

"She lied to me, Mama!"

A long exhale. "Nikki, what is it you want?"

"I…" That dreaded question again. What did she want? What did she plan to do with her life? Only this time, she had a glimmer of an answer.

"I wanna be with her, Mama. I want her to like me."

"I think we both know that you can't make anyone love you, sweet bean." A sad chuckle crackled over the phone. "You can only be there for them and hope they'll let you in."

"Nikki, do you know why I came to this country?"

Um, duh. "You came here for work."

"I came to get away from your grandparents. We always fought about my future; how they wanted me to take over the family business and I wouldn't have any of it. So I saved up, I stormed off and I told them how much I hated them as I marched out the door. That was the last I saw of your gran and grandad before –"

Her mother's voice faded, leaving Nikki's imagination to supply the squeal of tires, the crunch of metal frames; the futile ambulance sirens.

"Sweet bean, go and find her. Apologize to her. Just don't let her leave angry. Don't let your last moment leave you bitter and wondering 'what if'."

Nikki wiped the snot from her face. "I've been a super jerk to you. I'm sorry."

"Well, you can apologize properly when you have me over for coffee."

"But I didn't – Ohh, you want me to invite you over. Right." Social interactions. "I gotta go, Mama. I love you." Cogni had the exact coordinates of the garduk nest but she could still follow.

The slave bracer. It had fallen from Celeste's duffel bag and the Norai had forgotten it in her haste to leave. Time to activate this back-up plan. The scrawny next-door dog had retreated to Miss Jessie's
kitchen and it cowered as Nikki approached with the claw-like machine in hand.

"Sorry, guy," she offered. "I gotta do this." The abused puppy backed itself into a corner, whimpering at her with watery eyes.

Nikki raised the bracer, then flung it to the ground. "Dammit, why've you gotta make me the bad guy here?"

Grunting like a cavewoman, Nikki led the mutt back to its yard. Then she pulled up her sleeve, sucked in a deep breath and placed the bracer overtop her outstretched arm.

"Ow!" Silver claws clamped around her skin like a flytrap, pinching tighter than any blood pressure cuff. It wasn't a spinal cord, but it seemed to accept her arm all the same. Nothing pierced her skin, but it sucked tight with a vacuum seal.

Needlepoints pricked her arm, forcing her to flap the limb and spin in search of relief. When her arm pointed north, towards downtown, the needle-prick torture ceased.

That way, huh?

Nikki scooped up a rusty old bike from the neighbour's grass and started pedaling, turning street corners as the jabbing needles dictated. Her lungs burned, her thighs screamed; her eyes watered from the constant mechanical stabbings but she soldiered on with a determination no video game had ever coaxed from her.

Celeste … Please don't be gone. Please, just give me one last chance.
Fate, Rondarr reflected, was like a game of chance in a gambling den. Its patterns were odd and impossible to map out, and even those who tried to cheat the system met with cruel surprises. Still, a comforting certainty existed: in the long run, the house always won.

Staring at the unconscious cupidaemon in his cryo capsule, Rondarr thought of himself as the grandest of casino owners, finally collecting his long overdue winnings. Readouts showed the suspension process at 75% completion and rising. Just a little longer and he could cash in an astronomical fortune. Only one thing could make this victory all the sweeter…

Oh? An alert from the ship cognition – intruder on the perimeter scanners. Subject was a Tendricite.

Rondarr glanced at the readout – 81% complete. Plenty of time for some amusements.

Time to end to this drawn-out charade. Time play a final hand with the Night Wraith.

Winner takes all.

Winds lashed, storm clouds loomed and night fell cold and savage by the time Nikki pedaled herself into Glenberry's unsavory downtown. Sleazy motels, dive bars and strip clubs lined the streets, and not the glamorous big city joints, but the sketchy ones with faded marquees and peeling paint. She kept her head down.

The pain biting into her arm stopped when she approached a fenced lot scheduled for demolition. Isn't this where that worker jumped off the building? Anton had told her something about a suicide case. She looked up at the rusted bones of an old high-rise apartment. All the windows had been punched out and the inside hallways would be gutted of drywall and wiring. Just a shell of concrete and support beams waiting for controlled explosives to collapse it like an accordion. Coming Soon – Tea Leaf Spa, the placards declared under the warning labels about demolition in progress. Maybe it was just her imagination but when the wind picked up the whole building seemed to sway and creak.

Celeste was definitely here, there was no imagining that. The entrance gates had been forced open and an ugly pink vespa was parked next to the opening. Nikki dropped her bike and jogged to greet the silver hummingbird perched on the motorbike handles.

"Cogni, where's Celeste?"

"Greetings, Nikkeeeeda. Ki-Celeste has entered the premises."

Flashes of light snapped across the third floor. Onlookers would have shrugged them off as the sparks from a welding iron, a late-working contractor pulling overtime. Nikki recognized the blue flames of Celeste's laser rifle. She's fighting up there!

For the first time since she'd clamped on the slave bracer Nikki found a moment of cold clarity. What am I doing? Running into an alien firefight, no training, no weapons and all for a woman who hated her? You can't do this, kiddo.

"Do what, Nikkeeeeda?"
Nikki turned to the nosey AI. Had she spoken aloud again? Maybe she couldn't help but at the very least she intended to wring an overdue explanation from Cogni's neck.

"Why do you keep adding 'da' to my name? I know Celeste is your 'Ki', your captain, but what's 'da' mean?"

"The suffix designates you as a friend. Ki-Celeste told me to refer to you as such."

Friend. Even during those first hours wracked with suspicions, Celeste had been willing to call her a friend. Well that clinches it. "Cogni, follow me. We've gotta do whatever we can to help Celeste."

She jogged a few steps before realizing the camera bot remained at its perch. "You stupid idiot," Nikki growled, not quite sure if she was referring to Cogni or herself. Alone, she raced for the building, growing more uncertain the taller it grew.

C'mon, Nikki, you've stormed hundreds of evil hideouts! Except raiding Shinra Headquarters or Kefka's Tower always came with reset options. A service elevator had been bolted to the building and she stepped into the wire cage, mashing the button for floor three. While the noisy box rolled up its chute she double-checked her pockets to make sure she still had her weapon. Laser pointer? Check.

With the rooms stripped down to metal girders she could see all the way through the floor, and she eased her nerves with fantasies of deploying X-ray vision. I see her! Celeste, her hood drawn and her rifle ready, was crouched behind a stack of drywall panels, radiating a badassness that made her want to dive head-first into third-person cover-based shooters. The Norai would exhale, listen, and then whip her barrel around the corner to lay down suppressing fire.

Red laser bolts pumped into her drywall defense, tossing smoke and cinders into the air. Nikki flinched at the figure stomping through the haze, a hunchbacked dinosaur with a portable cannon in his claws.

The aliens had maneuvered themselves into a stalemate: Celeste was pinned with nowhere to move beyond her dwindling cover. Rondarr was incapable of advancing. Whenever his claws clacked against the metal floor, her rifle blasts forced him to retreat. Their game was locked in check but the poacher still sneered confidently, and Nikki watched his black claws dance across a wrist-top console as he added a new pawn to the board.

A trickle of dust was all the advance warning before the roof above Celeste collapsed. The adolescent garduk – tiger-sized and plated with spiky black armor – dived at its prey. Nikki hissed foul - No fair double-teaming her! - but Celeste was too swift to be caught again, rolling away and leaving the monstrous claws to sink into metal instead of blue flesh. Her fingers plucked a grenade from her belt and pitched it at the garduk.

Darkness burst from the container, a smokescreen so thick that Nikki swore Celeste had been storing a black hole in a can. The blinded garduk snorted and reared its head, and when the smoke cleared it stood alone and befuddled.

Rondarr's gravely cackle echoed through the empty floor. "More diversions, plant eater?" His tongue snapped at the air like a whip. "We don't need eyes to hunt you, not when you reek like a Tendricite slave." His claws tapped further commands to his collared beast – Nikki's arm prickled again – and the garduk pressed its face to the ground, sniffing the floor like a bloodhound.

Still haven't noticed me, Nikki thought. From her vantage point she could see Celeste crouching behind a corner girder and struggling to catch her breath. She needed a chance to recover but the garduk was on her trail already. "Hey, over here! Over here, come get me!" She didn't think, the
words simply leapt from her throat, and her fists rattled the elevator cage for extra attention.

The garduk whipped its head, target-locking the elevator, and it raced at her.

_Oh crap._ Nikki mashed the button for the roof just as the tiger-sized jaws smacked into the elevator cage, front paws raking at the mesh and nostrils sniffing furiously. Nikki accelerated upwards – the garduk smacked its head on the ceiling and fell off, but it was undaunted, racing up the stairwell in pursuit.

Lavender flowers and sweat. As she zoomed upwards Nikki realized that she still had Celeste’s musk all over her. _It thinks I’m her_, and she gave a final, morbid laugh, wondering how any half-intelligent creature could equate her with a goddess.

A polite ding announced the rooftop arrival. In a race between stairs versus elevator there was no contest when the opponent was an adrenaline-infused space beast. The salivating jaws awaited her across the roof, and as soon as the elevator cage whirred open the garduk sprinted for its meal.

Nikki wasn't expecting death to be humorous, but when the garduk smacked flat against the empty air – front paws spread and tongue lolling like a hideous plush doll suction cupped to a window – she waited to see if there would be a drumroll punchline. The unconscious garduk merely slid to the ground, its nails dragging crackles of static through a ship-sized cloaking field.

_A ship!_ Without the threat of being eaten to distract her, Nikki could see the detached front section of the heavy cruiser Celeste had shot down two nights ago. Dust from the demolition site had collected against its light-reflecting hull, allowing Nikki to follow its boxy outline like a connect-the-dots puzzle.

The boarding ramp had also been left open, leaving a floating door to nowhere in the air, so there was that too. _Observation skills: you suck at them, Nic-hoe!_

There was more: a human body sprawled at the foot of the ramp like a discarded garbage bag. A young man, dark-skinned with dreadlocks. "Anton?"

Nikki rushed to her friend's side and shook him for a reaction. His body was cold to touch and his hair was white with ice crystals like he’d collapsed in a blizzard. _What was he doing here? "Anton, c'mon dude, wake up! Say 'fuzzy pickles'! Say something!"_

"Unn… Gen Three Pokémon all had shit-tier concepts. Over-designed as fuck."

Nikki slapped him across the face. "Fuck you! Hoenn was Gardevoir's gen!" Nobody trash-talked her waifu! "Are you seriously forgetting Gen Five where they made Pokémon out of garbage bags and ice cream cones? I mean, what the fuck, where’s my dolphin pokemon, Game Freak?"

"Ow! Okay, Ralts line excluded and Unova was shit. Geez, I'm awake." Then Anton's face sobered with memory. "Nikki? Shit, you've gotta run, there's a –"

"A giant lizard man with a spaceship? Yeah, I got the update. Oh, and _I told you so_!"

Anton grimaced as she raised him to a sitting position. "Yeah, yeah. I just wish your conspiracies didn't hurt like a ton of bricks. This freak jumped me when I came here for a job. Put me in this –" Another memory. "Nikki, he brought a girl with him. That's why he thawed me out and dumped me. So he could swap her in! I heard him talking to himself, bragging about how he'd bagged a perfect trophy; that he was gonna sell her or skin her for parts."

He was fighting to stand up but Nikki hushed him. "Hey, chill." _Oh_. "Or maybe don't. Sorry. Look,
I'll get the other girl. Can you walk?” Anton's muscles were stiff as ice – probably still full of it too – but when she tried to help he shrugged her off.

"I can do this. Just save the princess."

She smiled. A nerd to the bitter end. "I'm on it. Just hope she's still in this castle."

Jogging up the ramp took her into a cramped metal container, the polar opposite of Celeste's spacious and sleek vessel. Rondarr must have been desperate to eject with just this cockpit. Everything was stuffed tight with bulky control panels lit by angry red overhead lights. There was room enough for a pilot's chair, and behind that a human-sized cylinder rose from the floor, radiating cold air like a refrigerator. Nikki wiped the frost from the glass and recoiled.

"Kyu?" The cop from the beach? She was the kidnapped girl? The little thing looked unconscious, a pale blue sheen overtaking her sleeping skin, and what did he do to her hair? Wild locks of pink and white flared out from the police officer's scalp.

"Ta cho chu-nan?" Her rescue was interrupted by an angry black security camera dropping into her face, a dark and humorless version of Cogni that glared at her with a menacing red lens. "Cho don asaroizu nan mugara!" White emergency lights started blinking across the roof. Shit, it hit the alarm.

Nikki jammed her hand into her pocket and pulled out a pencil-sized tube with a key-ring attachment. She blasted the laser pointer into the AI's camera lens, and the robot shrieked and recoiled, rocking wildly on its segmented arm and bashing its body against the ship walls.

"Booyah, Black Mage casts Blind!" Nikki taunted. Okay, gotta rescue the babe. A reptilian roar had just ripped through the building; she had a good feeling Rondarr had gotten his computer's memo.

The freeze capsule was idiot-proof, thank goodness, with big and obvious red levers on its side for unlocking. The glass panel hissed open with a spray of icy mist and the police girl slumped into her arms. "Kyu, you awake?" She was breathing in fitful spasms and Nikki wondered if it was safe to yank her out of sub-zero temperatures so quickly. The girl's hands clung reflexively to her sweater and Nikki shivered as the heat drained from her body.

She was wondering how best to carry Kyu when the rhythmic bang of clawed feet rattled the ship. Oh crap…

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Fate, Rondarr decided, was cruel and merciless as the burning stars. Just when he had the impudent Tendricite pinned in his crosshairs an alert chimed in from his cognition: an intruder aboard the ship. Cursing all the higher powers – the stars, the void, the cupidaemons and their damnable planet – Rondarr threw himself out a window, catching his fall with razor claws that gouged handholds as he sprinted up the side of the building with the speed of a golga lizard on stimulants.

He flipped onto the rooftop and dashed up the boarding ramp in time to see they cryo tube opened and the cupidaemon on the floor with … the blue-haired female!

They stared at each other, the desperate hunter and the unwitting prey, united last, and Rondarr barred his teeth in delighted grin as he switched the ramp to close. Two priceless rarities, all his! Now, if that winged beast would stay unconscious just a moment more …

A moment more. It was all he asked for but fickle fate, at that moment, chose to deal him a wild card. The cupidaemon opened her eyes. By the void, NO!
The pink-haired monster bolted upright, latched onto the human like a parasite and the pair phase-shifted through the floor. Rondarr dived to seize them but only caught a face-full of metal panels. He roared and mashed the flooring into scrap. Gone… and now she'd go intangible and invisible, impossible to retrieve. His perfect capture, stolen away in the blink of an eye, all because of –

Rondarr flung himself into his command chair, scrambling to activate sensors. Four lifeforms on the topmost level, and external cameras confirmed one of them as the Koru-Shikai. The wretched herbivore, the condescending mammal; the slave who didn't know her place.

Rondarr's rage-fueled claws twitched erratically as they traced over the weapons console, hovering over the many options for capturing live prey: gas canisters, electrified netting, tractor beams.

He passed over them all and powered up the laser canons.

"What the-?" A moment ago Nikki had been huddled with Kyu inside the ship, fumbling for her laser pointer and desperate to escape. Now she was flat on her back and looking at the underside of the ship while the tiny officer shivered against her chest.

"Urgh, Pluto's popsicle … phasing hurts when you're … half-dead…” She watched Kyu vomit up a sparkly pink sludge – playdoh and glitter glue? – before wiping her unladylike mouth and scanning her rescuer.

"My little champ…” Her green eyes smiled weakly. "Shit, I knew you'd… come in handy just… never saw something like this happening. When we're safe, you're getting the mother of all sexy lap dances, kiddo."

Nikki ignored the fevered ranting. "What just happened?" she asked. Kyu's eyes glanced guiltily up at the spaceship hull.

"Oh. That. Must've been an … emergency escape hatch! Yeah, nice find, champ." Groaning, she rolled off Nikki's chest, hissing whenever she moved her mangled and bloody left hand. "Ugh, I'm spent. Champ, think you can … be my knight in shining armor … a bit longer?"

"O-okay." How did someone keep up that fast-talking charm after being beaten to a pulp and flash-frozen? Nikki grabbed Kyu under the shoulders and started sliding them out from under the ship.

On his own, Anton had crawled into the elevator and Nikki shoved the injured girl into his hands with an order to "get her out" before punching the ground button and letting them escape. She wasn't leaving, not until she found Celeste.

A snarl from behind was all the warning she got that the garduk was back on its feet. It charged, and blue laser fire blasted its flank, throwing the monster over the safety railing and down fifteen floors. Nikki peeked over the edge to inspect the spread-eagled body. It was still twitching. Death spasms, right? Then she turned to the hooded sniper kneeling across the rooftop. Celeste stood and ripped off her hood.

"Nicole? Pa na isho, what are you doing here?" Her bellow was equal parts fury and concern.

"I … I came to help. There was, he had a -"

"Your arm!" Celeste seized the wrist holding the slave bracer like a blood-sucking tick. In a flash she ripped it clean off. "These fuse with your skin with prolonged contact! What were you thinking?"
"I had to find you! I had to tell you I'm -"

"Enough!" Celeste snatched her wrist again, forcing her to the elevator. "You have no place here." She mashed at the buttons for service, stopping only when her ear caught the crescendo whine of a charging generator. Nikki was thrown to the ground just as a bolt of crimson plasma ripped the elevator to shrapnel.

"Anton!" Nikki imagined the elevator car hurtling downward; had they made it to the ground? No, I can see them! She could make out a pinprick figure limping away with a human-sized bundle in tow. Thank goodness! So what about us? She and Celeste turned to the cruiser, engines screaming as it rose above them like a shadow of death. Spotlights blinded them from the targeting reticles sweeping the roof and the canons unloading from its underside; charging for a second bombardment.

"My god…" It was all Anton could manage. Craning his neck up at the airborne ship and the explosion that had blossomed from the rooftop. Nikki's still up there! His heart jackhammered against his ribs but his human cargo didn't seem to appreciate the dire straits.

"Oh please, I've seen bigger," she snorted, and then she chuckled to herself until her laughter turned to a hacking cough. "Course these big, metal toys are oh-so-breakable. It'd be a shame if someone phased through its circuitry and ripped out some important shit."

Anton looked at the flippant police girl, ready to chew her out. He stopped and looked again. Her good hand – "Are you carrying … electrical cables?"

The hunter and the human. Rondarr had them both locked down, and he savored the horror on their faces as his claws leaned into the firing trigger.

Blue warning message flashed over the viewscreens. Rondarr glanced quickly.

He glanced again, and he roared.

"System failure?"

The fiery roar of the ship's thrusters sputtered and flickered like a dry lighter. The lights along its hull winked out and the engine pitch dimmed downward in a tired sigh. The metal behemoth hovered in the air for a defiant second and then gravity gave the wayward child a good yank.

Nikki locked eyes with Celeste. "Run," the hunter ordered, and they were both sprinting in opposite directions as the metal meteorite plunged towards the roof.

The impact threw Nikki off her feet. A shockwave of concrete that rippled outward and flung her into the safety railing, skinned, battered and overwhelmed by a persistent ringing in her ear. That was the exhale, the explosive thrust outward. Then the roof caved in like a sinkhole, inhaling concrete – and her – into the crumbling center maw.

Nikki screamed as she slid downward. Her fingers instinctively scrambled for a handhold. At the
very edge her arms and legs wrapped around the bent frame of an I-beam overlooking the pit and all the unlucky debris that she had almost followed. Five floors below, Rondarr's ship had scraped to a halt. The building teetered and groaned, now only a sneeze away from tumbling like a deformed Jenga castle.

Nikki yelped as her beam bent another five degrees.

"Nicole?" She risked a glance up. Celeste stood on the opposite end of the rooftop gap, surveying the wreckage for safe passage.

"Celeste!"

"Te nai, Nicole! Stay where you are!" Celeste had removed her shoes and now the alien was leaping between ledges and outcroppings like she was a kid hopping between furniture. At every landing her cloven feet spread and gripped the narrow beams like suction cups. "I'm coming for you," the Norai assured her, but all around them the building continued to shudder and splinter.

I'm gonna die, Nikki realized. She'd made it past the garduk, past Rondarr and his ship but even if Celeste got close enough how would they get out of this wobbling wreckage? This was it, this was game over!

And if this was the last moment of her life, she was determined to go without regrets.

"I'm sorry," Nikki hollered across the chasm. "Celeste, I'm sorry I said I never wanted to see you again! I'm sorry I said all those awful things and that I looked through your photos. I'm sorry I wrecked your projector!" The girder bent again and she had to actively squeeze to keep herself attached.

"Don't look," Celeste commanded. Her voice was closer but still too far away to reach. "Keep speaking, it will help to calm yourself."

Calm herself? How could she stay calm when she was about to slide off this beam like skewered meat and go splat?

"I'm such a shitty person," Nikki sobbed. "I act like I'm so smart and too good for everyone else but I'm just scared! I'm scared people are gonna hurt me!"

Five floors below, an emergency hatch blasted free of the ship.

"I keep saying how crappy this world is but I'm the one who's messed up! I keep thinking everyone's out to get me so I push them away and treat them like crap. And I treated you worst of all." Her eyes were shut tight but tears still managed to escape.

"You were sweet to me," she sniffled. "You listened to what I had to say, you forgave me when I lied about being from the government. When you … you kissed me you made me feel like the most important person in the world; like I was actually worth something!"

The beam sagged again, prompting her to squeal. "So I'm sorry! I'm sorry I was so shitty to you, I'm sorry I was an awful friend! Because I don't hate you, Celeste. You're the coolest, most awesome, most wonderful person I've ever met and I don't ever want you to leave! Celeste, I -"

The beam bent a full ninety degrees and as she slid, footfalls thudded behind her. Nikki felt a harsh yank catch her collar. Strong arms pulled her into the air, gripping her in a possessive embrace.

"I'm here for you," Celeste panted. "I'm here for you, Nicole."
A roar from below. "Tendricite!" Nikki looked down and found the black barrel of a laser cannon staring back. Rondarr was hanging directly below them, bloody and enraged from climbing five floors of wreckage. One arm clung to a metal pipe, the other aimed a gun at their heads. Nikki shrieked, but Celeste just rolled her eyes and extended an arm, letting the crystal bangle around her wrist shimmer as it called for her weapon.

The poacher took a wobbly shot. The plasma burst flew wild. Celeste's rifle shrieked into her grip and she returned the favor. Rondarr's shoulder detonated in a spray of blood and the reptile plummeted to his ship with a heavy crunch.

Nikki waited for the one-liner, the witty farewell, but Celeste just holstered the weapon and wrapped both arms around her rescued human. The poacher wasn't worth the wasted breath.

Five stories below, Rondarr's eyes followed the blue-haired treasure vanish from sight. So... close...

Gingerly, Celeste walked them backwards to more solid footing – though 'solid' at this point was a nebulous term. Nikki's feet brushed the ground and she was turned about. The strong hands never let her go but she could finally look up into Celeste's eyes, pooling equal parts with fear and relief.

"You're such a fool," the alien scolded through her tears. "You're such a fool to come running after someone like me."

"I had to see you again. I didn't want you leaving and thinking this was just another awful planet with awful people." Nikki swallowed a hard lump. "I'm sorry I wrecked your projector."

Celeste's finger brushed a tear from her cheek. "You only dented the casing. I shouldn't have yelled at you. You're not Celara," she added. "You're so much more than Celara."

Nikki buried her face in Celeste's chest. "So," she began, "how do we get down?" All around them the moan of twisting metal filled the air, the cries of a weakened structure struggling to hold itself together. An acrobatic escape, an advanced alien gadget; Celeste would have some way out, wouldn't she?

The Norai only gave a sad smile.

"Just come close to me."

They held each other. It wasn't a proper sedative; it wouldn't numb the pain to come, but feeling the flutter of Celeste's heart against her cheek made Nikki forget everything else around them. We're dancing...

A final, thundering crack and everything collapsed. Screams flew from their throats and Nikki's stomach flew into her heart as the free-fall overwhelmed her senses.

And then, stillness. Stillness and a warm light wrapping around her like a comforting blanket. Nikki opened her eyes and saw Celeste do the same, her body and hair frozen awkwardly in a mid-fall pose. Was this the light at the end of the tunnel? Was this what grandma and grandad had seen? Together, they squinted at the origin of the ethereal glow.

"Kosoko kangai," boomed a voice from the heavens. Huh, so God spoke galactic standard, and she drawled her vowels like a valley girl.

Wait a sec. "Cogni?"

Heaven didn't dominate the sky above, but a blue and white saucer with sickle-wings did blot out the
night sky. The afterlife, Nikki realized, looked a whole lot like the underside of Celeste's spaceship, and from heaven's vessel, a tiny hummingbird robot descended from the light to speak with them directly.

"Kosoko kangai, Ki-Celeste. The Shikai-to Subasa awaits your commands."

Wait another sec. "You flew the ship here?"

"Affirmative," chirped the clueless camera bird. "Nikkeeee-da instructed me to follow her towards the vacated build-" The AI stopped and released a long "Ohhh. You were referring to my remote unit. Oops."

Celeste's tears of joy fell off her cheeks and hovered in the tractor beam. "Cogni you blessed, blessed fool! I'll never reformat you so long as I live. Now, get us on board."

Cogni spouted off an 'affirmative' and their bodies rose into the light of a gravity-defying alien ray. Below, only dust was visible from the demolition site, dust and the wail of emergency response vehicles. Nikki whispered a quick prayer for Anton and Kyu but her thoughts wandered elsewhere.

Celeste. At the moment of free-fall they'd grabbed each other tightly, and Nikki had yet to pry her arms from the Norai.

"Nicole, you can release me," Celeste assured her. "You are in no danger of falling."

Nikki only squeezed tighter. "I don't wanna let go," she whispered.

And Celeste sighed softly, stroking her hair in return. "I know."

"So … I guess that's everything." The Wraith's Wings had returned to its hiding place in the nature preserve. Safely aboard the ship, Nikki finally had a moment to take stock of events. "No more garduk, no more Rondarr, no more threat to planet Earth."

"Yes," Celeste confirmed, "my objectives have been met." She stood before a suitcase-sized container, stowing an important chunk of debris dragged up with the tractor beam: the severed arm of an adult Slovarian. The rest of Rondarr was probably pancaked flat.

Nikki felt her throat tighten. "So that means you have to leave, right?"

Celeste dismissed the storage case into a wall panel. "To log my bounties and receive payment I will need to report to the nearest Confederacy penal station. Even in hyperspace the journey will last at least two cycles. Your system is far from any civilized worlds."

Right. Celeste had her own life, her own routine to return to and it was far from Earth. Nikki stood and marched for the exit ramp. "I should go then." She would make this swift and clean like ripping off a bandage. It would only hurt for a second.

Oh, who was she kidding? The tears were already threatening to pour; she had to leave before Celeste's last look of her was a blubbering, blue-haired doofus.

"Of course," a voice called after her, "there is no time restriction on Rondarr's bounty, and so long as I store the garduk remains in cryo-freeze they will remain well-preserved."

Nikki stopped and faced the hunter, now flipping a slender hand shyly through her hair.
"So there's no urgency to leave immediate-OH!"

Nikki's running tackle nearly knocked her off her hooves, but Celeste caught and spun her around in the air, laughing and lifting her in her arms so their tongues could meet in a happy flurry.

"There's so much in this world I'd delight in seeing," Celeste purred. Her lips curled in a tease. "Do you happen to know of any lodgings that would accommodate an extraterrestrial bounty hunter?"

Nikki blushed and returned the knowing grin.

"I think I know a place."

Morphine, Anton reflected, was the ambrosia of the gods. Oh Lord did he feel fine!

He'd dragged the kidnapped girl to the outer fence when the building collapsed, washing them in clouds of dirt and debris. From there, it hadn't been long before the first-responders arrived and ambulances carted them both to the hospital for emergency treatment and wonderful, wonderful anesthetics.

_Is morphine a hallucinogenic?_ he wondered. _I don't think it's a hallucinogenic_, but then how to explain the two gorgeous and otherworldly ladies attending to his injured roommate? The dresses in sparkling pastels, the neon highlights in their hair, and – how could he neglect – the crystalline wings sprouting from their backs?

They were helping the police girl sit up in her bunk, unclipping her IVs and lifting her under their shoulders. "Heyyyy," Anton slurred. "You sh'stay in bed. Bed," he repeated. Wasn't that a pleasant sound? He should say it again. "Behhhhd." _Tee-hee-hee!_

The angel ladies just rolled their eyes but … Cue? Kyu? The injured girl, what's-her-name – spared him a smile and a wink that gave him an instant stiffy.

"You rest up, okay, Ant-man? You did your part; just leave the rest to us cuties, mm-kay?"

To drive the point home, one of the angel ladies reached over and hit the button for his morphine drip. _Oooh!_ Anton knew which lovely lady he wanted as his private nurse! Now the room was all sparkly, and there was a big, spinning portal in the air, swirling around like – he giggled – _like a toilet bowl! The angel ladies're going down the toilet bowl!_

The portal shifted hues to a neon blue, and a sudden, sober thought broke Anton's giggle-fest. "S'not over yet, ish it?"

Kyu smile dimmed as the fairies marched her towards the warp-rift. "Not by a long shot, Ant-man," she sighed.

"This is where the shit really hits the fan…"
Three days passed and Nikki found herself prancing behind the counter of the Nutmeg Café, humming songs to the cappuccino maker like she was Snow White cleaning house with her animal friends. Happy little bubbles percolated from the coffee machines and she imagined a similar stream of chubby read hearts bubbling from her head.

"Hey, Nikki! Corner booths need cleaning!"

Customers came in foul-faced and surly. It was Wednesday – the dreaded hump-day with its false promise of being halfway through the week – and she made it her mission to serve up the coffee and smiles that would brighten their day!

"Hey, I ordered a double-double, not a grande!"

She couldn't help but waltz dreamily behind the till with a big moony smile over her face. She had so much happiness bubbling up inside her that she had to share it with everyone!

"Um, miss, I gave you a twenty. This is change for a ten."

All these poor souls who hadn't found their Perfect Somebody, the one who completed your life and made every little mundane minute sparkle with promise. She would be their preacher, and the gospel was L-U-

"Um, Hellooo? Like, are you even listening to me?"

"Hmm?" Nikki shook her head and appraised the pig-tailed goth girl. "Oh, right. Here's your drink. One coffee, black."

The tattooed teen inspected the Styrofoam cup and came up wanting. "Like, what the fuck? My name is Lillian. You wrote 'Celeste' on my cup."

"Oh, sorry. Let me fix that." Nikki took back the drink and scribbled down her corrections. The Lillian girl only frowned further.

"It still says Celeste. You just doodled a bunch of hearts around it."

"Oh. Oops." She meant to be sincere but the thought of *Celeste* and *Hearts* made her giggle like a schoolgirl. Her customer muttered out a 'whatever' and slid her cash across the counter. Nikki noticed that the girl's pigtails were frazzled and unwashed, and that deep bags – not makeup – lined the underside of her eyelids. "Hey, you look kinda down," Nikki commented. "Wanna talk about it?"

The goth teen narrowed her eyes.

"Everything's shitty," Lillian blurted. "I wished for a boyfriend and instead I almost got eaten by a lizard demon from hell. My best friend got electrocuted 'n kidnapped and now she's in some fairy hospital and I can't even talk to her! And today my mom threw a hissy-fit and totally took away my cellphone! Fuck my li… Hey, are you even listening to me?"

Nikki turned from the specialty tea she'd been brewing. "Oh. Sorry, my shift just ended and I'm
clocking out. I heard everything up to 'shitty'. Did you say something else?" Miss Lillian just huffed and crossed her arms so Nikki assumed they were good. Poor thing. "You have pretty eyes, Lillian. You should wear more purple to match."

"The fuck?" The goth girl darted between the moony-eyed barista and the coffee cup adorned with lovey-dovey hearts like a detective piecing together evidence. "Wait … are you bi?"

Then she immediately threw up her hands. "No, wait, just hear me out, 'kay?" A deep breath. "I need a date," Lillian blurted. "Will you go to the Fireworks Festival with me? I'll, like, pay for your ticket, I'll buy you shit – snacks, smokes; you name it. All you have to do is come to my house and meet my parents, kay? Oh, and they have to, like, see me put my tongue down your throat so they'll get super pissed. We good?"

Nikki gave an adorable aww. "That's so sweet of you, Lilly-Anne, but I'm not bisexual." Tea in hand, Nikki trotted to the break room to collect her backpack. "I'm a lesbian," she grinned, "and I'm taken."

"I'm home," Nikki sang as she dashed into the apartment. Her day was half over but Celeste's was just beginning. She found the Norai doing push-ups on the floor, a light sweat to shake off the last cobwebs of sleep.

"Kos kan, Nicole."

Nikki snorted playfully. "Yeah, I'd better be 'welcome' here. I'm paying for the place." She presented the cup of tea and a long stem rose to her house guest. "I brought you breakfast," she smiled sheepishly.

Celeste mopped off her sweat and sauntered over, still messy with bedhead and dressed in borrowed pajamas. Hunting in the Earth's sweltering afternoons had been the equivalent of pulling graveyard shifts for the nocturnal Norai, and after they'd stowed the garduk remains aboard her ship they set about getting Celeste back on a proper sleep cycle. The bed was always occupied: Nikki in the pre-dawn hours; Celeste during the day while her host worked.

"Pajamas fit okay?" Nikki asked, admiring her Legend of Zelda nightgown that only came to Celeste's knees. The alien woman had brought two crates full of clothes and supplies for her stay but somehow she'd neglected to pack any sleepwear.

"They smell wonderful," Celeste winked.

The pair sat at the plastic dining table so Celeste could nibble at her rose petals. "Did you have a pleasant sun cycle?"

"Meh, it was okay. Oh, the mayor's office is holding a big inquest into that collapsed high rise. They say construction crews weren't following proper codes and that's why it crumbled early."

"And the unidentified aircraft that flew through the city?"

"Oh, the newspapers all figure it was a drunken crop-duster pilot." Nikki leaned forward. "But all the conspiracy blogs know it was really a secret black-ops helicopter hunting an escaped psychic. I posted online explaining it was an alien spaceship." She proudly raised her phone. "One thousand tweets and climbing, all telling me what a stupid idiot I am." Wasn't it wonderful how blind and trusting all the sheeple were?
Celeste took a sip of her decaffeinated beverage. "I'm relieved that I've gone unnoticed."

"You know what I've noticed?" Nikki's leg bounced restlessly. "You take way too long to eat. Sometimes I think you like teasing me."

"The blush of your cheeks is delightful," Celeste agreed. With a saucy smile she dangled the plant above her mouth like a carnival sword swallow, wrapping her tongue around the stem in a spiral twirl that made Nikki's heart race. Celeste lowered the rose stem between her lips in tiny swallows, accompanying each slurp with soft and satisfied moans that would put Miss Jessie out of work. "And I enjoy my desserts ripe and red."

\textit{Finally!} Celeste leaned over her chair and Nikki obediently closed her eyes and parted her mouth. A happy thrill coursed through her chest as Celeste nibbled and sucked on her lips, mopping her tongue over every crevice until she'd licked them clean. She pulled back with a satisfied smack.

"Mm, what do humans call this flavor?"

Nikki fished out the green case of lip balm. "Lemon lime," she read. "Good?"

"It is agreeable, although I still prefer the taste of your cherry."

Nikki was sure her ears were steaming. That was one non-literal expression she hoped she'd never have to explain. "Um, did you ... want seconds?"

Celeste only ruffled her hair. "Perhaps another time. I was hoping to photograph the setting of your star tonight."

Nikki nodded. A romantic sunset. "I know just the place."

With the vespa returned to the rental shop it took a decent walk to reach the scenic overlook, but Nikki decided the view was worth every sore footstep. From up here, even the tallest downtown skyscrapers looked like miniature models, a craftsman's village coming to life with the glow of fireflies. They followed the city as it stretched into the blue ocean, a mirror dazzling with the gold of the setting sun, and they stared into the clear and cloudless sky, mesmerized as its colours shifted from gentle blue to deepest crimson.

Celeste closed her eyes and breathed deeply, committing to memory every fresh scent and lively sound her camera could not capture. "Your planet is truly beautiful," she murmured, and Nikki could only nod her head and agree.

\textit{It really is. When was the last time I got out and really checked out the city?}

Celeste held up another lava lamp holo-cam and began taking pictures. After a while she set it to hover so they could pose together with the city and the glowing sun at their backs. With Celeste in her cap, make-up and human clothes, they looked like any other couple recording precious memories.

"Nicole, I would like to show you something."

Seeing Celeste's dented projector sphere made Nikki twinge, and the video recording it conjured didn't help the feeling subside. A young Celeste, short-haired on a snowy backdrop, narrating her latest adventure into the ruined cities of Tendricide. Behind Celeste's shoulder, a tiny Norai huddled
meekly, her glass camera eyes flicking like fish gills. *Celara.*

Nikki couldn't understand their language, but she got the gist of the conversation that followed. Celara was afraid, she didn't want to go on. Young Celeste tugged her forward, yanking at her hand but the sickly Norai wailed and rooted herself to the spot. Celeste huffed and stomped off on her own. After a half-minute of the shaky-cam march, a frightened howl made Celeste spin around. Celara was chasing after her, the fear of being alone winning over the fear of unknown dangers.

"Celara was a fearful child," Celeste explained. "My greatest joy was in helping her overcome her anxieties, to see that things were not as dire as she imagined." She flicked off the video. "When I first saw you on that beach, Nicole, I was terrified. I imagined you were some phantasm from my past sent to haunt me. But the more I came to know you, the more I realized how wrong I was.

"You embrace the unknown. You saved me from my injuries, you offered me your aid and your kindness even when I tried to push you away. You ventured into Rondarr's ship to save those humans; *kaba*, you wore a slave bracer just to find me." Celeste shook her head, overwhelmed. "Celara never could have accomplished your deeds."

Nikki cringed. She didn't deserve these honours. "It's hard being brave on my own. I mean, I don't even leave my room unless Audrey or Tiffany drag me out. But it's like … you make me feel safe. And, I dunno, I guess it's okay to try all these crazy things. Because I know I'll have you there with me."

There was nothing more to say, so they joined hands and shared a kiss under the setting sun.

"Got your pictures?"

"Indeed. Would you escort me into your settlement once more?" Celeste crooked her arm and Nikki latched on in a happy snuggle.

"It's a date."

Nikki hadn't been exaggerating when she'd described her life as 'limited'. Work, the arcade; maybe the mall if she had to buy a new game or replace her dirty underwear. Hell, she could navigate the Internet better than her own city! But that made dates with Celeste all the more delightful: everywhere they visited was a fresh and wonderful new experience for the both of them.

Celeste's meatless digestion meant she had to be creative in selecting restaurants. Her typical burgers 'n fries wouldn't cut it. Tonight was *Yuki Sushi Port*, a Japanese restaurant dressed up as a marina. Rice rolls of tofu and eggplant came served on platters shaped like sailing boats. Neither of them knew how to use chopsticks so just grabbed the sushi with their hands. The waiter rolled his eyes at their uncouth eating but they stuffed their mouths all the same.

The bill made Nikki's heart lurch. *Damn, a full-grown Norai can eat!* They'd ordered two of the deluxe royal gala platters and Celeste still ended up eating half of hers. Standing at twice her size and burning all her energy from plants and legumes meant the bounty hunter had to pack on the calories.

"Is everything all right?" Celeste inquired, breaking her staring match with the bill.

"S'nothing," Nikki lied. "C'mon, I've got something fun to try!"

Bowling. Celeste had mentioned wanting to try human sports and Nikki remembered kinda-sorta
having fun at the game (or at least not completely sucking) when her parents had taken her out as a little girl. She’d assumed that *Roxy Lanes* would be a stuffy, dry affair for retired old farts and was shocked to find the underground alleys decorated with dark lights, a roving disco ball and dance music for "glo-bowling" night. Young people her age packed the lanes, fellow teens hanging with friends or out on dates.

*Should've thought about shoes*, she realized. Even with a ladies size one Celeste's cloven feet left the toe section hollow and floppy, and the polished floors sent her skittering and spread-legged, as uncoordinated as a deer on winter ice. But whenever she fell, Celeste just laughed it off and picked herself up. "Success!" she'd whoop as her ball wobbled a corner pin to the ground. Then she'd raise her hands to collect her "five up high" slaps that the other bowlers exchanged.

"Where to next?" Nikki smiled after three hilarious games. Their date nights kept to a routine and Celeste got to choose their next venue.

The Norai summoned a holographic snapshot of a lounge club from her projector sphere. *The Blue Note.* "I noticed this establishment while wandering the city last night. They serve alcoholic beverages and feature live musicians."

Nikki had her reservations. Her only experience with clubs had been Audrey's forced excursions to Lusties and she braced herself for another den of thumping dance music and sweaty perverts. *Blue Note's* swanky atmosphere surprised her. The table area was elegantly lit with candles and wood paneling, the bar was free of booze stains and peanut shells, and the only noise was the quiet murmur of polite conversation. *What a novelty* - people could actually talk at their tables without shouting.

A trio on bass, piano and saxophone crooned out mellow jazz tunes, the perfect tempo for slow dancing. Several couples had already begun to embrace and sway. Celeste extended her palm.

"Would you accompany me to this dance?"

Nikki hesitated before the dance floor of collared shirts and cocktail dresses. Putting aside their jeans and baggy sweaters, they'd still stand out as the only female couple on the floor. "They'll stare at us," she protested.

But Celeste was already leading them forward. "Then look only at me," she smiled.

*Dancing sober is definitely nicer*, Nikki decided. Celeste kept their movements simple but she knew how to lead, guiding Nikki in circles and even dipping her backwards in a move that stole her breath. Nikki could sense the raised eyebrows and ugly murmurs all around, but an equal number of voices fawned at them or smiled in passing. *Go figure, I guess we look cute together.* After a while, Nikki found she didn't care about the voices, good or bad. She was having too much fun spinning and twirling with Celeste.

When the musicians packed up for the night, Niki and Celeste left to find new ventures. "Wanna try the arcade again?"

Celeste wrinkled her nose. "No, I think not. Your firearm simulators are woefully inaccurate. The light guns are improperly weighted and feature no recoil."

"Yeah, yeah; you're just jealous that I beat your score on House of the Dead, Miss Badass Bounty Hunter." An idea. "Hey, I think there's an archery range in town."

"Would you care to try firing a real weapon?" Nikki jumped when Celeste pulled the compact pistol from behind her back.
"Shit, where were you keeping that?" Celeste gave a cheeky grin and made a joke about 'inspecting her body more carefully' but Nikki stuck to her guns. "Seriously, Celeste! What if a cop showed up? Please tell me that's all you're hiding!"

Crestfallen, the Norai revealed her the knives strapped to her ankles, the razor hairpin under her cap and vial of alien mace tucked in her bra. "I apologize for alarming you." The alien twirled a finger through her hair like a scolded child. "Those who do not recognize me as the Koru-Shikai often assume I am a runaway slave. I've grown accustomed to arming myself at all times."

Their conversation stalled as Nikki digested that tidbit. Does she ever relax? Does she get to be just Celeste? Guilt hit her like a hunger pang for nearly ruining this one night of freedom.

"Hey, show me how that gun works."

They snuck into Dawnwood Park and Celeste set up a row of aluminum cans atop a bench. "Stun setting," she assured her, pressing the laser pistol into Nikki's hands and positioning her body: arms slightly bent, legs shoulder-width apart. Celeste hugged her from behind to steady her aim.

"Breathe … hold and …"

Pssew! Nikki's shot flew low, hitting the bench. It burst into flame.

"Oh shit, you said it was on stun!"

"Kaba! That was wood?"

"Crap, crap, crap – we're gonna burn the park down!"

"Pa na isho, who builds furnishings from wood?" The flames were small enough that Celeste could beat them down with her cap. They smothered the last ember and had a half-minute to breathe easy. Then the police siren wailed.

Leaving a string of crap and kaba in their wake, they bolted through the park, swearing and laughing their heads off from the combined terror and excitement. When they ducked into an alley to hide, Celeste pulled her close for a steamy make-out, and the adrenaline made her tongue taste all the sweeter.

Nikki popped her lips free with a gasp. "Okay, I think almost getting arrested for arson is a hint to call it a night." She checked her watch. Late! "I should probably head back. You gonna explore on your own again?"

Celeste shook her head. "No," she smiled. "Take me home."

Walking back to the apartment was something new. They'd spent time out on the town together, they'd kissed and held hands, but when the hour grew late Celeste had always taken the spare key and continued exploring the city until dawn. This is the first time we've come home together, Nikki realized.

Where's she gonna sleep?

With her brain busy mapping out logistics like who would shower first, and what am I gonna wear, she turned from the front door and nearly bumped into Celeste. Whoa! Had she been watching her
lock the door that whole time? Nikki's stomach tightened.

"So, um, tonight was fun," she gulped.

"Tonight was fun," Celeste agreed. Her fingers reached out to trace along Nikki's shoulders. The gamer swallowed nervously. Had she left the heat on today? It was getting kinda warm in here.

"So… I guess we're calling it a night?"

Celeste's fingers continued drawing along her shoulders. "I'm far from tired," she countered, closing in for a slow lick.

_Huh._ Nikki's mind detached itself from her body. What could two people do alone and at night? Celeste leaned in for another lap but Nikki broke away.

"Hey, um, do you wanna play some video games?"

Celeste's brow furrowed – just for a second – but then she resumed her calm smile. "Perhaps. First I should remove my make-up and change into more suitable garments."

"Yeah, okay. I'm gonna go check my daily updates." Online auction houses and weekly quests required her attention.

Nikki flicked on her bedside lamp and booted up her gaming computer. A mountain of angry messages filled her MMORPG inboxes, scolding her for missing scheduled raids or guild meetings. _Sorry_, she typed back. _I was out on a date!_ There, that would shut them up. Celeste seemed to be taking her time in the bathroom. An idle melody drifted through the door. _How long's it take to scrub your face and put on PJs?_ Nikki wondered. She managed to clear two expert dungeons before the Norai made her presence felt.

The bedroom door creaked open and alien footsteps clopped across the hardwood. The musky smell of lavender made Nikki jump and miss her attack. In the reflection of her monitor Nikki caught Celeste resting her chin atop her gaming chair.

"Are you enjoying your game, Nicole?"

"Oh totally. I got some really sweet loot. Lemmie show you."

"Hmm." The Norai didn't quite share her thrill. Blue fingers snaked across her keyboard and hit the pause button. "I have something to show you, Nicole. Turn around."

The siren song in Celeste's voice put her on edge, but Nikki dutifully logged out and removed her headset. _An alien weapon, a Tendricide artifact._ The gamer girl kept her thoughts steady with likely guesses. What else would Celeste want to show her? Nikki spun her chair.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Celeste stood before her in a black evening dress made of a smooth alien leather. It covered her limbs down to her wrists and ankles but _wow_, did it ever fit nicely. Celeste gave her a little runway show, strutting across the room to show off every angle. The skirt had a seam running up the side and the flashes of bare, blue calves mesmerized Nikki.

"Oh wow."

"Thank you. I purchased this garment for an assignment on Raxis Delta. I had to infiltrate an evening
gala in order to apprehend a wanted business mogul. It is an adjustable gown from the Kajad all-night collection."

"All night?"

"Yes. The garment can be adjusted to suit all night activities."

Celeste's right hand slid up to her shoulder. There was a hiss of compressed air as she hit a hidden locket and detached the sleeve from the main body. Celeste peeled the fabric off like a glove. Her bare, blue arm glowed softly against the dark leather.

Nikki swallowed down a mouthful of butterflies. *Whoa.*

Celeste's naked fingers roved across her chest and slid up her covered arm, teasingly slow to uncouple her remaining sleeve. This time she brought the fabric to her lips and tugged it off with her teeth, every quick jerk revealing more of her blue skin. Nikki jumped when the leather casing landed in her lap with a saucy wink.

Now Celeste's hands wandered down her sides, tracing the curves of her breasts and hips. Bending over, she unzipped the slit of her skirt and drew the curtain from her long, toned leg, stroking it daringly from cloven foot to meaty thigh. A little click of the belt at her hips sent the skirt tumbling to the floor, and her bare hoof kicked it aside. What remained of her gown was little more than a leather, one-piece swimsuit.

Celeste strutted over to the gaming chair, pinning Nikki's head between her hands and leaning in to moisten her lips with a hot and breathy tongue. Blue hands trailed to the hem of her shirt…

Nikki bolted at the touch on her stomach, shoving back her chair to break the kiss. "Whoa! Wh-where are we going with this?" Her breaths came in panicky gasps.

Celeste stepped back as well, the rejection hitting her like cold water. "I thought you - I thought we - " A look of hurt crossed her eyes. The glamor of her striptease had faded and she hugged her chest, a foolish, half-dressed woman.

"I apologize. I should have made my intentions clear." Her eyes drifted away nervously. With a deep breath she started over.

"I find you desirable," she whispered. "My time here has only confirmed my feelings for you, Nicole. I would very much like to touch you, to bring you pleasure. And –" she kneaded her knuckles, "if you find it agreeable … I would like to mate with you."

*To … mate?* Nikki followed Celeste eyes towards the bed. "Oh my god…” Why did her body go so cold and stiff? Why was she trembling?

"I understand if you disagree –"

"No!" Nikki interjected. "I mean, I like you. I like you kissing me. It's just …" Her head fell. *What am I supposed to do? What does she like? What if I screw up and she hates me? What if it hurts?" I mean … sorry, I'm just … I mean, no one's ever …" Oh god, was she crying? Nikki hid her face in her hands.

She heard Celeste's hooves slowly cross the floor, felt the hand reach tentatively for her shoulder. Celeste opened her arms in offering and Nikki burrowed into the Norai's embrace, letting Celeste stroke her hair reassuringly.
"I don't have a lot of practice with this sorta stuff..."

"I have a confession," Celeste whispered. "I have never coupled with a human. You would be my first."

Nikki squeezed out a small laugh. Celeste giggled along with her, and Nikki drifted back to their first meeting aboard the ship and the adorable, dainty laughter that had first melted her heart. She didn't feel stressed anymore. Well, she still had a cold pit in her stomach but it didn't threaten to swallow her whole. She forgot that she was in a darkened room, alone with a half-naked woman. Instead, she was sharing a joke with a wonderful friend; the woman she admired and adored more than anyone in the world. The woman who wanted to know her more closely in every way.

"So, um… you really want to… I mean…" Unable to finish, Nikki gestured towards the bed. "With me?"

"More than anything," Celeste nodded back.

Nikki took a deep breath. "Me too."

They sat together on the side of the bed, fingers intertwined in their laps as they traded familiar licks and kisses with their tongues. Nikki knew this part, a repeat of the careful make-out sessions they'd shared nightly, yet every meeting of their mouths still made her tremble with excitement. Every kiss was a promise of deeper pleasures to come.

Celeste let her set the pace, pressing no further than kisses, but every squeeze of their knuckles declared her desire for more, and every pleasant moan from her throat teased at the pleasures that could be.

When Nikki had steeled her nerves she pulled back from their kiss and looked up at the alien woman, resting her hands on Celeste's tall shoulders. "I'm ready … I think," she shivered.

Celeste nodded in understanding and guided her onto the bed. She fluffed and stacked the pillows into a cozy pile and lay back, inviting Nikki to lie atop her. Nikki scooted up to straddle her legs along Celeste's powerful hips.

Warm, she thought. For an arctic species, Celeste's skin was invitingly warm, like an electric blanket urging you to lose yourself in its folds. She sank against the Norai's lap and steadied her palms against leather-bound shoulders.

When they were settled, Celeste combed a hand through her blue hair and leaned forward to inhale the silky goodness.

"We can stop at any time," Celeste reminded her.

"I know," Nikki nodded back. She allowed herself one last deep, steadying breath. "So … what do you want me to do?"

"Kiss me."

Nikki leaned in, circling her tongue over Celeste's lips, their roles reversed from the first, drunken embrace they had shared nights ago. Kissing Celeste made her think back to all the smut-fics she'd read to stimulate herself; how they all sang of mouths like fountains of honeyed nectar and lips sweet and smooth as chocolate. Celeste's mouth was chapped and rough from her hunts, her taste salty from the sweat of her body. Like potato chips, Nikki thought, tugging hungrily at the blue lips. She
wanted to devour them by the bowlful.

Celeste lapped at her face with equal vigor, breaking only to take furious gulps of air before diving into Nikki's mouth again. This time, the strokes of her tongue were accompanied by the rhythmic massage of hands down Nikki's shoulders, now free to explore and caress the curves of her back. Nikki shuddered as the strong hands slipped under her shirt and roamed along the straps of her bra.

*Hands...* Nikki thought. *Right, I should use mine.* She raised one trembling palm from Celeste's shoulder and settled on the nearest handhold - the sickle-curved horn growing around the Norai's ear. Nikki rubbed her palm up and down the bony length. "Is that good?"

Celeste made a face. "My horns hold little sensitivity." *Oh, right...* She might as well have been jerking off a piece of bone. "But I do enjoy having my ears stimulated," she added.

"Ears. Okay," Nikki nodded. She just had to get at them. No wonder Norai used their tongues for basic kissing; you needed a long extension to slip past the skull growths. She tried to put her face through the loop of Celeste's horns but bonked her forehead. She had to go in from behind, and when she pressed down her tongue, the round of heavy slobbering she delivered only made Celeste grimace.

"Just a light touch," she clarified, and Nikki tensed at the demonstrative flick of a tongue across her earlobe. *How does she know exactly how to touch me?* Nikki winced. *How is she so perfect at this?*

She tried the motion herself, lightly tracing the edge of Celeste's ear and was rewarded by a pleasant shudder. "Now my neck," the hunter urged, tracing her fingers down her artery. Nikki followed the roadmap with her lips, kissing until she hit the obstruction of black leather. Celeste took her by the chin for another mouth-to-mouth licking. "Where do you enjoy being touched?" she asked in a hot whisper.

Nikki only squirmed. "I- I dunno. It's all good." What did she have to compare against? Undaunted, Celeste sent her hands roving up and down Nikki's sides, searching for hidden pleasure spots while Nikki contented herself stroking a finger along the alien's clavicle. She didn't dare cross the forbidden zone.

"You can touch me wherever you desire, Nicole." Celeste took her hand and dragged it atop her breast. "I want to feel your hands all over me."

A gasp. Even through the leather outfit Nikki could feel the warm softness of her generous breasts. Celeste guided her through several practice strokes, demonstrating how to gather up her flesh in a gentle squeeze. Nikki tried it herself. Her shaking fingers clamped like crab pincers and Celeste winced again. "S-sorry," she stammered. She felt ready to crawl into a hole and die, but Celeste remained patient as ever. All these awkward attempts only made the Norai smile with good nature, like she was some adorable puppy who didn't know better.

"Let me show you."

Nikki's breath hitched as Celeste slipped a hand up her shirt and over her covered breast. Even through her bra the sensation lit her up like a Christmas tree, a soothing caress that melted through her skin. She tried repeating Celeste's motion, stroking her fingers inwards to the center tip. Celeste murmured her approval.

"That good?" Nikki checked.

"So good," Celeste repeated breathily, and the dreamy smile on the Norai's face made Nikki feel
"S-sometimes," she blurted, "when I'm feeling horny I go looking through DeviantArt for porn. They say no explicit content but everyone posts it anyway, and when I find some really hot pics of Zelda or Samus, all spread with their boobs out..." she trailed off, not really sure where this was going. "Well, I start pinching my nipples."

_Oh god, why did you say that?_ Her inner doubter slapped her upside the head, only to be immediately silenced when Celeste's fingers slipped inside her cup, circling over her areola and coaxing out her tip. A firm squeeze.

"Like this?"

"Unh… harder," Nikki whispered through clenched teeth. Celeste ran the hardened nub between her fingers, upping the pressure until she forced out a shudder. "Oh yeah… that's it. That's it." Ready to collapse in pleasure, both her hands fell to Celeste's chest, kneading the teardrop breasts through their leather casings.

Just a few presses and Celeste had her body under a spell. Nikki felt the arousal in her core hunting for release. Her lower body twitched and rubbed against Celeste. She felt Celeste's hips buck back in response. This felt good, this felt so good!

"What else?" she panted as Celeste's fingers snapped her cup back and trailed down her stomach. Her body was flush but they couldn't stop here.

Celeste met her with a foxy smile. "You could undo my clothing," she suggested. Her fingers fished around her collar and revealed the zipper lining to her alien leather. All bravery suddenly drained from Nikki, leaving her flesh clammy and cold. _Clothes..._ Right, they had to get naked for this.

"Yeah, okay," she swallowed, locking eyes with her lover for reassurance as she guided her trembling hands upward.

Something flickered across Celeste's eyes. "Wait." The Norai reached across to the nightstand and flipped the lamp switch, casting the bedroom into darkness. "There, this is more … sensual."

"I ... I guess," Nikki replied. Even if she squinted she could only see vague outlines. Celeste's golden eyes lit up like lamps, of course, but they flickered and darted hesitantly like candles. The chest heaving under her hands had a tightness to its exhales, like she was frightened. _No, I'm just imagining._ What did an experienced goddess like Celeste have to fear from her virgin touch?

"Okay, lemmie just –" Nikki's hands fumbled through the dark. The dress didn't have a traditional zipper, or even buttons. It was more like pressure points you had to squeeze your thumb against to release an air seal and peel open the leather. And you had to keep finding these seals every few inches to keep the release going. Nikki's fingers found the first at Celeste's neck, then another at her clavicle, but in the dark she couldn't progress any further.

"Celeste, I can't see."

"Here, let me –"

"No, I can do this, really. I just need some light."

Celeste's hands, which had been trying to guide her own, fell limply onto the mattress. She gave a defeated sigh. "Very well."
When Nikki had the lamp lit once more, Celeste's eyes glued themselves to the wall and one hand played nervously through her hair. "I-I'm opening the zipper," Nikki explained.

Celeste gave a meek whimper but nodded her on.

Nikki continued the pattern: thumb opening the seal, then fingers running down the seam like she was opening a ziplock container until she hit the final opening below Celeste's belly button. The attached shorts seemed to open on some separate system. She pushed her glasses onto her forehead, reducing the world to a vague smear, while she wiggled the leather down Celeste's shoulders and peeled the dress from those perfect breasts. "I wanna see you all at once," she whispered. It sounded sexy in her head but Celeste made nary a peep. Her fingers dug into the sheets. Finally, Nikki could see a blurry canvas of blue from neck to navel. "Here goes," she chimed and she flicked down her glasses.

Oh.

Nikki remembered asking herself what kind of person traveled the stars with pints of spare blood for transfusion. The answer laid spread before her in the battlefield scars pitted into Celeste's body. Underneath her right breast, a jagged path of white. A knife wound ripped across her flesh. Just underneath her ribs, a mottled patch of grey skin, bumpy like a scab. Blaster fire? Acid? She recognized the three parallel slices across her stomach – the garduk's claw marks – but a further host of raised white streaks stretched across her torso and breasts. She tried to tally them all but they scribbled over one other, like an artist who had restarted on a half-painted canvas, except this image had been dug with knives and blaster bolts.

Celeste draped her arm over her eyes like she'd been dreading – but expecting – this moment. "Please don't look," she pleaded.

Nikki swallowed carefully, while a mix-tape montage of schoolyard taunts played through her mind. Muffin top, flabby thighs, Nikki the Hicky. Nic-hoe, Nic-hoe, all full of dough!

Her blue eyes fell on Celeste and her agony. She'd never made love in all her life, but Nikki immediately knew what needed to be done.

The scar under her breast. Nikki put her lips to its edge and ran her tongue along its length. Celeste's body stiffened in shock. The scabbed patch below her ribs. It tasted like old blood but Nikki bathed it in her saliva all the same, pecking her lips around the edges where the nerves still had sensation.

"Wh- Nicole?"

"Don't talk," she hushed back, clamping her palms over Celeste's forearms to pin her protesting body. "Let me do this."

Every scar, every cavity, every battle wound. Nikki's lips found them all and doted each with a kiss, letting her body whisper the loving words her throat could not find. You're beautiful. You're so beautiful.

The garduk claw marks. Nikki ran her tongue around them in up and down loops. Celeste gave a deep gasp and Nikki felt the thrust of hips grinding against her own. She pushed back, trying to contain the fevered lunges but pressure only spurred on Celeste, made her clench her teeth and buck harder.

Nikki continued her loving ministrations, working her way up Celeste's stomach. She noticed Celeste's forearm straining to clench her breast. Nikki stared, captivated by their mountainous rise
and fall. The sky blue globes darkened around her areola, swelling with firmly puckered nipples that called for her mouth like ripened blueberries. Nikki pounced on the left breast, wrapping her lips around Celeste's ripe fruit and running her tongue over the juicy nub. Celeste's back arched off the bed in reaction. "Yes ... oh yes!"

Nikki dove to work, cupping a breast in each hand and pressing the mounds together, frantically jumping between the swollen tips while her fingers kneaded into the soft tissue. Celeste's hips continued their frantic rocking, only now her legs clamped against her thigh in a desperate bid for friction.

She could feel Celeste's heart jackhammering through her sweaty chest, hear the shallow pants of breaths from her moistened lips and taste the hot friction from between her legs. The alien's mouth hung open. "Anh, anh – oh!" She tried to speak but the sharp cries were all she could gasp, coming together faster, accelerating; climbing in pitch and intensity.

Nikki was familiar with those cries but had never known them from another. Her tongue moved faster, her fingers squeezed tighter and her legs pushed harder, trying to sustain the pressure until finally Celeste pitched back her head, thrust her breasts to the air and let every muscle in her body release a final, prolonged cry of ecstasy.

Collapse. Her body dropped, limp and panting. Nikki realized how fiercely she was panting too. Was that -? Should she go on, had she hit her mark? She put her tongue back to work but Celeste waved her off with a hoarse cough. "Water," she begged, fanning the air. From forehead to navel her skin was slick with sweat.

"Oh, right. Hang on!" Nikki bolted for the kitchen and returned with a tumbler full of ice and water. The cold-weather alien gulped it down greedily and the cool liquid spilled over Celeste's lips and down her neck. Nikki felt her breasts ache with longing as she watched the rivulets run down Celeste's skin. She made two more runs for water before Celeste had her body temperature under control.

"Was that okay?" she asked meekly. Celeste smiled and quirked an eyebrow - as though there could be any question of her satisfaction - and pulled Nikki close so they could nuzzle noses. "You made me feel wonderful."

Nikki blushed. What did you say to a breathy whisper like that? "It was um, good for me too," she added, though her body still hungered for something more than the light tingles their grinding had sent to her extremities.

Celeste snorted. "Rest assured, I haven't finished with you. Ashi yoku cho rokobi."

Nikki blinked. "Come again?"

Celeste smiled, whispering and licking her ear at the same time. "It means, I desire your pleasure."

In a flash Nikki found herself thrown onto the mattress and staring into Celeste's hungry eyes. She tried to sit up but the Norai slammed her back down with a cunning growl.

Nikki's heart pounded a million little anxieties: she looked awful in these clothes, she was sweaty and gross. What was Celeste planning? Would her glasses get in the way? Would it hurt? Celeste shushed her panting fear with a finger on the lip. "Let me be good to you," she whispered, leaning over and inhaling her scent with a predatory purr.

Celeste's top still hung around her elbows and the alien began by pulling her arms free of their
bindings and letting the top puddle down her backside like a skirt. The sweat along her bare, blue skin glistened under the lamplight. She rubbed and squeezed her breasts in show, grinning at the flustered reaction from her lover, and giggling at how Nikki’s hands travelled up her sides to reach the blue mounds for herself. Celeste took her wrists and pinned them to the mattress, licking at Nikki’s lips and rubbing their breasts together.

Slowly, Nikki felt the pressure from Celeste's body ease away as the older woman sat up, and she strained her neck to keep their lips connected. Celeste gave her a last, reassuring lick. "Lie still," she whispered. Her nose trailed down Nikki’s neck and over her shirt, sliding down Nikki’s torso and dotting her with pinprick kisses. Even through her shirt and bra the fluttering touches made Nikki burn. What's she... she's not -?

Celeste's descent detoured at her stomach, lapping the liquid pooled on her belly but then continued further. And when the metal obstruction of her pants’ button halted progress, Celeste looked back up at her and released a knowing growl.

No way... she...

Celeste ripped open her shorts, seized the waistband in both hands and in one fell tug yanked her pants and underwear to her ankles. Another tug stripped her shorts – and socks – off entirely, and Celeste gave a predatory relish in throwing the clothing as far across the room as possible. Nikki squeaked at the cold draft against her nethers.

Oh shit, oh shit...

Celeste's hands delighted in their slow torment of her legs, sliding from her ankles, up her calves; swirling around her thighs and circling her belly. Each rotation dipped lower and lower until Nikki flinched at the electric touch against her bush. This is happening. This is really happening...

Celeste's lips followed suite, kissing and licking their way up her legs. Not just kissing, Nikki reminded herself - marking. Every luxurious stroke of her tongue coated her skin in scented saliva and pheromones, a declaration of ownership: You are mine. And now, Celeste's tongue nibbled its way past her knees, hands pushing apart her fleshy thighs as she prepared to claim her lover's core.

Oh shit… Nikki gripped the bedsheets like the guardrail on a rollercoaster cart, bracing herself as Celeste took her to the heights of pleasure. She stared, barely believing her eyes as Celeste's lips circled her mound, nipping and pecking at the skin around her labia, hovering close to her swollen clit but never touching. Nikki watched the seductive look in those golden eyes as they met her own orbs, trembling and watering for release.

"May I?" Celeste purred, angling her mouth so the hot breath tickled her wet and aching lips.

Nikki's breath came in staccato gasps; anything more than a mewling pant was agonizing but she reached a hand out over Celeste's palm and squeezed the blue digits in approval. "Kos kan," she panted.

The phrase of welcome. Celeste's eyes widened in surprise, but quickly recovered their devious hunger. The Norai laced her fingers with Nikki's own - they would ride this moment together - and lowered her lips to devour Nikki's world.

Nikki pitched her head back in sweet surrender as she plunged into a sea of pleasure.
Special thanks to King Pepper Steak for beta-reading this chapter. Make sure you check out his juicy stories for Monster Musume / Daily Life with Monster Girls. They do not disappoint!

Also be sure to check out "Falling in Love" by Princess of the Dead Sheep. It's an ambitious Huniepop project that imagines potential endings with each girl. Some of them are happy endings, others are bittersweet, but all of them present very honest and accurate portrayals of the characters we've come to know and love.

If you like what she's written, drop her a kudos or a review. Tell her which ending you most enjoyed, or which girl you'd like to read about next. Audrey and Jessie are already up, but we need you to cheer on the other ten.

As always, thanks for reading!
Sunlight, bringer of screen glare and mortal enemy of all hard-core gamers poked its radiant fingers through the window and went straight for Nikki's eyes.

"Uffh!" Nikki grimaced and squinted against the intrusion - c'mon, five more minutes! - but the damage had been done. Her power button had been pushed, her systems were coming online and her head was filling with awareness. That newfound awareness lead to some pertinent questions, namely -

Um… Where are my pants?

Further questions bunched in her brain like passengers on a rush hour subway: Why were the bedsheets tangled around her bare legs? Why was her body all sore and sticky with sweat? Why was - wait, why couldn't she move? Something was pinning her arms around her chest! She couldn't get up!

Now panicking, Nikki's darted her neck from side to side to get a better view. To her left, the alarm clock. To her right - Oof! Nikki bonked into a face-full of blue alien boobs.

A bemused giggle trickled into her ears. "I see you've awakened."

Nikki craned her eyes up the blue body and the arm draped over her chest like a blanket. Celeste, head propped up on her fist, smiled as she ran a finger over Nikki's sweater. "Good morning."

It took a moment for Nikki to process. Celeste. In her bed. Stripped to the waist and gazing at her with a look of absolute adoration.

"Um, hi..." Nikki blinked and rubbed her eyes, not sure if she was awake any more. "So... last night ...

Celeste's smile widened and she snuggled closer. "You sang for me."

Sang? Nikki's photographic memory finally booted up. Celeste's hands exploring the curves of her body, Celeste's lips devouring every inch of her skin; Celeste's tongue -

Nikki turned away, blushing madly and covering her face. "Oh, um ... wow." Did we really do ... all that?

Celeste's fingers stroked her shoulder. "Are you unwell?"

Nikki turned back. "Hang on, I just --" She touched Celeste's cheek, still warm with affection. Her hand trailed lower, confirming that the soft, pleasant skin matched the sensations in her memory. Celeste flinched as her hand grazed over a scarred and mangled abdomen. So even that was real.

"Sorry," Nikki stammered. "I just wasn't sure ... I mean --" Breathe, Nikki, breathe. "Wow, I just never thought I'd wake up like this."

Celeste smiled in agreement. "It feels unreal," she echoed. "Waking in such a state of happiness." The Norai nuzzled her neck. "Have I satisfied you, Nicole?"

Nikki tapped her chin in mock thought. "Let me think... I got to spend the night with a beautiful, badass bounty hunter from outer space, I cashed in my V-card, and now I'm waking up next to the
most amazing girlfriend ever." She pecked Celeste on the lips. "Yeah, I'd say I'm awesome."

"Girlfriend?" Celeste frowned at her choice of words. "I hardly think last night qualifies as friendly activities."

Nikki laughed. "Yeah, I guess it's kind of a lousy term." She scooted closer, enveloping Celeste in her arms and legs. "How about … My lover? My mate? Her eyes flashed with inspiration. "My Valkyrie! Yeah, that has to be the most awesome nickname ever! They're like these super cool warrior women from human folklore."

"Valkyrie…" Celeste tested the syllables across her tongue. "I could enjoy that, chiletto."

Nikki frowned. "Chiletto?"

"Hmm… Chila are a winged species native to Tendricide. They resemble your Earth 'birds'. Chiletto is the name we give to their infant form. When they hatch, so tiny, wide-eyed and covered in soft down feathers, you cannot find a more precious sight." Celeste kissed her neck in summary. "My chiletto."

"Hey, how come you get to be the kick-ass warrior and I'm just a fuzzy little bird?"

Celeste looked at her with a devious grin. "Because when you stroke the feathers of a Chila hatchling they release the most glorious melodies." With a growl Celeste rolled over and pinned her against the mattress. "Shall I make you sing again, my chiletto?"

Yes, Nikki's body panted. Yes, yes, a thousand times, yes! But when Celeste leaned in to kiss her lips they were interrupted by a rude gurgle that drew both their eyes to Nikki's stomach. Nikki blushed.

"Um, I should probably get some breakfast first…"

Standing across from Celeste in her galley kitchen, nibbling on a pop tart with nothing but a baggy sweater to protect her modesty, Nikki's thoughts drifted back to high school phys-ed. Of all her classes, Nikki had held a special loathing for gym and the public shaming circle that was the girls change room. At the start of class she'd dash in and change ahead of the crowds; when the PE instructor whistled game over, she'd linger and clean up oh so slowly, the last to enter. All to ensure no one glimpsed the flabby skin beneath her clothes, or the acne crawling up her back. She knew very well how awful she looked and reminders were redundant, thank you very much.

So what bizarre world had she entered where her she was suddenly the girl who stole your breath away? As Celeste ate up spoonfuls of yogurt, her golden eyes feasted on the sight of her barely clothed lover like she was a centerfold pin-up. Nikki could feel Celeste's eyes roving over the hem of her sweater like an alien spotlight. Her top was just long enough to provide cover but every time she moved or shifted, the flash of hips and butt sent Celeste purring like a hungry cat.

Her bounty hunter looked perfect as always. Of her alien evening gown only the leather dress shorts remained, so she'd buttoned one of Nikki's night shirts over her chest. Combined with that translation collar around her neck like a black choker, she was a mouth-watering sight.

She makes it look so effortless, Nikki pouted. That perfectly toned body, the hypnotic strut of her legs; even her mane of bed-head looked wild and inviting. It was baffling how her Valkyrie had eyes only for her flawed and flabby human body.
Maybe I can be sexy too, she thought. Maybe there was nothing to it, just a bit of attitude.

Nikki let a piece of her breakfast pastry crumble to the floor. "Oops," she declared, casually as possible, "Better pick that up."

It sounded brilliant in her mind – she'd bend over from the hips, let her sweater slide up and flash Celeste an eyeful of her bare assets. Yeah, that would give her Valkyrie something to purr over. Nikki got as far as bending when her spine protested with a sharp crack.

"Ow, ow, ow!" Nikki staggered forward, banging her face against the fridge and landing butt-first on the cold kitchen tiles. Celeste was at her side in a heartbeat.

"Are you injured?"

Her nose was bleeding from the face-plant but some paper towels made it manageable. "Ahm o-day," Nikki snuffled. But there goes my pride. How were her joints this stiff? Did Dance Dance Revolution with Tiffany not count as exercise? Were those high scores and sweat-stained shirts all for nothing?

At least she'd earned a nice consolation prize. Several of Celeste's shirt buttons had popped open when she'd bent down, giving her a nice view of a toned, alien tummy. Celeste noticed her gaze and moved to button up. Nikki stopped her hands.

"Can I see?"

Celeste looked away as Niki's fingers explored the many slashes and scars ripped into the blue skin. Her breath hitched when human hands traced a thick scar across her belly.

"Sorry," Nikki winced. "Do they still hurt?"

"Not physically," Celeste admitted. "Simply painful reminders. Hunts where I failed to react swiftly; confrontations where I thought I could let down my guard." She tugged the shirt together, closing the curtain on her past.

"Some of them are kinda neat. Like tattoos," Nikki offered. "Or maybe they're warning signs. This is what I lived through so you'd better not mess with me."

"Or testaments that the Night Wraith can be bested," Celeste countered. "But you're sweet to think otherwise." The grim look of her face had eased slightly. "Have you recovered?"

The bleeding had stopped but dried blood stained her hands and upper lip. "I should shower, I guess."

Nikki started down the hall. The click of alien hooves trailed behind.

"Um, the stall's kinda small," Nikki explained.

"Are you certain?" Celeste returned with a coy smile. Her fingers popped the remaining buttons on her shirt and let the top slide down one shoulder. Nikki sucked in a sharp gasp at the sexy little teaser trailer.

"Well, when you put it that way…"
Steam wafted from the shower like a mist of fragrant incense as they took turns undressing each other. Celeste's borrowed top, Nikki's baggy sweater and bra; their last defenses dropped to the floor in a pile. Nikki crouched on her knees so she could pull down her Valkyrie's form-fitting shorts and complete the collection. The alien panties underneath weren't all that different from Earth's offerings. Decorated with spiral lace and hugging Celeste's cheeks like a second skin, Nikki took her time tracing over and admiring the delicate undergarments.

*She probably put these on special for me.* Lacy alien silk didn't exactly scream 'practical' for a criminal-hunting mercenary.

Celeste's fingers stroked her hair, urging her forward. Nikki hooked her fingers around the waistband, her smile brimming with excitement, but also a touch of trepidation.

*Please don't have teeth,* she prayed. *Please don't have –*

"Oh, neat!" It wasn't exactly the sexiest of exclamations, but the fuzzy hair trimmed into a five-point star was too adorable not to gush over. Nikki ran her fingers through the dark curls. "I tried shaving once, but I just cut myself bad. My um, parents had to take me to the hospital when the bleeding wouldn't stop..." She was so thankful Celeste seemed to gloss over these embarrassing confessions.

"Stand up. Let me look at you, chiletto."

They stood and stepped back, laying their bodies bare to one another. Nikki's arms swung restlessly at her sides. "Well... here we are," she mock chuckled. Under Celeste's intense gaze, the urge to cross her legs and hug her chest was overpowering.

Celeste took a grinning step forward. "My wonderful chiletto." Nikki squirmed as blue fingers tickled the mane between her legs. Well she could play that game too.

"My big, strong Valkyrie," Nikki sang in return, reaching up to trace her lover's swollen nipples. *Being totally naked ... it's kinda thrilling.* She could feel the goosebumps running down her stomach, her body bubbling in anticipation of Celeste's touch. Celeste took the first step closer, but they both took it in turn to run their fingers down one another's arms and chest, delighting in the cool, pleasant touch that sent them both grinning and giggling with excitement.

Feeling daring, Nikki trailed her fingers down Celeste's pubic hair and further still, her breath hitching at the slick, sticky warmth between her Valkyrie's bare legs.

Celeste smiled viciously and leaned into the touch, rocking her hips so her slit rubbed against Nikki's fingers. "You do such incredible things to my body, chiletto." When she was satisfied with their foreplay, Celeste took her by the hand and led her into the curtains of steam.

Last night Nikki thought she'd hit peak paradise during her first time with Celeste, but stepping into the shower she realized she'd only reached a false summit. There was so much more her Valkyrie had to share.

After they'd had their fill of kissing and cuddling under the shower head Celeste picked up the bottle of body lotion and squirted the gel over Nikki's chest and back, rubbing her skin until it was covered in a foamy lather. She felt pampered; spoiled by all the attention Celeste lavished upon her: massaging her legs from hip to toe, kneading her fingers into every stiff muscle of her back and gently soothing her scalp with shampoo. It was like she'd spent the week holding back all this pent-up affection and now it came gushing out in personal massages.

Nikki did her best to return the pleasure tenfold. *Mental note: wet, soapy boobs are the best!* She
couldn't get enough of the way her hands glided over Celeste's oily skin or how shiny those breasts looked under her hands. She reminded herself to wash evenly, but her hands kept drifting in for another rub of her Valkyrie's chest. Whenever Celeste closed her eyes and swayed her head in a dreamy motion, Nikki knew she'd found a sweet spot. She'd squeeze harder, coaxing a soft moan from Celeste’s throat.

“More,” Celeste groaned, and when the lavish body rub pressed the Norai past her limit, Nikki found herself roughly mashed between her lover and the glass stall, gasping and holding on for dear life as Celeste’s fingers plunged between her legs.

It was a full body assault and she groped at Celeste's perfect breasts to urge her on: the frustrated growls nipping at her ear, the cool glass pressing into her back; the warm cascade of water beading over her skin like a thousand phantom hands, caressing and engulfing her body in heat while Celeste pushed her closer to the edge.

"Oh shit!" Nikki gasped, grabbing at Celeste's shoulders as she neared her mark. The sharp tug off-balanced the Norai. Both their feet slipped on the wet floor and they toppled with a shriek and a bang, foreheads clunking on the way down.

"Oww... I think I'm falling for you," Nikki grinned once the ache in her head had subsided. Celeste probably didn't get the pun, but she burst into laughter anyway, resting her forehead on Nikki's shoulder as they descended from the wild high. Her orgasm had slipped from reach but Nikki hardly minded. Just being with Celeste was pleasure enough.

Naked and content, they nested on the bed like a set of Russian stacking dolls: Celeste leaning back on a pile of pillows, Nikki curled happily between her legs, and her laptop carefully perched on her knees. Nikki browsed through her fan art portfolio, showing off the various monster girls and fursonas she'd drawn over the years.

Click. A blue-haired falcon girl with wings spread behind her muscular arms.

"Hmm… A Shen-to, but they only possess two upper body limbs. Also, the feather patterns are concentrated on their backs and arms."

Click. A scorpion girl with a segmented stinger tail and generous breasts.

"A … Chu'rai matriarch? But their bodies are completely covered in exoskeleton."

Click. Celeste drew back at the sketch of an upright cow girl.

"Why does she have mammary glands on her chest and stomach?"

"Ugh, don't you start on that too!"

So far, any resemblance her characters bore to actual alien species had been coincidental. Nikki intended to change that.

"How about this one?" Navigating to a separate, private folder, Nikki double-clicked the sole image, a file labelled JESSIE. Her screen filled with the pencil crayon portrait of a masked, pink-haired human with dragonfly wings.

Even now, looking at this sketch of her old love fairy filled Nikki with so many conflicting emotions.
It was hard to stay mad at her; so much good had come in spite of Jessie's bullying and badgering. She'd met Anton, she'd come clean about being gay, and when she'd finally rejected the love fairy she'd felt a swell of pride for finally standing up to a tormentor. If anything, Nikki was mad at herself for following Jessie like a lovesick puppy, performing tricks for a glimmer of affection.

"Anything?" Nikki glanced up at Celeste, surprised to find her eyes wide and startled. The Norai picked up the laptop and held it close to her face. Nikki waited for the surprise gasps. She didn't expect Celeste to hiss like a cat with its hackles up.

"Cupidaemon," she snarled.

Nikki tensed. "So you've met them?"

"I am familiar with them. Officially, the Confederacy denies their existence, but I have seen and heard enough to know better." Celeste tossed the laptop to the mattress, eager to be rid of the portrait.

"Cupidaemon are extra-dimensional beings, their technology advanced beyond anything seen throughout the galaxy. It's unknown how long ago they began visiting – millennia, perhaps – but their species found a way to step between the fabrics of our realities. They 'phase' into our dimension."

Nikki recalled Jessie flying through her apartment walls as though they were hologram illusions. She tried to imagine the fairy rippling through the walls of the universe itself to visit the blue Earth.

"Cupidaemon never make contact with governments or whole civilizations but numerous worlds have recorded their visitations in legends or folklore: phantasmal 'fairies of love' with shimmering wings and a fragrance of sugar; kind-hearted spirits who appear before pathetic or pitiful individuals and bring them good fortune."

Pathetic? C'mon, I wasn't - Nikki bit her tongue. Well, maybe I was…

Celeste continued. "The stories vary but one element is always consistent: cupidaemon encourage their hosts to partner and mate. They want us to breed, like cattle."

Nikki winced, thinking back to Jessie's matchmaker games. "You make them sound super creepy. If they're that advanced maybe they just want to help us?"

"When the slavers first invaded Tendricide, my ancestors tried to rationalize it as well. They claimed that we were being visited by the gods; that only the sinful and wicked among us were being 'spirited away'." Celeste shook her head at the foolish notions.

"Every planet is a self-sufficient ecosystem," she declared. "The only reason a species travels beyond its home environment is to take the resources of another. To these 'fairies', our galaxy is simply a means to some insidious end." Suddenly, Celeste was glaring at her. "Where did you see this creature?"

"N-nowhere," Nikki lied. "It's just something I drew a while back. The look in her eyes! She and her love coach had parted on poor terms, but she didn't wish the fury in Celeste's eyes on even her worst enemy.

The hunter mulled over her explanation and settled. "Forgive me. It is a remarkable resemblance."

"No, it's cool." Nikki leaned back and though it over. Not only was there a galaxy full of inhabited planets and a government of cooperating species, but there were beings from other dimensions too!
"It's all so amazing," she said. "I can't wait to go out there and see it for myself."

"Go out?" The words rolled off Celeste's lips like a joke. "Your planet is an Idyl world. Even if travel were permitted, you would be an undocumented species. Planetary border crossings would never allow you surface access. You'd put yourself at risk of countless diseases, to say nothing of infecting the inhabitants with your own bacteria."

"But … you're okay."

"Anti-bacterial injections, customized for Norai physiology. There is no human equivalent." Seeing her crestfallen gaze, Celeste added, "You might be permitted on some of the orbital space stations. Some are continents in their own right. Lifeless, metal land masses…"

"I get it," Nikki said curtly. The stars were locked off for a groundling like her. She managed a smile, though. "I guess I'll have to settle for you staying with me."

"Remain on Earth…" Celeste looked to the star-blocking ceiling, trying to envision that future. "What would I do here?"

Nikki reared back. "That's the point – you don't have to do anything! You can stay with me and be safe. You don't have to risk your life hunting criminals!"

"Nicole… I enjoy my work. The thrill of a chase, the satisfaction of capturing my target; the freedom to go and do as I please. It's not an obligation, chiletto. This is the life I've chosen."

"Fine, then. I mean, we have bail bondsmen here on Earth. You could hunt down our criminals!"

"How?" Celeste countered.

"It's easy; all you'd need is …" Oh. She'd probably have to register as a state bounty hunter. That meant photo IDs, personal records, birth certificates, social insurance numbers.

An eerie silence claimed the room, and terror like a dark, smothering blanket forced Nikki to lay her cheek against Celeste's chest. She needed to hear her Valkyrie's heartbeat, to know she wasn't alone. Were we really that stupid? she wondered. Had neither of them thought this through?

Maybe we just didn't want to think of it. The bills from the vespa rental, all the specialty restaurants – Celeste was eating a hole into her thinly stretched budget. Against her cheek, Celeste's skin was damp and smelled of perspiration. How desperately would she sweat in the spring heat, or the summer?

What if this is our last night together?

"Celeste," she whispered, "what's the word you use when you really like something?"


"No, I mean, when there's something so important to you that you can't go without. When it's gone you feel sick; when it's near you want to cry because you love it so much."

Under her cheek Celeste gave a long exhale. "Iko. Why?"

Gathering her courage, Nikki turned around and sat in Celeste's lap, feeling the heat from her sex rub directly against her own. Carefully, she brushed the silver hair over Celeste's horns and ears aside, willing her hands to stay steady. It was laughable - they'd known each other so intimately but this
tiny act felt so personal, so nerve wracking, like a first kiss all over again. Her fingers reached for Celeste's ears, to remove her translator earpieces and set them carefully on the bed. Staring directly into Celeste's eyes she whispered,

"Ashi iko cho, Celeste."

Then she watched and waited, feeling like the stupidest child ever.

Celeste stared at her with open lips and glassy eyes. She was a galaxy renowned bounty hunter, a scourge of the underworld, but confronted with four whispered words, she struggled to breathe. She reached to her throat, to unclip the translation collar around her neck. It fell through her shaky fingers and dropped to the floor. Her voice was scratchy and accented without the device, but she forced the words from her throat:

"Ahy wahnt to staye wih yew, Neecole."

Relief. Nikki hugged and buried her face in Celeste's hair, shuddering out her utter relief and joy.

"This is your home," she declared, "and maybe you can't stay here all the time. Maybe you have to travel for work or leave when it's too warm, but this is where you come back, okay? This is where you're safe. This is where I'll wait for you."

"Home," Celeste repeated, fighting the tears from her eyes. "Yew ahre mhy home," and she sealed the vow with a kiss.

Far away in Glenberry's crumbling downtown, a pair of black heels clacked angrily down the sidewalk, pausing to appraise a fenced-off square of rubble and the uniformed cop guarding the site.

"Hey, are you a fairy?"

The officer turned with a twitch in her eye. Bad enough she'd pulled night shift babysitting the demolition wreckage from thrill-seeking teens. She didn't need lip from some gothed-up, drugged-out mall brat wandering the streets.

"Pick your next words very carefully, kid."

The pig-tailed princess snorted back. "Not talking to you, jackass. Look, tell Kyu that I, like, hopes she gets better or whatever? And tell her I don't need her help anymore; that I've got my life all figured out." Her eyes grew solemn. "I was like, so obsessed with finding a boyfriend that I lost track of what was really important. I forgot about the family I already had."

An evil gleam split her lips. "This weekend, my cousin's visiting from out of town! I'm gonna take him to the Fireworks Festival, get him totally sloshed and mack on him! That'll show my mom!"

The goth brat flashed a devil sign and skipped merrily on her way. The officer shook her head – kids these days – and slunk behind the fence for a cigarette break. She paid no attention to the lavender-haired girl standing behind her – not to her ancient dress, her insect wings, or the fact that she barged through the girl's body like it was a ghostly projection.

The love fairy also ignored the bodily intrusion as she finished waving to the black-haired human. "Such a strange girl," she hummed to herself, but strange was standard for a Kyu client. Her fairy wings puttered her over to the building-sized pile of scrap metal.
"Find it, Ginger?"

Like a diver surfacing from an underwater expedition, a red-haired fairy phased through the rubble with a gasp.

"Yeah, I got it, Cicely. The ship's about seven feet below. Banged up but still intact. We can let them excavate for another day or two; then we'll have to step in and grab that junker."

Cicely nodded as she served tea from a flower-studded thermos. "What's our story – FBI? CIA?"

"Why don't we say it's a joint investigation? That always gets the little earthworms squirming!" Ginger downed her tea like a shooter and slammed the cup angrily on the ground.

"Saturn's shlong, how'd I get stuck on survey duty?" She gestured to the bloody gauze wrapped around her leg. "I get chewed up by a space dog, nearly amputated, and management just throws us back out like it's a paper cut! Meanwhile, Sugardust gets a few scrapes and it's a hero's welcome for the pink puke!"

Cicely frowned. "The poor thing had more than just 'a few scrapes', Ginny. And she did come up with the plan to use the hunter."

"Ugh, don't remind me. Damn deviant probably stuck her tongue in an electrical socket just to earn some sick days!"

The pile at their back groaned and shook. Cicely startled but Ginger waved it off. "Never mind that. The foundation's still shifting so it'll keep grinding overnight." A smirk. "The look on your face, though. S'like you were one of those human bimbos in a monster movies! Eek, it's gonna get me!"

"That's enough, Ginny," Cicely pouted. She really didn't care for this planet's darkness.

"I could totally see it! Poor Cissy, quivering alone. The big monster jumps out and you'd scream, like this!" A falsetto shriek ripped the sky.

"Don't act so high and mighty! You'd be shaking too, and you'd scream loud as a baby hydra!" Cicely acted out her own terrified screech and soon the two were laughing and snorting, amusing themselves with play-screams as the debris at their back continued to quake and shift.

When a scaly fist shattered through the rubble, neither fairy could say who shrieked the loudest.
Fireworks and Fairies

Nikki spent the next two days locked inside her apartment, basking in the joy that was her Valkyrie. She cashed in her sick days, she shut off her phone and she pretended that there was nothing to the world but four walls and Celeste. If the future would force her alien lover to leave the Earth, then they would exist in the eternal now. They held each other, made love with all the tenderness they could muster, and when their bodies were spent and exhausted, they continued their affections in hushed whispers:

*Your eyes sparkle with the radiance of a rare, blue moon. Your lips call to me like water melted in the dead of Tendricide's darkest winters. I desire to drink deeply from them.*

*You are so much hotter than all the Nintendo princesses combined. And I'm including human! Midna on that list, okay? God, you boobs are so perfect!*

When the outside world came knocking for them, it did so with the sound of explosions.

"*Te nai!*" They were playing video games when Celeste tackled her to the floor and covered her body like a shield. The life-saving lunge was flattering, but -

"Celeste, it's just fireworks…"

She took her Valkyrie to the window and pulled back the blinds. Brightly coloured starburst pops and fizzlers decorated the sky over the marina district.

"It's the fireworks festival." Nikki explained. "It's this annual cash grab by the city – they hold a big tournament of fireworks displays and it's supposed to get everyone down to the carnival grounds so they can spend their money on old, rickety rides, rigged games and junk food."

Celeste's eyes sparkled. "It looks incredible."

Nikki gave a sarcastic snort. *Please, I've seen better carnivals in my video game-* She held that thought. *Fireworks. Carnival rides. A pretty girl inviting her to sneak away together. It's just like the Golden Saucer,* she gasped. "Oh my god we seriously need to go. Now!"

Celeste gave her a crooked grin. "I would happily accompany you this instant, chiletto." The Norai slipped behind her, bending down to nibble her ear and hug her bare chest.

"But perhaps we should first locate our clothes."

Down in the streets, no one batted an eye at Celeste's blue and white alien cocktail dress, other than to admire the detail in her costume. The Norai wore no make-up over her frosty skin, no covering over her silver hair and horns, and no one paid her any mind. Half the crowd was dressed as bizarrely as she – cowboys, skeletons, pirates and animal suits paraded past the alien mercenary.

After all, it was part of the celebrations. Everyone came to the fireworks festival in costume.

They stood at ground zero for the festivities: the Corkscrew Carnival fairgrounds, a year-long amusement park built at the edge of the marina. Celeste rotated on the spot, drinking in the extreme overstimulation of neon lights, carnival game stalls and whooshing roller coasters. Overhead, the
tinny, organ grinder music piped through the loudspeakers was accompanied by a barrage of crackling fireworks. Every gunshot pop and burst of light sent the crowds cheering, but they only made Celeste grip her hand a little tighter.

"You okay?"

"Fine," Celeste assured her, but her breaths were far from a resting pace. "I realize they're simply decorative combustions, but my reflexes…"

Another explosive bang cut her thought short. Nikki wrapped herself around Celeste's arm to ground the alien.

"Do you wanna go back and grab a gun?"

That got Celeste to smirk, and she raised her empty hands in surrender. "No, my behavior is entirely irrational. You were right, Nicole: there is nothing for me to fear on this planet. I need not be an armed mercenary, or the Koru-Shikai. Tonight, I can merely be Celeste."

Then she put on that hungry grin that never failed to make Nikki shiver, leering deviously as she gathered her human lover into her arms. "Though if you feel unsafe, chiletto, you need only come closer."

"Celeste…" she whined, though her heart raced happily. They were in the middle of a crowd of sight-seers, after all. "They'll stare…"

"How could they help but stare when you appear so heated?"

Nikki groaned. "Okay, first of all, it's 'hot', as in you look so hot. Second –" She paused to reach on her tiptoes and peck Celeste's cheek, "You're gonna have to tone it down until we get home tonight."

Celeste purred and licked her cheek. No promises. "You look so desirable in those garments."

For once, Nikki had to agree. She'd torn her closet upside-down looking for something that didn't scream 'shut-in loser', finally remembering the little pink boutique bags that Audrey had brought last weekend. Inside, she found a beautiful, knee-length black dress with a wide collar. The fabric over her shoulders and forearms was sheer and see-through but it had full-length sleeves and a belt to bring out her hips. It was like an upscale version of her baggy sweaters, one that showed off the best of her curves and sent Celeste growling in approval.

And it came from Audrey. The diva had even picked out matching flats and a tasteful gold necklace carrying – get this – a Legend of Zelda Triforce pendant from a hobby shop! Nikki had been dreading a frilly Lolita dress with more layers and ribbons than a wedding cake; who knew that Smellrose would actually go out and buy something that made her look pretty?

"Nikki? And Celeste! Oh, hey guys!"

The pair turned to the upbeat greeting. "Tiffany?" Nikki exclaimed. "Oh, hey!"

The cheerleader fawned at the two. "Aww, that dress is super-cute, Nikki! And Celeste, you're a… blue, alien goat-lady? Oh, this is another video game character, right?"

"Yeah, let's go with that, your majesty." Tiffany had to be a Disney princess, what with that sparkling, white ballroom gown, gloves and delicate tiara. No big stretch for little-miss perfect. "We figured we'd come and check out the festival. As a date," Nikki grinned.
Tiffany glanced between the two of them. "Oh! So you're ... well good for you!" It was an awkward congratulations, so Tiffany took her friend into a big hug to make her message clear.

"Sorry, you just ... Caught me off-guard, but you two look so adorable together. I'm excited for you. Are you happy, Nikki?"

"I'm so happy," she nodded. "And guess what? We had sex. In the shower!"

Tiffany just stared with a sour lemon face.

"Um, sorry. Too much?"


Was she in trouble? Wanting to get to the bottom of this mystery, Nikki gave Celeste some cash to try a shooting gallery booth and let the blonde pull her aside.

"Nikki, I've been trying to reach you all week; what happened to your phone?"

"My phone? Oh, I kinda ... shut it off. Yeah..." Since her heart-to-heart with Celeste, Nikki had eliminated everything that might disturb their love nest: phones, e-mail; even her digital alarm clock got unplugged. There'd be no outside distractions in their perfect world.

"Listen, I really need your help: Audrey, did she stop by your place last weekend?"

Thinking nothing of it, Nikki shrugged. "Audrey? Oh yeah, last Sunday she came by with this bullshit apology. I basically slammed the door in her face and told her to screw off."

She expected Tiffany to gasp at her boldness, to whoop and high-five her for slam dunking Smellrose like the piece of trash she was. She never expected the gentle blonde to grab her collar with a fury unbecoming of a princess.

"You!" Tiffany hissed like an alley cat. "You did this to her!"

"Me? Wait, did what?"

"We had an agreement: Audrey was supposed to call me after she went to see you, but she never did! I called, I texted; she didn't even come to classes the next day! I didn't see her until Monday night when I got home from cheer practice." She bit her lip. "Nikki, she was passed out on my doorstep."

Fury. "What the hell did you say to her, Nikki?"

The shock over Audrey's state gave way, and Nikki shoved the blonde off her. Why was she getting chewed out for the bitch's lousy coping skills? "Why's it always my fault, huh? Ever since I came out she's been a god-damn bitch to me! I've done nothing wrong here!"

"You know, you can be every bit as mean as her, Nikki Ann-Marie. Maybe you don't have Audrey's mouth; maybe you don't say it loud like her, but when you bite, you're cruel. Even when someone's
trying to help, you won't even stop to hear them out!"

The hurt look on Tiffany's face. Why did it make her thoughts retreat to that awful night with her love fairy?

"Nikki, you don't know what Audrey's been through these last months. What I put her through," Tiffany choked. "I know Audrey always puts on this tough front, but it's only because she's been hurt so much. Nikki, she needs to know that she can trust people. She needs you."

Silently, she digested all that Tiffany had to say. "I didn't … I mean," she started over. "Well… tell her that … maybe I overreacted. I guess."

"Tell her yourself," Tiffany snapped. "She's right there."

Even with Tiffany's finger guiding her, Nikki had to squint to hunt down … Audrey? No, that couldn't be the loudmouth party girl.

A raven-haired girl stood apart from the crowds, limp and lifeless as a scarecrow among the corn. Black. No highlights, no bows, no braids; just a defeated, dangle-off-the-shoulder black. No party dresses, no extravagant Lolita fashion, just a jacket, a striped top and a stained jean skirt from the aisles of a thrift store. This wasn't Audrey, this was a firecracker that had fizzled out into black chaff.

This new Audrey slumped through the carnival goers without makeup or glitter; not even a purse. Her eyes glazed to her cell phone, pausing only to take the occasional sip from a slushie cup. She wasn't lining up for games or jumping on rides or flirting with the available guys; just putting in the barest effort to stand, shuffle forward and tap at her screen.

A group of laughing middle schoolers bumped into her; Audrey's drink pitched over her shirt. Nikki braced herself for the F-bomb onslaught, but Audrey just rolled her eyes and dabbed at the cold stain with her jacket. She couldn't give a damn.

Nikki stepped close. "Audrey?" The raven-haired corpse stiffened, but turned. Her eyes were resigned and weary.

"Oh. It's you."

It was the shortest quip to ever pass through Audrey's lips. Nikki soldiered on.

"What happened to your hair?"

"Oh, this?" Audrey flipped her colourless fingernails through her black mane. "Yeah, it's my new style. I call it Zero Fucks, because apparently when you don't give a shit, everything good just falls into your lap." She retreated to her mobile game, grunting with frustration when she hit a game over. "These candy games are so god-damn cheap. How do you play this shit all night?

"Wait … are you trying to be like me?"

"Tiffany said you were in the hospital. That you ODeed on Prozac or something."

Audrey raised a glowering eye. "Tiffany needs to know when to shut up. And it was Symbyax," she added. "Anti-depressant my ass. I still felt like shit after the first, so I kept going. Should've known. Never did anything to help mother."

She continued mashing violently at her phone, but her focus was shot. Stamping angrily, Audrey buried the phone in her pocket and fished out her cigarettes and lighter. An angry click, a greedy
inhale. Nikki coughed at the smoke blown into her face.

"What're you even doing here? Shouldn't you be at home, getting finger-fucked by your perfect, dyke girlfriend?"

Nikki's cheek twitched. "Why do you have to be such a bitch all the time?"

"Fuck you," Audrey retorted. "You roll out of bed looking like horse shit; you act like a fucking pill and you still get all these hot guys and girls lining up to drill you! Anton, Celeste! I just –"

Audrey's hands fell to her sides in defeat. "I work my ass off trying to look good, trying to be fun; trying to be somebody worth a damn! The one time I find someone, it turns out he's a fucking rapist! I fucking work for this shit, and I've still got nothing!"

Her burning cigarette stabbed the air like a knife. "I'm done. I'm done with everything! Fuck you and your fucking blind luck, Nikki Ann-Marie!"

Nikki's jaw dropped in disgust. "Luck? You're always Miss Perfect – perfect clothes, perfect skin!"

Even with her cheeks and eyelids scrubbed of eyeliner and rouge, Audrey still looked naturally pretty. "You do all this stupid shit and smoke all these stupid drugs and nothing bad ever happens to you! You –"

They were doing it again – provoking each other. Yelling and hating and accusing. She could keep it going, Nikki realized. Keep up this burning hatred and rage at the shadow of a girl she thought she knew.

The thought made her sick. Sick and tired.

"Hey Audrey?" She exhaled. Blew out all her frustration and tossed out something new.

"Thanks," she grunted. "For the dress, I mean. It fits nice. And Celeste really likes it. Thank you."

Audrey took a long and thoughtful drag of her cigarette, saying nothing. Nikki wondered if she was even coherent enough to hear her.

"Whatever," she finally grunted, turning to walk away.

*I tried.* Warily, Nikki turned as well, finding Tiffany and Celeste watching from the sidelines. Tiffany approached first, touching her shoulder in sympathy.

"Just go," Nikki sighed. She wasn't mad, not really. "She needs you more right now."

Tiffany nodded. She picked up her skirts and hustled after the ruined Audrey.

Celeste came to her from behind and pulled her into a tight hug. "You did all that you could, chiletto. Some are so consumed by their beliefs, they can never be reached."

She said nothing, just lost herself as Celeste's fingers combed through her hair.

"Do you desire to return home, Nicole?"

Nikki shook her head. "No. We came here to have fun; she can't take that." Spinning around, a fresh sparkle overtook her eyes.

"C'mon, we're gonna get some cotton candy, and then we're gonna loot the shooting gallery booths." An alien sharpshooter and the Galaxy Arcade's light-gun master gamer. Those carnies wouldn't
know what hit them! "And then, we're gonna ride the Ferris wheel, and we're gonna make out under the fireworks 'til they kick us off!"

Celeste gave her sexiest tiger growl. Hand in hand they set out to conquer the fair grounds. Nikki's eyes drank in the colourful fireworks, and her palms squeezed Celeste tight while she breathed the sweet and heady scent of -

*Sugar*? Nikki froze and darted her head. That smell... Like an intoxicating cocktail of all the sweetest chocolates, syrups and honeys, stirred together into an inescapable lure. She hadn't breathed that scent since -

There, ducking behind a corner booth! A head of pink hair, sparkling skin and - no, it couldn't be - crystalline insect wings.

*Jessie*?

She looked like Jessie, but the mischievous green eyes that winked at her belonged to Kyu Jones, the cop Rondarr attacked. She even gave Kyu's same loony grin, waving a handkerchief to catch her attention. "Hey, Champ! Hey, listen!"

Dear lord, was she quoting Navi from Ocarina of Time? What was going on here?

"Chiletto?" Celeste startled when she broke their grip, but Nikki paid no attention. A love fairy was calling to her. She had to get to the bottom of this!

"Chiletto!" Celeste's cloven feet clomped after her as she jogged deeper into the carnival. Nikki kept her eyes locked on Kyu, flitting ahead like a sparkling, pink firefly. Had she looked carefully at the costumed party-goers she passed, Nikki might have noticed certain girls dressed like police cadets take an interest in her wild running.

Each one locked on to her fleeing body like a security camera. Each one allowed Celeste to dash past them, and then each one marched in pursuit.
The Goddess

Like a hurried white rabbit, the love fairy kept one step out of Nikki’s reach, skipping gaily through the carnival wonderland while she huffed in hot pursuit. The winged girl seemed to know exactly how fast Nikki could run, pausing at certain corners so she could catch up or pulsing pink light from her body when Nikki lost track. *She wants me to follow; she wants to tell me something!*

Nikki moved on autopilot, intent on activating this NPC quest, never really concerning herself that she was leaving the colourful lights and music of the carnival behind her; that she was jogging further into the darkness of the night.

She’d never really read the cautionary tales about fairies luring children out into the woods.

The chase ended down one of the lamp-lit piers stretching into the ocean. This was one of the loading docks for the water taxis. Normally a haven for couples stealing off for a make-out session or carnival staff ducking off for a smoke break, now it was eerily deserted – just the wash of ocean waves against the pillars and a pink beacon waiting at the platform's edge.

It was chilly, but Nikki moved forward unafraid. The fairy beckoned her forward like a carnival Barker. "Step right up, folks! Come see the amazing fairy girl! Not too close, ladies – she likes to bite!"

"Kyu…” The cop, Tiffany's roommate, Rondarr's kidnapping victim. "It's really you, isn't it?"

Up close Nikki could confirm that same cheeky grin, and those green apple eyes ripe with mischief. The pink hair bundled up into pigtails was new, as were the butterfly wings, but it really was Kyu! "You are a fairy!"

"And you are so lucky I'm not a dude, Champ."

Kyu was dolled up for the carnival in a tight, strapless dress with arm warmers. Nikki couldn't quite pin down the colour: one minute the dress shimmered blue; the next, a band of pink rippled through the fabric like gel in a lava lamp. A layered skirt fanned around her hips like flower petals.

"Are you okay? You're not hurt?" Kyu had dotted her skin with little pink heart tattoos, each one masking a bruise she'd suffered under Rondarr. Her left arm warmer was also bulkier. It was covering a medical cast.

A slender finger shushed her lips. "Shh, questions later, just … oh, lemmie look at you!" The fairy stepped back, waving her arms up and down Nikki's figure and gushing like a proud fashion designer.

"Champ, you are all sorts of sexylicious tonight! That dress, those legs, and you are lookin' so fine without that virginity! Oh don't go stammering on me; I can smell it on ya. Snuck your fingers into a nice, warm blueberry pie, eh, eh? Girl, you are gonna be one of the freaky ones, I just know it!" The fairy paused to boogie around to an old Rick James tune. "*She's a super freak! Super freak! She's su-pah frea-kay!*

Then she sighed and slumped over the railing.

"You should've stayed with your lady-friend…”

*Huh?* Where did that ominous statement come from? Before Nikki could ask, Kyu popped into her
face, manic once more.

"Hey, say something funny! Do that nerd thing where you're all oblivious, like 'Kyu, I don't really like pie.' Say it for me? Here, I'll set you up: Hey Champ, you like pie?"

"I – I don't really like –"

"Well your lady-friend likes yours! Oh snap! Walked right into that one, Champ! I got ya good! I got ya…"

Then she pulled Nikki tight to sob on her shoulders.

"Oh Zeus… I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Kyu, wha-?"

"Just … promise me you won't argue with her, okay? Now look sharp; I'm about to get interrupted."

"Inter -?"

"Chiletto!" Celeste pounded down the pier, resting a hand on Nikki's shoulder while she caught her breath. "Why did you run? I worried –" Celeste stopped and narrowed her eyes at Kyu. Her nostrils twitched at the scent of sugar. "Nicole, who is this?"

"Hey, Bluebell. Really oughta keep your birdy on a shorter leash." Straightening up with sudden professionalism, Kyu snapped her fingers and muttered to the air.

"We got 'em."

Nikki startled. At her side, a uniformed police girl appeared out of thin air. Behind Celeste, a second cadet materialized, blocking the path back to the carnival. The hunter hissed and pulled her close as an entire squad of police women encircled them. One by one, their blue uniforms rippled like liquids and melted away, replaced by flowing gowns and dresses in Kyu's flower petal design. Long hair in pastel pink, lilac purple and electric blue shook free from their caps, while insect wings like panes of coloured glass spread from their shoulders. Nikki gasped - Love Fairies! - but Celeste grit her teeth and snarled a more sinister name.

"Cupidaemons…"

They didn't look like cops anymore, but she and Celeste still got the criminal treatment. Each fairy took a shooting pose – arms raised and purple spray bottles aimed.

"Hands where we can see them, Norai."

"Don't move, Norai!"

Nikki yelped as she was yanked against Kyu's chest, a spray vial pressed to her temple. "We only wanna talk, Bluebell. So hands up and I let her go." In Nikki's ear: "I'm sorry. Don't argue with her. Please don't argue with her."

Celeste glared at the ring of fairies in their flower dresses like they were weeds to be trampled. Nikki had no doubt she could pluck the wings off each and every single sprite – and behind their magic potions, the fairies trembled with that same knowledge – but they'd found her weak point and Celeste reluctantly obeyed, raising her hands. Kyu gave her a shove, and Nikki stumbled forward to join Celeste in the center of the ring.
"Cupidaemons … they do exist! But … Nicole, what are they doing on your planet?"

"The better question," a new, regal voice demanded, "is what you're still doing on my planet."

Like dogs hearing their master's whistle, the fairies stiffened, then each took a knee and bowed reverently. Even Kyu dropped her nose to the ground, a nervous tremor consuming her butterfly wings.

"Don't mind the theatrics," the new voice intoned, cold and dismissive. "They just like keeping their wings attached."

She looked and dressed human, clacking her spiked heels down the pier in a tall and regal catwalk strut. With her immaculately white pants suit and the golden jewellery clinking along her wrists and neck, she might have been a business leader or politician. Except for the mint-green shade of her hair she could have blended seamlessly with the carnival crowds. That, and the mask. Her face was hidden behind a jeweled theatre mask, a relic transported from an ancient Greek amphitheatre, except instead of portraying exaggerated joy or sadness, the golden visage kept its mouth to a thin line, eyes narrowed in aloof judgement.

She planted herself in front of them, hand on her hip to match her mask's disapproval.

"You're a long way from home, Norai. I was assured you'd leave as soon as you collected your bounty money, but here you are – lingering like a hangover." A finger thoughtfully rubbed the lip of her mask and she turned to consult the fairies.

"This is what it's like when you people get acne, isn't it?" She gestured at Celeste. "There you are – sitting in front of me like an ugly pustule. I could just squish you and be done with it, scrape you right off my skin. But the scar would be even more troublesome."

"Awesome analogy, boss. Ten out of ten!" The other fairies murmured along with Kyu.

_Squish? Pustule?_ Nikki darted her eyes nervously. Celeste, whose bare hands held the strength to snap bones, was acting bizarrely passive: bowing her head and glaring at her boots while this fancy-pants woman compared her to a pimple! Who did she -?

Nikki's head swam with vertigo. One glare at the woman and ... _oh wow!_ She had to grip her breast to keep her heart from fluttering out of her chest. Those perfect curves... That dreamy hair... This woman was an oasis in the desert and Nikki had to go to her! Had to gaze at her! Had to -

Celeste spun her into a protective hug, and her eyes flinched as though a spotlight had suddenly cut off. Nikki blinked and forced her eyes to adjust.

"Don't look at her," Celeste hissed.

"I have that effect on simple creatures," the woman commented. She tapped her mask. "Count your blessings I'm keeping this on, otherwise you'd be hard pressed to remember your names."

"I'm familiar with your legends," Celeste countered. "Shen-to folklore speaks of an ancient settlement that retained no memories of an entire year. The population woke as from a collective trance, finding their homes neglected, their food spent in festivities none remembered celebrating. Only the sightless among them recalled this lost time: a year of madness - poems, shrines and statues made to adore a faceless goddess. A year when they were visited by a cupidaemon queen."

"Cruel, isn't it? A face as like mine and only the blind, flea-bitten beggars remember me."
What're they … talking about? Nikki's head felt fuzzy as a jar of cotton balls. Hard to … concentrate. Every time she slipped a glance at the masked woman, her body flushed with a giddy heat and her vision blurred. The pier vanished in a dizzy haze, Celeste slipped from her thoughts. Time itself stopped so she could admire this impossibly gorgeous woman with the silhouette of a supermodel, the poise of a queen, and the radiance of a goddess!

My goddess, her mind sang. Then Celeste yanked her back and she gasped like a deep sea diver coming up for air. What she swore was five seconds showed as five minutes on her phone. What's happening to me?

"Who … are you?"

The beauty – the goddess – broke her staring match with Celeste and sent Nikki swooning. "No one special," she sang with false modesty. "Just a gardener. A gardener come to admire her roses." Her mask redirected its glare at Celeste.

"A gardener wondering how this stray weed came to root among her flowers. Seriously, though – that human? I know the scars leave you self-conscious but you can aim a little higher."

Celeste kept her face downcast, but Nikki flinched at the squeeze coming from her Valkyrie's hand. "What is your purpose here? It would be foolish to assume a fairy queen descended to this realm for simple pleasure."

"Too true. I feel dirty just lingering here. These 'carnivals' are beyond me – standing in line for cheap thrills, crowding together for the grease-soaked scraps you call 'food'. Then there's your fascination with those fire-pops!" She gestured to the sparkling sky. "It's no wonder Father kept you so enthralled with his little flash-bangs. But no, I'm not here for your fun or for small talk. You've been lazing on your ass for two whole days; time to finish the job, bounty hunter."

"Job?" Celeste raised her head quizzically, immediately grimacing like she'd looked into the sun.

"Oh, that's right. Kyu? Show them."

Wha the -? Nikki's light-headed infatuation broke when Kyu steered her aside, tugging down her dress sleeves and waving a glowing palm over her exposed shoulder.

Nikki's skin reciprocated the glow.

"Holy shit!" Under the fairy's touch, a tattoo appeared on her shoulder: a heart stenciled in sweeping calligraphy curves. It pulsed rhythmically like a blip on a radar screen. "Y-you tattooed me?"

Kyu stepped aside and shrugged. "Locator charm. Perfect for tracking down those missing keys from your back pocket. Soon as you showed up on the beach with that weird-ass alien tech, I figured we'd wanna keep an eye on you, Champ. Once I figured out you two had a little … liaison going, all we had to do was point you in the right direction."

Nikki's phone buzzed. Multiple Twitter updates. Her hand automatically opened the app, and in return, the winged fairies each raised their own phones.

GingerSnaps @SassafrasG
Hey, kiddo. #MonsterDog

CicelySpice @WintergreenC
You were very brave, Nikki. #Alert
"You tagged me," Nikki stammered. Like cattle in a barnyard; like a rat in a laboratory maze receiving little electrode jolts; go here, do this, turn left. Celeste read the messages over her shoulder with steely eyes.

"You were directing our every move. Prodding us forward as though we were -"

"Slaves?" the goddess finished. She snorted. "Call it symbiosis: my fairies don't usually entertain guests as crude as garduk, and you needed a surveillance net to track them down. It worked quite splendidly until you took your little lover's sabbatical. Hard to move your pawn when she's shut off her phone. Now it's time you got back to work. Your little playmate, the Slovarian? Finish the job."

Celeste's golden eyes flickered with panic. Rondarr? Nikki gulped. No, he couldn't! She glanced up at Celeste to confirm, but she'd already quashed all hints of fear.

"Rondarr was terminated."

"My fairies saw him: bursting out of the grave you dug for him, angry enough to tear this city apart."

Two nervous sprites bobbed their heads in agreement. "Garduk, we can manage, but under a cloaking field he's impossible to track."

"Terms?"

"Oh, that's right. Payment. How's this? You get to live. And I'll permit you to leave. Go back to the frozen hellhole you call home and forget all of this ever happened."

Behind the woman's shoulder, Kyu raised her thumbs and mouthed stage cues: 'Say Yes! Yes!' Her Valkyrie turned away.

"My home is with -" Celeste's throat seized up in a gasp. The golden mask hadn't changed its steely expression, but the eyes beneath it narrowed with contempt.

"Are you arguing with me? With your goddess?" The air around her grew dark and heavy. Her index finger inched towards Celeste like a blade.

Nikki screamed as her Valkyrie dropped to the ground, gripping her skull.

"Don't delude yourself that this is a negotiation, bounty hunter. You are trespassing on holy ground. I've toiled for millennia to keep this planet hidden from your galaxy and no one is going to desecrate my treasure. Not the Slovarian, not those beastly garduk, and not some filthy little cross-breeding deviant from a race of slaves!"

The other fairies averted their gaze, but Kyu stepped into the circle. "Boss, we kinda need her in one piece ..."

"Hmm, true." The goddess flicked her finger and Celeste collapsed in a heap. Nikki dove to her Valkyrie's side, but Celeste shrugged her off. She was gasping in pain but the Norai made it her mission to rise up, to hold and shelter her love with her body.

"Aren't you a fascinating speck of dust," the goddess sneered. "You care for this little seed, don't
you? Mm… yes, I can hear your little heart beating for her. Be-beat, be-beat, be-beat," and she tapped her finger along to the rhythm, every bob making Celeste jerk under an electric current.

"Did you know? The other day some imbecile served me a plate of this planet's fruit without rinsing them for pests. There was an inchworm – a ghastly, horrid little inchworm oozing its way across my meal. Now what do you suppose I did, hmm? Well, after I tore a strip off my servant's wings, I plucked off the worm. I flicked it aside."

Her masked eyes smiled at Nikki. "Naturally, I threw out the fruit as well."

Celeste's grip went limp and cold.

They were done here. The goddess turned, motioning for her fairies to follow into the portal she'd conjured. "Finish the job and be out of my sight, bounty hunter." She looked back, and Nikki's body responded gladly to the tug of those masked eyes. A wicked leer festered under that mask. "Let your darling human remember you as a brave hero. Or she might not remember you at all."

Slowly, teasingly, her hand reached for her mask. Yes! Nikki's arms and legs crawled forward. A voice called after her, but the fog was too thick to hear. She was in the vacuum of space and this woman was her radiant sun. Nikki wanted to circle her, to spin ever closer!

The mask fell like an eclipse and tears trickled down Nikki's cheeks. The sun, she marveled. I'm looking into the sun!

Something sizzled on her cheek. Breath quickening, knees trembling, eyes… burning? Burning. She was burning up inside!

"C-celeste?" Couldn't look away; couldn't look away. Blinding white! Fiery hot! "Celeste!"

Too much. Too much! She was going to expl-

"Chiletto? Nicole, can you hear my voice?"

"Uhnn…" Groggy and tired beyond belief, Nikki sat up and rubbed her eyes, puzzled as to why Celeste was kneeling and doting on her like a bedside nurse.

"Are you harmed, Chiletto? Can you remember -?"

"Celeste, it's just fireworks…" Tackling her to the ground and covering her body like a shield was flattering, but in public? Seriously? Combat nerves flaring up, I guess.

"Do you wanna go back and grab a gun?"

She was only trying to be considerate; she never expected Celeste to tackle her with a desperate hug. "Whoa! Celeste, give me some room here!"

"I thought… I thought I lost you."

"From fireworks?" Nikki groaned. "Look I'm okay, but –" She paused to crane her neck and peck Celeste's cheek, "You're gonna have to tone it down until we get home tonight."

Did I say something wrong? That simple teasing left her Valkyrie looking horrified. Nikki stroked her fingers across Celeste's thigh. "Hey, everything okay?"
The Norai pushed her hand away.  
"We should return home."

_Huh? _"Is this about Audrey? Because we came here to have fun; she can't take that." Leaping to her feet, a fresh sparkle overtook Nikki's eyes.

"C'mon, we're gonna get some cotton candy, and then we're gonna loot the shooting gallery booths." An alien sharpshooter and the Galaxy Arcade's light-gun master gamer. Those carnies wouldn't know what hit them! "And then, we're gonna ride the Ferris wheel, and we're gonna make out under the fireworks till—"

"Enough!"

The shout made her draw back, startled. Celeste was breathing raggedly and looking to the stars. "You've made your point," she hissed to the skies. "You've made your point." The Norai turned away while she wiped her eyes, composing herself.

"Chiletto … what if I had to leave?"

Celeste's words threw her off-balance. "W-what, you mean for a job? We talked about this Celeste. You belong he—"

"No, Nicole. I mean … if I left this world; if I never returned. You would proceed with your life, would you not?"

"What're you saying?" Her mind was drowning, but Celeste only continued her misty-eyed babbling.

"When Celara rejected me, I was overcome with ache and emptiness. I believed I would never again find someone so wonderful. Yet here I stand with you. Nicole, my absence will hurt awhile but you will find someone—"

"Why would I want to find someone else!? I want you!" _Why are you saying these things?_ Nikki raised her hands, cupped them around Celeste's cheeks so she could pull her face close and tell her. "Celeste, you don't under-!"

_Blood._ Nikki drew her hands back, staring at the black liquid smeared down her fingers.

"Wh-what happened to your ears? Why are you bleeding?"

Wait, why was she asking? Nikki rewound through her memories and – she flinched. Her mind hit a full-stop. A blank space. Meeting Tiffany, confronting Audrey, the girls leaving, and then –

_Urgh!_ A bright light flashed through her mind, obscuring everything. Going back to that moment hurt, like someone had taken a hot bulb to the photo-negatives of her memory, searing the images until they were nothing but a blinding, scalding white.

"I can't remember." No, that wasn't possible; she always remembered everything! "Celeste… what happened to me?"

"Pheromones… an aura…" the hunter muttered to herself. "A beauty that devours memory. How … how can I win?" Celeste brushed a hand through her own hair, and Nikki caught a glimpse of the dark smears running from her earlobes down to her jawline. Her Valkyrie tried to mask her quiet sob in a laugh.
"I convinced myself that I could save your planet. Kill the garduk and rid your world of an invasive menace." She gave a sad laugh. "And in the end, your world was already infested."

"Celeste, you're not making any sense! I -" Pink. It was a faint image, but she remembered a - "F-fairy? Did … did we meet a fairy?"

"Cupidaemon," Celeste corrected. "They've been aware of my presence this entire time. Nicole, they have been monitoring us. They –" She steadied herself with a deep breath. "They informed us that Rondarr is still alive."

"Alive?" she repeated. Déjà vu rippled through her head. This wasn't her first exclamation on that subject.

"Alive," Celeste confirmed, "and concealing himself with a holo-cloak. This explains how he was able to move undetected among your people."

"How do we find him?"

"Slovarians are predatory species with a pronounced sense of smell. He will be searching for us." She stood, fortified into warrior mode. "We must return to your dwelling at once. I require my arsenal."

"Right," Nikki nodded.

"Remain close to me. Rondarr could appear as anyone."

Hand in hand, they marched down the boardwalk, silently agreeing it was best to stay away from the lights and the innocent crowds of the carnival. Rondarr, alive, but that wasn't what scared Nikki. It was seeing Celeste helpless and on edge; knowing there were pages torn from her book of memories. It was the cold shame of having her mind violated. Who … did this to me?

"Nikki?"

"Oh fuck, not this shit again!"

She glanced towards the twin voices of Tiffany and Audrey. Great, the princess and the pauper had also picked the boardwalk as a retreat. But who was the boy walking with them?

"Nikki." Tiffany continued with a smile, "Look who we ran into! See? I told you she was here tonight."

A boy with dark skin and dreadlocks loomed over the girls like a shadow, an uncharacteristic grimace on his face. Anton. Wait, he was out of the hospital already? Why was he clutching an arm like it was still injured?

What if Rondarr goes after him again?

She broke Celeste's grip and ran to her friends. I have to warn him! "Anton!"

He opened his arms invitingly. "Hello, Nikkeeee."

Oh crap…

Half a second to turn and run. Half a second and Anton batted her two friends aside like trash. Audrey scraped against the concrete. "Fuck!" Tiffany's head smacked against the pier's metal guardrail and she crumpled on the ground.
Anton's good arm burst into scaly lizard talons that snatched the back of her dress; slammed a metal binder against her back. The human-sized slave bracer suctioned to her spine and snapped its X-cross pincers over her chest. The electric burst made her scream.

Celeste's golden eyes burned with fire. "Rondarr."

The dragon-armed Anton grinned in acknowledgement. "Five cycles," he snarled. "Five cycles you left me to rot like a kha-worm under that rubble. Five cycles I spent digging my way out - with this." His free arm thumped against his chest, sinking into the holographic t-shirt to tear off a splintered piece of his breastplate. The blackened slag bounced in front of Celeste's hooves.

"Chiss-nak hide armor-weave. Properly harvested, there is no more durable material in the galaxy. Solid enough to scrape through rock, sufficiently padded to cushion a fall from a great height."

Nikki's eyes darted frantically. Audrey was groaning but Tiffany wasn't getting up. In the water below the pier, something was frothing. Celeste took a thunderous step forward.

"Release her."

She's not seeing it! "Celeste --" Rondarr's claws on her throat caught her off. Anton's lips spread in a malicious smile.

"You should know that I was not the only one to survive falling from that structure." Nikki gurgled as his grip tightened; he was reaching around her to punch at his wrist-top console. "Five cycles have made him grow splendidly."

"Celeste, the water!"

She got the warning just as a gigantic lion's paw rose over the pier and smashed through the railing, inches from Tiffany's prone body. Rondarr cackled and backed away; Celeste lunged for the fallen cheerleader and pulled her back as the great, black beast rose from the depths.

Celeste's eyes went wide beneath the cavernous jaws. On the ground, Audrey craned her head higher and higher, following the ever-growing monster rising from the sea.

"Holy shit..."

Tall as a military tank and armored just as thickly. A shell of stalactite spikes over its back; in its skull, rows of teeth like elephant tusks frothing with green slime. A host of tentacles ringed its jaw like a lion's mane, lashing and whipping the air in search of prey.

The adult garduk pulled itself ashore, mouth and mane roaring at the night sky.

"What the flying fuck is th-AAAHH!"

The mane of tentacles lashed out, ensnaring Audrey's wrists and waist, dragging her towards the foaming jaws. "LEMMIE GO! LEMMIE GO! NIKKI!"

Celeste caught her wrist with one arm; the other reached to the sky, palm open and calling for her rifle. The crystal bangle flickered uselessly. Out of range. She'd left her every weapon at home.

The garduk's roar had caught the attention of the carnival-goers. People were jogging over to the commotion, then screaming and fleeing in a panicky mob. Nikki flinched as Anton's voice cackled in her ear, reveling in the frenzy like this was a game to be enjoyed.
Audrey was sobbing, nails digging into Celeste's skin as she held on for dear life. Celeste grimaced and dug in her hooves, but she was on the losing end of the murderous tug-of-war. Her eyes shot towards Rondarr like bullets.

"I will end you," she promised with a hellfire glare, and Nikki saw her Valkyrie's grip on Audrey slacken. Saw Audrey's eyes pale as she realized who the scales in the Night Wraith's mind tipped towards; that against Nikki's gold she held all the weight and value of a grain of sand.

Rondarr began dragging he backwards; his discarded chunk of armor crossed her feet and she kicked it towards Celeste. "Save Audrey," she screamed.

Their eyes met one last instant.

*I will come for you.*

*I know you'll find me.*

Then Celeste snatched up the armor shard and charged the garduk with a battle cry, slashing its tendrils in full Night Wraith fury.

Embracing the confusion and chaos like a cloaking field, Rondarr made his escape, pulling her with him into the scattering crowds of the carnival.
Disguised in his Anton suit, Rondarr was just another overprotective boyfriend gripping his date's shoulder, one of many human couples fleeing the confusion at the carnival grounds. Cries about a 'wild animal' or a 'bomb' flitted through the air. No one knew what was going on, but a communal 'panic' button had been hit and the instinct to flee became contagious. Between the dragon claws gripping her skin and the earlier electric shock, Nikki was swimming in pain, and she struggled to keep pace.

Rondarr marched her into the parking lot and singled out a black pickup truck. The driver was an older man speaking hurriedly into a cell phone while he fumbled with the ignition. Rondarr ripped open the cab door, threw the man against the concrete and shoved Nikki in front of the steering wheel. "Drive," he commanded after lurching into the passenger seat.

Nikki stared at the wheel and the displays like they belonged to an alien cockpit. Yes, she had a driver's license but she'd only ever used it as a personal ID! Braking, shift into drive, then apply the gas, right? Under her timid press, the truck jerked forward in a sudden start that made both their necks whip about.

"No games!" Anton's voice barked.

"I'm trying!" she spat back, earning her another full-body shock from the slave bracer.

"Shut your filthy, mammal maw! Now go! Take me to her ship!" While Nikki merged with the fleeing lanes of traffic, Rondarr laid down his laws.

"That bracer is set to trigger at a five cha radius. You move even an arm's length from me, you burn. You attempt to remove the restraints, you burn. Slow down or detour..." He tapped the console strapped to his scaly forearm. Pain was just a button's push away. "You burn."

Seeing no other options, Nikki took them south on the freeway out of town. As she drove, Rondarr picked at his Anton skin, pinching his fingers through the holographic flesh and unclipping little metal nodes attached to his limbs. Piece by piece, Anton's flesh dematerialized into scaly lizard limbs: sickle-clawed arms, a crested iguana head, and a dinosaur torso with a broken breastplate filled the passenger seat.

Nikki glanced at Rondarr's left arm, the one she swore Celeste had blown off at the demolition site. Shorter, thinner, and made of slimy, pink flesh that made her think of raw fish, it looked like he'd grafted the limb of a fetus onto his full-grown lizard body. So he's a regenerator...

The newly-grown arm seemed to pain Rondarr. His lizard lips kept wincing and his strong arm kept clutching at the newborn muscles. More than once she thought she saw the regenerated arm bulge, its fingers twitch. Even now, his body continued adding layers of tissue to the half-formed limb, and the accelerated healing was painful.

Rondarr caught her staring. "Don't conceive for an instant that I'm weakened." Something cold and metal tapped the back of her skull. In the rear-view mirror, Rondarr's tail held a small, fold-out blaster and he waved it at her in show. Nikki glued her eyes to the road and didn't look back. She could feel the pistol tracing little circles behind her head, as though he were looking for an excuse to shoot her, the human collaborator.

Rondarr snarled suddenly. "Open the window." Like a carsick dog, he stuck his snout through the
glass, coughing and retching. When his face returned, he breathed angrily through his mouth, nostril pinched shut. "You stink like that filthy Tendricite," he gagged.

"She's a Norai." Nikki wasn't sure why she said it, but she needed this little rebellion. "She's not a slave for you to trade around like a piece of furniture. She's a person!"

The warning zap from the bracer made her scream and swerve lanes. Thank God they were out on the empty highway! Rondarr leaned close so that his putrid breath hissed into her ear.

"On my planet, we follow this simple truth: the strong take dominion over the weak. I ate the flesh of my mother, of my brood-mates and I grew strong. I will not be challenged by some backwater cha-worm, or a wretched plant-eater who dares to play-act like a predator! Now shut your mouth and drive! You'll find there's a premium for slaves without tongues."

They took the exit into the nature preserve. Rondarr made her smash through the security toll booth and demanded that she drive beyond the parking lot and into the connecting trails. Nikki pushed the vehicle as far as it would go until it tripped in a ravine and stalled. Her captor ordered her out and they marched onward.

Nikki obeyed, silently reminding herself that every step towards Celeste's ship took Rondarr one step closer to a dead end. What was he planning to do? *The Wraith's Wings* would have advanced alien security: retina scans, bio-energy signature detectors. Cogni wouldn't lower the ramp or fly the ship for anyone but -

"Kosoko kangai na Shikai-to Subasa, Nikkeeee-da."

Oh God damn it.

Rondarr flashed his tail blaster, and the instant Cogni poked her camera eye through the entry ramp, he shot her dead. The electronic shriek made Nikki flinch. When she opened her eyes, the camera bot dangled limply from its wiring like a body from a noose, sparks flicking into the air. Cogni...

Rondarr forced her up the ramp, glancing around the interior as if checking for booby traps. The control consoles remained in lockdown so he marched her back down, planting her in front of his body like a shield. At the base of the ramp, they waited.

It wasn't long before the warning shot kicked up the dirt at their ankles.

"RONDARR!"

Celeste. Towering at the treeline entrance to the lake bed, her purple wraith armor hastily and half done up, her face and skin sprayed with the green blood of the garduk like she’d smeared herself in war paint. With her rifle at the ready she was a murderous sight, a mother bear ready to kill the fool that dared plant himself between her and her own.

"Cel-!" Rondarr's claws choked off Nikki’s cry, so she just tried to breathe and keep steady. *I'm okay*, she mouthed, all the while wondering how Celeste had caught up to them so quickly. Those cloven feet were fast, but she’d detoured at the apartment to grab bits of armor and her signature rifle, while they'd driven to the ship at highway speeds. Had she stolen a vehicle too?

In the bushes next to Celeste, something – someone? – rustled, but kept out of sight.

"Plant eater," Rondarr hissed, hatred emanating in every rasping syllable. He crouched low, ensuring he was shielded with the ship at his back and his hostage in front.
"You are still wanted alive, Rondarr. Release her and I will not deliver you as a corpse."

"Don't presume to order me, your herbivorous filth!" Rondarr barked back. "You've stolen everything from me: my cargo, my ship, my limb! I will leave on your vessel but not under your command, and not without this parting gift." Nikki winced as he hugged her tight. "Meet the first of the galaxy's new slave labour: dear, little Nikkee.

Celeste gave a single, dark laugh as she stepped into the grove. "You are as ignorant as you are hideous if you believe you can sell her, you Slovarian s'kaba! Do you even comprehend how much research and testing went into my people before we were 'fit for market'? Years were spent kidnapping and dissecting Norai, studying our physiology and developing antibodies so we would not collapse and die off-world!"

Celeste’s rifle gestured at her disparagingly. "Do you believe that any slaver in his right mind would pay for that girl? Can you conceive that anyone will look at those small, weak limbs and find her fit for labor? That they will scan her shapeless body and enjoy her as an amusement?"

Rondarr snorted back. "Her hair is -"

"Pa na isho, it's blue colouring! Examine her scalp, you ignorant s'kaba! It's already growing out!"

Rondarr steamed, but she felt his nostrils sniff over her hair; heard him sneer at the line of brown roots growing back from her dye job. Celeste gave him no time to sulk.

"She is a pitiful, unremarkable, worthless little creature! She's not worth a datari to anyone!"

Nikki swallowed a heavy lump. She's just reasoning with him. Just trying to make him lose interest, she told herself, but she couldn't help but avert her eyes, listening to her lover sneer at her like a piece of spoiled meat. I really am nothing...

"Worthless," Rondarr agreed, and yet the speech hadn't encouraged the reptile to ease his grip in the slightest. His forked tongue lapped at Nikki's cheek. "Worthless to all except one."

Celeste's battle stance softened. "Except one," she agreed.

She dropped her rifle. Spread her palms wide. Raised her hands in surrender. "Take me in her place."

Nikki fought her restraints. "Celeste, no!"

"Be silent, Chiletto!" Celeste's order hit her like a slap across the face. "This is the only way."

Rondarr's grin grew tenfold as she kicked the rifle out of reach. For good measure, Celeste unclipped the summoning bracelet from her wrist, let it fall into the dirt.

"You will have complete security clearance to my ship. Take me and leave this world."

Rondarr gave a deep belly laugh – "You mammals and your sentiment!" – but Nikki didn't feel his claws or the bracer budge an inch. Celeste's discarded rifle… Rondarr cast an eye over it carefully, tensing as though it might explode. All his setbacks and humiliating defeats had made him paranoid; he wouldn't leave anything to a gamble.

"Remain exactly where you are," he commanded, and prodded Nikki forward so they could eliminate this variable. Celeste stood stock-still as they approached the rifle. Rondarr made her kneel, reached his deformed arm around her -
Celeste's hand whipped behind her back for the concealed pistol. Rondarr's tail had already curled like a scorpion stinger, blaster aimed and ready.

A shot rang out. An explosion burst next to Celeste's head. Her body spun off in one direction.

Her horn flew off in another.

"CELESTE!"

The metal talons around her chest uncoupled, and Nikki collapsed to her knees. Rondarr's gravely chuckle rang through the grove. He bent into her face and shoved the slave bracer into her hands.

"Put it on her."

Celeste. She wasn't dead, but she lay sprawled in the dirt like a discarded rag doll, the stench of ozone sizzling off her blackened hair. Spasms wracked her body but she made no sound. Her mouth hung open but the pain was beyond what she could release in a scream.

"Put it on her," Rondarr repeated, tapping his gun against her forehead. The barrel was still hot from firing.

Nikki's feet took her forward automatically. Up close, Celeste's face ran slick with blood. The once-lustrous hair down her left side was scorched and shredded and... her horn! Nikki remembered running her hand down those beautiful sickles, marveling at the cool, smooth surface. A blackened stump was all that remained. *I can't see her ear...*

Sensing her presence, Celeste's golden eyes flickered dimly with something like happiness. "He released you. He released -"

Her eyes fell to the slave bracer and the payment owed. She bit her teeth and forced herself to sit up, to roll over and present her back.

"Do it," she pleaded.

The instant Nikki touched the bracer to her spine, its metal claws latched onto Celeste like a parasite sensing fresh meat. Before the restraints could even click shut, Rondarr was already jabbing at his remote control. Electric current poured into Celeste's flesh and screams poured from her throat.

"Now crawl!" Rondarr commanded.

The machine had pinned her arms against her ribs, robbing her of the leverage to even sit up. Celeste could only shuffle through the dirt like a wounded, blue worm, and still the Slovarian ordered her forward—gleefully mashing his ‘shock’ button if she slowed or stopped for air.

"Stop it!" Nikki sobbed. "Stop it, you're killing her!" But she was already forgotten, left to collapse in a wreck and watch helplessly as this monster maimed and tortured the woman she loved.

Growing impatient with her feeble slithering, Rondarr stomped over to meet his prisoner halfway, crushing Celeste's compact blaster underfoot as he moved. The rifle, he picked up, twirling the weapon in his good hand as he circled and inspected his prize.

"The great and terrible Koru-Shikai - the monstrous night wraith who stalks her victims to the grave." He kicked her under the ribs. "How right it is to see you in your place." Nikki hid her face in her hands, flinching with shared pain every time Celeste cried out.
"You were correct," Rondarr continued. "Why settle for this *hyoo-mun* worm when I have far more desirable cattle right here? I can't begin to tally how many enemies you've made – families and organizations who would pay an emperor's ransom to exact their revenge on the bounty hunter that vexed them and ruined their operations."

He dragged his index claw across Celeste's cheek in a mock caress. *Fight back,* Nikki sobbed. Celeste just clenched her teeth and accepted the pain.

"I will auction you off to the highest bidder. Better yet, I'll offer you up in pieces: fifty thousand datari for your hands; a hundred thousand for your tongue. But your skull..." Rondarr chuckled. "Oh, I intend to keep your skull for myself. You will make a fine drinking mug." He yanked at her remaining horn. "Ha! You even come with a handle!"

"No. A single thought, a match struck into flame. No. A fury building, seething through Nikki's insides. No. You won't hurt her anymore!" Anger pumping through her gut like gasoline, Nikki dragged her body through the dirt, target-locked onto a discarded, glimmering hope. *I'm not the only one you forgot about!*

Lost in dreams of riches and revenge, Rondarr didn't notice her stalking towards him like a hunting cat. His claws stretched to the stars as he continued his ranting. What trouble could she cause him, a lowly human worm?

Nikki stood, and the crunch of gravel beneath her flats made Rondarr turn and release a mocking laugh. "Are you still here?" He poked at Celeste with the barrel of her own rifle. "Plant eater, I think your pet wishes to join you!"

"Stay the fuck away from her!" Arm extended, fingers curled into claws, the crystal bangle over Nikki's wrist glowed with a fierce, white fire.

Rondarr's eyes flew wide. The weapon in his claws quivered at the call. He tried to grip the rifle tight, seize it with both hands, as though he could fight the magnetized summons. Nikki knew better.

*Mjolnir always comes to its master.*

A powerful yank wrenched Rondarr off his scaly feet, face-planting him into the dirt. He was still holding on, and the rifle dragged him through the mud on its invisible tow cable, crunching snout-first into the rocks and reeling through the dirt until it brought him grovelling at Nikki's feet. She stamped his snout once and ran.

Across the clearing, sprinting like it came naturally, then raising her arm again. The rifle flipped Rondarr onto his back and yanked, tearing his joints and clanging his head against the rocks. This time, the weapon slipped from his grip and continued towards Nikki, scraping to a halt at her feet.

She snatched up the rifle, positioned her arms and legs the way Celeste had shown her, lining the winded reptile in her sights. Breathe, steady and-

"GAAH!" Her shot flew wild. In a blind fury she'd aimed at Rondarr's chest, but the plasma bolt only lanced through the tip of his tail, shaving it down several inches. The poacher howled at the stars.

Not enough. Nikki aimed again, but Rondarr could pounce as well as any garduk. The rifle butt slammed into her ribs. Winded, she collapsed in the gravel with the Slovarian hunched over her like a hungry animal. "Insolent pest!"

"Nicole!" Celeste was struggling to her feet. Rondarr mashed his wrist-top console, pumping her full
of voltage. His claws continued to her human throat.

A new voice joined the fray. "Hey! Over here, fuck-face!" A rock whipped against Rondarr's head; both he and Nikki spun at the thrower.

_Audrey?_

Springing from the bushes with a rock and a long branch, the raven-haired girl charged in with a scream, whipping her rock and swinging her wooden sword like a psycho samurai. "Don't fuck with my friend, you –"

Rondarr caught her stick in mid-swing and reversed its momentum, flinging Audrey across the field. She was down in one blow.

Nuisance dispatched, Nikki found his black claws around her throat. She opened her mouth, but couldn't even croak. His claws were squeezing, her vision was blurring, going black with shadows...

And from the shadows, something dark and terrible forced itself to stand.

"Not her," the voice snarled, bloody and scarred. Electricity twitched uselessly across its body, only serving to intensify the yellow glow of the monstrous eyes, the sheen of the sickled horn.

"Not her," it repeated gravely. "Not ever."

The Night Wraith roared. Her voice was raw and ragged and furious as she pried against her electrified bonds. Sparks leapt, flesh sizzled and metal claws groaned in a futile resistance. A primal rip tore the slave bracer from her chest. Restrained no more, the beast of shadow surged forward like a bolt of silver lightning, slowing only to crouch and seize something off the ground.

Rondarr turned too slow, too late. The Night Wraith raised her arms, cried out in fury, and buried her weapon in his chest.

Rondarr blinked. His claws slackened and Nikki collapsed, wheezing in air. They both looked to his exposed chest, to the piece of dismembered bone shoved down to the hilt. The curved horn he'd shot off Celeste's head - now lodged straight through his heart.

He staggered. Coughed up blood. Tried to reach and pull the shard from his chest. Tried to comprehend. "Not ... by a ... slave ...

Then he collapsed at Celeste's cloven feet, eyes and mouth trapped in horrified disbelief.

"I am a Norai," Celeste hissed at the corpse. "And I am free."

Her eyes staggered over the field, confirming that Audrey was rising to her feet, bruised but no worse for wear. Nikki watched them drift over to her, saw their fury melt and relax now that her beloved was free of harm. "Chiletto…"

Celeste crumpled to the ground.
Love and Lingering Hope

Shoes paced restlessly down a metal deck. Mechanical arms clicked and whirred over their surgical work. A sharp gasp of pain, which Nikki hushed back with her hands and her voice. "Easy, it's okay. You'll be okay."

From behind her came a shaky murmur. "An alien … a real live, god-damn alien."

Audrey rotated on the spaceship's deck in slow, disbelieving circles, sucking on a cigarette the way a hospital patient might grab an oxygen mask for relief. She'd kept placid long enough to help drag Celeste up the ramp, but once inside her mind retreated in shellshock.

"Nik, this is all real, isn't it?"

Nikki didn't reply, didn't even notice the question. Her senses were focused entirely on her wounded Valkyrie; she wouldn't have noticed the diva if she were swearing and prying up the metal floorboards. She barely noticed Cogni's spare camera body peering over her shoulder at the raised medical stretcher, where segmented pincer arms worked over Celeste's inert form with needles and laser cutters. Another gasp. She gripped Celeste's hand in both of her own, wishing she could absorb and take on the hurt herself.

"You'll be okay," she repeated. "You're onboard the ship. Cogni's going to fix you up. It's gonna be okay."

In the back of her mind, she wondered just who she was trying to convince. Celeste was hanging on by a thread.

The skin around her shattered horn was black with blood. Burns and blisters from the slave bracer seared her arms and chest. Cogni had injected her full of painkillers and stemmed the worst of the bleeding but there were just so many wounds to treat. Celeste's body trembled with lingering pain and her breathing came in shallow gasps.

"You're safe…" she coughed. "Pa na isho, you're safe…"

"Of course Nikki's safe! She had you looking out for her, right?" Audrey stomped over to the table with a blustery grin plastered on her face.

"Nik, this is nothing! You should've seen this bitch slice up that giant monster thing at the docks! Ran up with nothing but a shiv and she's hacking and stabbing that fucker into a bloody, green hamburger! I got tossed in the air like a chew toy, and this chick comes up and catches me!" She leveled a smirk at Celeste. "Just had to have a big, damn hero moment, huh?"

Celeste did her best to chuckle. "Enduring your … driving skills … required … far more bravery."

"Please! Nik, get this – after we dumped Tiff with the paramedics, this bitch starts barking at me like, 'I require vehicular transport! Take me to the forested region!' Well of course I'm gonna drive like a bat outta hell!" Audrey took a fresh puff and laughed out the smoke. "I seriously thought you were Australian, you know that?"

"And I … convinced myself … you were … intelligent enough … to remain hidden." Celeste's words shook with displeasure, and yet she raised her finger in the Earth gesture of approval. Audrey smirked and flashed back both middle fingers.
"Bitch, please! I'm the naughtiest donkey you ever met!" Then she clapped Nikki on the shoulder. "See, Nik? She's gonna pull through in no time!"

The cigarette trembled between her fingers, but Nikki took the hint and forced herself to smile.

"Y-yeah," she declared weakly. "Celeste, you're going to pull through this. We'll take you back to my place – I'll get the bedroom all set up for you to rest. I'll take the week off work and look after you! And when you're healed up, we'll hit the town and celebrate! Bowling, dancing, um–"

"A target range … to practice your … firearms."

"Yeah! Anything you want! We'll take Audrey and Tiffany; Cogni, you can use one of your bird remotes and come too, right?"

She turned to the camera bot, inviting the AI to join in their illusion. Cogni narrowed her aperture like she was squinting with incomprehension.

"The bleeding has been stabilized, but these wounds are beyond my capacity to treat. Ki-Celeste must be placed into cryo-sleep and transported to the nearest medical starport."

On cue, a floor compartment hissed open, summoning a glass capsule similar to what Rondarr had used to lock up Kyu and Anton. To Nikki, it looked like a metal coffin. So it had come to this.

"Right … c'mon."

She and Audrey each took a shoulder, and with the help of Cogni's tractor beams they settled Celeste into the capsule's padded interior. Audrey stood by awkwardly while Nikki crouched to whisper her assurances.

"Celeste, we're gonna put you to sleep now, okay? We're gonna get you help."

Her Valkyrie raised her lips in a smile. "Cryogenic … transportation. Nicole, let me … see you … once more. Before I wake … from this precious dream."

Nikki went livid. "What're you saying? I'm coming with you! I'll stay with Cogni, make sure she gets you somewhere safe! I'm gonna make sure you're okay."

"Cogni will … direct… the physicians. Your presence… will merely… cause alarm."

Her presence. Right, her alien presence. Out among the stars, she would be the anomaly carted off to a galactic government lab for dissection and study.

"But you'll come back," Nikki added. "As soon as you're fixed up, you'll come back to me!"

Burdened with memory, Celeste's eyes fell away.

"Nicole … you recall … the cupidae-"

"We talked about the love fairies. They told us about Rondarr, right? They want to keep us safe!"

"They want you... kept... hidden," Celeste wheezed. "Your world ... Nicole, they ... present themselves as gods ... compassionate spirits ... but they - they -" She broke off into coughing. Nikki held her hand until she was done.

"Chiletto, they ... demanded that I leave. They declared that ... if I did not depart ... they would ..."
She couldn't finish, but recalling their threats brought strength flowing back into her eyes. "I will not allow them to harm you," she declared.

"So you're leaving me?" Nikki squeezed Celeste's hand tight, refusing to let go. "No… No! You can't just give up like this!" Not after all they had gone through to be here! "We're supposed to be together, Celeste! I …" Her voice was falling to pieces, but she forced her lips to part.

"Celeste, I love you."

The pain in Celeste's face wasn't just from her injuries. "Ashi iko cho, Chiletto. I adore you with all my soul…" She swallowed. "But this is … an opponent … I cannot best."

What had they said to her? What kind of threats had these kindly, pink fairies made to her Valkyrie? She forced her mind to search back, to peer at those searing, white flashes of memory and scrape up some glimmer of a clue. Ugh! Still nothing but blanks.

"You have to come back! Celeste, I need you. I need you to be with me. I can't go back to being alone."

A touch. A caress of trembling fingertips across her cheek, like she was a priceless treasure to be handled with utmost care. But Celeste didn't see frailty.

"You are so much... stronger than you realize..." she smiled softly, "and you are never... alone." Her eyes drifted to the raven haired girl shivering in the refrigerated ship. "Live your life... Nicole Ann Marie. I can be happy... knowing you are safe."

Why couldn't she see reason? Nikki rifled through her dress, found the keys to her apartment and pressed them into Celeste's palm.

"Come back to me." She didn't care about fairies or gods or any other supernatural crap that dared to threaten them. "Just come back home."

The metallic floor trembled as engines came online. Cogni lowered on her periscope arm to get at eye level with the capsule.

"Coordinates set, Ki-Celeste. We must depart." Audrey's hand touched Nikki's shoulder.

"Nik, c'mon - this thing's starting to move."

The capsule lid began to seal, and only Audrey's quick reflexes kept the glass from shutting over Nikki fingers. Even as she was pulled backwards, Nikki's eyes fixed to Celeste like they were tied by invisible strings. Then a hiss of frosty air filled the tube, obscuring the glass. The ship's machinery retracted the capsule into the floor.

"No!" Nikki lunged after it but Audrey had pinned her tight around the arms. The ship was rumbling towards takeoff but she didn't care. She wanted - needed to stay! "I have to – I have to be with her!"

"You heard the robot. Everybody off! This ship's leaving!"

She fought the diva every step of the way, kicking and flailing, but Audrey still dragged her down the ramp and outside, where the blasts of steam and heat made it impossible to race forward.

The Wraith's Wings rose on thunderous thrusters, maneuvered its sickle-wings skyward and exploded into the atmosphere. Nikki chased the afterburners higher and higher, following until the ship's fire was just another pinprick of light among the countless stars.
The dust settled, the wind died and the forest returned to its natural stillness.

Celeste was gone, back among the heavens.

Leaving her here.

Alone.

Wind whipped through her blue hair as Nikki watched the dull, orange haze of Glenberry grow on the horizon. Riding shotgun in Audrey's red convertible, it wasn't speed that blurred her sightlines, but the tears welling up in her eyes.

Audrey's fingers tapped restlessly on the wheel. She'd tried turning on the radio, but the cheery pop songs felt so out of place and she settled for silence. Nikki could feel the diva glancing at her, nervously chewing her lip until she finally grunted in frustration.

"Are you just gonna sit there? For fuck's sake, I just watched an alien goat-woman stab a dinosaur through the chest and take off in a motherfucking spaceship! And that's after I was almost eaten by some god-damn tentacle monster from outer space! Fuck, maybe you can just shrug it off, but I need to talk!"

"I thought I had things figured out," Nikki murmured against Audrey's outburst. She'd always been guilty of drifting through life, not really thinking of the future. Being with Celeste had given her purpose. She'd been gifted a shining, blue beacon to light her way, granting her a life - a love - to strive towards.

"You know that building that collapsed downtown? That was Celeste, and I was there. Just trying to talk to her. I almost fell from the roof and got crushed, that's how bad I wanted to be with her! And now she's gone. She's gone. Audrey, what am I supposed to do now?"

Audrey's only reply was to continue driving. Then -

"Couple months back, I met this guy." Audrey grunted, lighting another cigarette as she drove. "Guess you could say he was the perfect guy. Nice to look at, cared for animals, made me smile. A god-damn saint. Sure as hell didn't work out."

Nikki turned her head. "What happened?"

Audrey didn't respond all at once. Her eyes and hands tensed with that glazed, spaced-out look she'd emitted at the café, and then again at the diner and the dance club. For a moment, Nikki worried that the car would slip into the ditch, then -

"Oh fuck this! Wasted enough time getting mopey over that piece of shit." Audrey shook herself from the trance, snorting and flicking her cigarette down the highway.

"Let's just say he wasn't after me for my personality. Tried to get me drunk so he could rip off my dress and get all grabby…"

Nikki stiffened. "Did he –"

"Tiff showed up and stopped him, okay? Fuck, I don't know why I'm telling you this. I mean, your girlfriend just shanked a guy in the chest to keep you safe; that's how much you meant to her." She drummed her fingers on the wheel. "I guess both our happy endings turned out shitty. Just shrug it off and keep going, I guess."
Nikki didn't answer that heresy. *How do I go on without Celeste?*

"Fuck!" Audrey blurted as they pulled up to Nikki's apartment building. "Tiffany – she's probably at the hospital right now. I gotta go find her. You coming?"

Nikki shook her head. "Audrey, I need some time alone. You'll text me, though? When you find her?"

"Never did bother taking you off speed dial." Nikki shut the door but Audrey didn't leave immediately. "You sure? I don't do this break-up crap like, ever but … aren't I supposed to make you coffee? Buy a bunch of ice cream so we can gush and all that crap?"

"I'm not hungry," Nikki sighed. Then she paused. "That story about that guy. Audrey … that was some scary shit. You don't deserve that."

"Yeah, well you don't deserve to be trashed because you're into girls, but there's some real assholes out there." Her eyes drifted shamefully. Nikki swallowed carefully.

"Hey, maybe … can we hang out later?"

Ruby eyes smirked her way. "Why not? Someone's gonna have to drag you out of that apartment. Might as well be someone fabulous."

"Fuck you," Nikki scoffed, and Audrey returned her grin.

"Only in your dreams, bitch."

It wasn't until the diva drove off that the full weight of the emptiness hit her.

Celeste was gone.

Nikki shuffled up the stairwell in a daze while her mind grappled with this new reality.

Celeste was gone.

Upstairs, there'd be no one to greet her. When she opened her apartment door, there'd be no one waiting to ask her about her day. Playing video games, the second controller would go unused. No one shaking her head at Star Fox's *intriguing interpretations of interstellar lifeforms* or flailing wildly at Sonic's *confounded targeting reticles!*

After she brushed her teeth and slipped on her pajamas, there'd be no one waiting in bed to scoop her into her arms, kiss her softly on the neck and hold her in a warm hug as they snuggled off to sleep.

Celeste really was gone.

But she had to be coming back! She had to! *What about all the stuff she left at the apartment? Weapons, clothing … Her projector sphere!*

Nikki rushed up the stairs with new purpose. She wanted to bolt inside, gather up all these little mementos and hold them tight, breathing in her lover's heavy, lavender musk. It would only be a shadow, but she'd still have a piece of Celeste next to her heart.

*Shit, how am I gonna get in?* Giving Celeste her apartment keys was starting to feel more rash than romantic. She'd locked herself out! It had been sheer luck that a neighbour had propped open the back entrance after a smoke break. Was she going to have to sleep in the hallway? *Maybe I should*
Arriving on her floor, Nikki was immediately puzzled by one suite's opened door and the boxes piled in front of it. *Someone moving out at midnight? Wonder who's apart- ? Wait, that's my apartment!*

Nikki dashed down the hall and through her front door.

The fairies rummaging through her belongings all looked up at once.

Love fairies. Each one sporting bright, pastel hair, short dresses in floral designs and wings like butterflies and katydids. One had been stuffing Celeste's clothes into a pink packing crate. A second had been browsing the files on her computer, finger tapping the delete key. More still had been tracing wands and spray bottles over her walls and bedsheets like a winged home cleaning service.

They were sterilizing her apartment.

"Holy shit! Ladies – check this out!" The silent stares broke when one oblivious fairy with pink hair phased into the main room, waving Celeste's black evening gown in her hands. "It's one of those Kajad all-night stripper dresses! Ho ho, someone was gettin' bi-zay in here!"

Nikki couldn't believe her eyes. "Kyu?"

The fairy turned, and her party girl cheer morphed into the mortified look of a teen busted by her parents. The dress dropped to the floor.

"Champ?" The nickname cinched it. Kyu - the cop, Tiffany's roommate, Rondarr's kidnapping victim. She was a fairy. "Wh-what're you -? I mean, you're supposed to -"

"That's Celeste's dress!" Nikki shouted. Her horrified mind raced through every tender moment shared with her lover in that gown, every nervous touch and heated gasp. Nikki stomped forward and seized the leather dress in her arms, daring the pink fairy to try and defile it with her jokes.

"What's going on here? What're you people doing in my apartment?"

While the pink fairy fumbled for an answer, another sprite with fiery red hair and a leg brace flew forward and slapped Kyu upside the head.

"I thought you were monitoring that tracking charm, Sugardust! Janus' junk, she's not supposed to see this!"

"You would have had to return for her phone anyway," a regal voice commented from the kitchenette. "Just get it done now."

"Right away." Snapping to attention like a soldier, the red-haired fairy marched up and phased her hand into Nikki's pocket, plucking out her smart phone. "Hey!" Nikki swiped at the fairy, but her hand slipped through the magical girl like she was made of mist.

"Oh lovely," the ginger fairy grunted. "She had the entire crash-landing recorded with commentary! Minerva's mammories, she could've put this all on their Internet!" She grumbled to herself as she began deleting the videos.

"You can't do that!" Again, Nikki grabbed at the fairy. Again, her hand slipped through. She might as well have been threatening a hologram. All around her, the fairies resumed their work:

"Computer clear?"
"No vids or pics, all good!"

"Hey, I need some more sanitizer for these sheets!"

"Just a sec – and check underneath the bed too!"

"Hey, is this human toothpaste?"

"Just take it all. Better safe than sorry!"

Nikki had seen this trope play out in so many sci-fi stories: a team of black-ops agents combing over a crash site and scrubbing it clean of all alien presence. Except instead of black-suited CIA agents these were flowery fairies, aliens in their own right! Aliens in charge of an alien cover-up!

A neon blue haired fairy stepped forward and yanked Celeste's dress from her grip. Celeste. They were taking away Celeste!

"You can't do this," she cried out, launching herself at each fairy in turn, trying to paw at them. "Those are Celeste's clothes! You can't take those!" To the bedroom. *Before they find it! I have to save -*

"Heads up, another tech piece!"

Nikki froze in horror. Celeste's projector sphere – they were loading it into one of their boxes!

"Noo!" Nikki dove in, and for just a second she was able to grab and tug at the box. Then the startled fairies extended their phasing powers and she was sent tumbling while they scurried out with their prize. "You can't take that! She stores her pictures in there! It's all the memories she has left of her planet! Please, those are her memories!"

She tried following the fairies, but then she noticed one especially tall and green-haired sprite poking her head into the fridge. *They're raiding my food too?* Wait, why didn't this fairy have any wings? She'd been giving orders before. Was she a supervisor?

"Hey, that's my mom's quiche! You can't just –"

Then the woman turned and Nikki's protest dropped along with her jaw. All of space and time fell away. *She's ... oh wow!* The night was cold and miserable but this masked woman glowed like a warm fire. Nikki's feet staggered mindlessly towards her promise of warmth and comfort.

"Needs more salt," was all the woman grunted. *No, not a woman – a goddess!* Her flawless, centerfold body was crowned with a golden theatre mask and it kept sliding up her face as she shovelled forkloads of scrambled egg into her dainty, ruby lips. Just that innocent flash of a chin or a lower lip sent Nikki trembling like she'd been treated to a full-frontal striptease. Her goddess licked her lips and spoke to her, but the words came in clipped:

"Well, you mother ... passable ... Don't suppose ... nap ... in your ..." Wait, what was she saying? *Hard to ... remember...*

*Don't look at her!*

Celeste's voice hit her like cold water, and Nikki dropped to her knees, duck and cover style, hands pressed over her eyes. *She's the one. She's the one that messed with my memories!* Nikki could hear the regal click of high heels as the woman approached. She squeezed her eyes into thin lines.
"Why're you doing this?" she whimpered. The goddess seemed amused by her trembling.

"Darling, don't take it personally - this is just the regular clean-up after your planet entertains guests. There's other teams decontaminating the carnival grounds and the nature preserve as we speak. Any evidence of visitors from beyond your planet, my fairies make it vanish." She paused to enjoy her purloined meal.

"Panic has such a distasteful flavor," she continued. "You people are so much easier to manage when you think you're the only intelligent species in the universe."

So she was the one in charge of this conspiracy. That meant she had the power to make it right again! "Celeste – you have to let her come back!"

"Let me guess," the goddess began in a mocking tone, "because you're madly in love with her? Because you're star-crossed lovers meant for each other?" A disapproving cluck of the tongue. "It gets so boring listening to you virgins blather on like broken records. Think for a minute: she's a cold-climate species with an extreme metabolism. Assuming you could keep her fed, your little love bird would still fry like an egg in this planet's summers."

"We'd find a way," Nikki objected. "We'd make it work!"

"How sweet. A long distance relationship? Please, I know how that little game ends: other mercenaries start tracking her; they trail her to this little, blue haven. Or she gets lonely and lets her secret slip over a few drinks. Soon enough your planet is a bustling galactic port, you're all learning and intermingling. You start swapping stories about culture and folklore."

Nikki finished the thought. "And someone comes to warn us about the con-artist cupidaeemons and their shitty, memory-eating fake goddess!"

Time stopped. The fairies at their work – moving boxes, deleting files – it all stopped. A furious shadow fell over Nikki.

"Are you arguing with me?"

Invisible hands snatched at her shoulders, yanked her into the air like a puppet on strings. The golden mask loomed over her face with the furious fire of the sun. It was coming off.

"Oh, you can't keep those little eyes shut forever," the goddess taunted. Her finger trailed across Nikki's cheek; Nikki gasped at the contact. "Look at me," she demanded. "Look at me and let me take the hurt away."

The same invisible arms holding her up were now prying at her eyelids. The golden mask was raised and the light behind it was blinding.

"I'm going to find you people, you 'fairies',' Nikki promised. "I'm going to make sure the whole world knows what you cupidaeemons really are!"

And just like that, her strings were cut and she fell to the floor. The goddess’ mask was back in place and the woman stared at her with that expressionless, gold facade.

Her head tipped back in howling laughter.

"I haven't – I haven't laughed in … oh, I'm in stitches, you're so adorable!" Nikki risked a glance up, saw her leaning on the kitchen counter and gasping for air.
"Good luck with that," the goddess smirked, snapping her fingers and waltzing out the door. The fairies understood their cue.

"Kay, ladies – time to pack it up!" The fairies! One by one they were taking the last of the boxes out the door. Nikki dashed after them.

"No! Please don't do this!" She begged them, grovelled before them; tried to snatch at their wrists to plead but only phased through their ethereal bodies. Nikki tumbled to the floor and her glasses bounced off her face.

"My glasses!" Shit, not now, not when the last fairy had just left! She patted the floor, trying to find them in the blur.

"Here." Slender fingers handed over her lenses. Nikki refit her glasses and the pink haze kneeling before her refocused.

Kyu.

"Back there," the fairy coughed, "that was just me showing off for the girls. You know that, right?"

"How could you?" The rage she'd leveled at Audrey? That had been a warm-up. This was undiluted, righteous fury and if she could, she'd slap the fairy where she stood. "You're a love fairy! You're supposed to help people find their soul mates, not rip us apart!"

"Champ, we all got jobs we gotta do. You know all about keeping your boss happy, right? I mean, making the Big V laugh like that? Genius! Pure genius!"

Nikki couldn't believe the excuses pouring like puke from this girl's mouth. "I saved your life and all you can do is rant about your lousy job? Celeste was right," she scowled. "You people really are monsters."

The way the fairy staggered, Nikki's emotions might as well have been bullets. Kyu's entire body drooped shamefully, wings and all, like she was shouldering an immense, invisible pile of rocks. "Champ, I…" she stopped. Her eyes opened at alarm and she pointed to the crystal bangle over Nikki's wrist. "Wait, is that –?"

"Miss Sugardust? I believe I said we were leaving." The dreaded high heels clicked down the hallway, and the masked goddess peered through the doorway. Kyu slapped both her hands over Nikki's wrist and whispered for silence.

A bright and perky grin greeted the fairy goddess. "Yep! On my way, boss. Just had to remove her tracking charm!" A hand waved over Nikki's shoulder, causing pink sparks to burst painlessly from her skin. "Just gotta do a quick maintenance spell and we're good."

For a long moment, the golden mask bore holes into the fairy's nervous grin. Finally, a shrug. "Don't keep me waiting." And she waltzed off, muttering something about needing a drink.

Kyu released her wrist, and they both stared at the bracelet's white fire, the hidden token linking them together.

"This isn't right," Kyu muttered, eyes puffy and red. "By the Botoxed bitch I call my boss, this isn't right. But this is all I can do. I'm sorry, Champ. I'm really, really sorry."

She stood and ran out the door.
Nikki looked around at her apartment, her home, scrubbed clean of every trace of Celeste's presence. The luggage, the clothing she'd brought – gone. Nikki went to the bedroom, seized the bedsheets and inhaled. The stale odor of disinfectants assaulted her nostrils.

It was like Celeste had never existed - that her laughter had never echoed through these rooms, that cloven feet had never clicked across these floors. That her adoring, golden eyes had never gazed upon a lonely little girl like she was the most treasured being in all the galaxy.

Nikki fell to the bed, clutching at the alien bracelet and its faint glow like embers in a dying fire.

Now she truly was alone.
Nikki didn't dwell long on her despair. The vow she'd made to the masked goddess stuck like a lump in her throat - to find and expose every last deceitful love fairy. That was her purpose.

Despair cemented into unbreakable rage.

Nikki poured herself into her vow like it was the latest video game to master. Scouring the Internet for fairy websites, hitting the library to research Fae folklore; anything to dig up a possible weakness. Nikki pursued every resource at her disposal.

"I wanna know about Kyu, Tiffany."

"N-Nikki, I really not sure what to say." Even over the phone, she could picture the cheerleader sweating buckets. "Kyu, my roommate, she left months ago and I haven't seen her since."

"Dammit, Tiff, you've gotta have something! A phone number, e-mail; anything! That sneaky fairy bitch was living right next to you! You had to have noticed something!"

"Nikki..."

Wait.

"Are you covering for her, Tiff?" Nikki started pacing across her bedroom, a feral cat on the prowl. "Are you protecting her?"

"No! It's just -"

"Because she took Celeste away from me, Tiff! And I'm gonna find every last one of her kind, and I'm gonna make them pay! Kyu, her goddess; even Jessie."

A tiny gulp warbled over the line.

"I'll never forgive them," Nikki vowed, "and if I figure out you've been hiding them from me ... Well, you'd better wish we never met."

At first it was easy to sustain her fire and her fury. Her memories of Celeste were still fresh and raw as an open wound; the slightest thought made her chest ache and her teeth grit. She welcomed the pain, the righteous anger. She imagined her heartache blazing like a signal flare, a beacon to guide her Valkyrie home from the stars.

Nikki built conspiracy websites, calling for like-minded fairy haters to join her cause. She patrolled the city, scanning the night clubs and cocktail lounges for signs of cupidaemons. She stood on the beach late at night and flashed her laser pointer at the heavens, tapping Morse code messages to the stars.

When her resolve waned, she scrolled through online newspapers to feed her fire. *How can people be so blind?* she seethed. *The carnival stampede wasn't caused by a feral dog on the loose, she roared in the comments section, it was clearly the adult metamorphosis of an alien invasive species, sent on a deliberate attack by a poacher from the Slovar star system!*
And that crashed SUV, all the scorched craters in the nature preserve? Those weren't drunken teen bonfires, they were the exhaust marks of an alien bounty hunter's spacecraft! It should have been obvious, except that the invisible fairies manipulating the human race had zapped all the space debris and alien corpses back to their alternate dimension! Why wasn't anyone taking her seriously?

=Audrey, you saw it all! Back me up,= she texted.

=U sound like a raving lunatic. Tiffany's freaked ur gonna pull a knife on her.= Then she jumped topics completely. =Hey u still wanna hang out 2night?= 

Nikki didn't dignify that with a response. She had no time for these so-called friends.

Weeks passed. Her websites went unvisited; her night patrols turned up plenty of creeps but they were only human. Text messages from Tiffany and her mother piled up on her phone. Then one day, her furious mission was interrupted by a bang on the door. Whump, whump, whump. Audrey awaited her on the other side, and she wasn't accepting excuses.

"Get your shoes. We're fixing your hair."

When she only squinted dumbly at the sudden burst of sunlight, Audrey snorted and thrust a makeup compact into her face. The glassy image horrified her.

Eyes, black and baggy. Skin chalk white and pockmarked with craterous stress acne. Her sweater dangled off her shoulders, not because it was too bulky, but because she'd lost so much weight. It was her hair that made her whimper in horror. An inch of colourless, brown rot had erupted from her scalp where she'd failed to reapply her dye. The blue silk Celeste had so adored was now dry and frayed, withering away at the roots.

"Celeste told you to live your life. Why the fuck are you throwing it away, Nik?"

She hadn't cried since the night she'd lost Celeste. Now the salt water stung her eyes, burning down her cheeks in briny trails. Audrey didn't wait for permission, she just stepped forward and forced her into a hug.

"I miss her," Nikki howled into the diva's shoulder. "I miss her and I don't know what to do."

"You get out," Audrey whispered. "You get out and you keep going. Don't waste your time fucking around with what you lost. Just walk on."

Nikki detached herself from Audrey's embrace. Excused herself to find her wallet and her keys. Together, they walked into the sunlight.

Four words.

Four words to reach across the silence, to mend a connection left tattered and frayed far too long. Four words to reassure that she wasn't alone.

"How's it going, Mom?"

There was no hesitation from the voice across the phone. "I'm glad you called, Nikki. How're you feeling, sweet bean?"
"I dunno, Ma. Okay, I guess." The Nutmeg Café was deserted at this sunset hour, just the orange rays of a dying sun piercing the windows. She scanned one of the mirrors, brushing aside her newly blue hair. Her skin hadn't yet fully recovered, but Audrey had trained her well in the arts of concealer.

"Everything's just kinda … ordinary." No alien emergencies to stress her nerves, no thrilling dates to make her heart race; not even a 'welcome home' lick to curl her toes. "Anything new with you?"

Her mother exhaled into the speaker. "Oh, I was asked to leave the knitting circle at our church. You remember Mrs. Matthews, Lauren's mother? Well I raised a stink when that crusty old thing made a remark about … girls like you, Nikki. The group decided I needed some time alone to reflect with God."

"Mom, you don't have to go all 'gay rights activist' with the church ladies for me. I mean, I'm not …" deep breath. "I'm not with anyone right now."

"Well that doesn't change who you are, now does it?"

Leave it to a mom to beat her at perceptiveness. "I guess not."

"Whatever happened to that Canadian girl you were with? Celine?"

"Celeste, Ma, and she had to leave."

"But I thought you two made up!" When had her mom jumped from disapproval to dying for gossip?

"We did but … stuff came up. Look, Ma, I've gotta go. Customer just walked in. Say hi to dad for me. Love you."

Nikki killed the call and gave a weary exhale. So now she shows up? A month ago, her blood would have boiled at the sight of this petite figure with her false, brunette pixie cut and her troublesome green eyes. Now, she just made Nikki rub her head in exhaustion.

"You," she scowled.

"Heya Champ, what's crack-a-lackin' in Lesbos these days?"

Nikki imagined herself summoning Celeste's magnetized rifle and shoving the barrel in the smug fairy's face. Or maybe conjuring a magical, oversized mallet for a game of whack-a-mole. She glanced hopefully at her wrist, but the crystal bangle she wore as a keepsake just glowed impotently. With her arsenal depleted, she had to settle for glaring daggers.

"What're you doing here?"

The fairy's hand shot up. "Whoa, time out! I'm here on olive branch business, Champ. Hear me out, m'kay?"

"We're closed."

"Bull-friggin-shit, missy! You've got five minutes till closing time and this fairy wants her caffeine rush." Kyu slapped a twenty on the counter. "Double caramel cocoa cappuccino grandé with extra whip. Make it, and I leave for good. I'll never bug you again."

I just closed the till, and I'll have to clean the machines again! But if it meant banishing this worthless trickster from her life, she could endure the momentary pain. Firing an angry glare, Nikki
snatched up the money and set about brewing the fastest cup of coffee she'd ever made. While she worked, Kyu pleaded her case.

"Champ, I really feel super bad because of what happened to you, honest! No bullshit – I screwed up and I'm really, really sorry!"

"You used me and Celeste."

"Because I was freaked out, okay? I help people fall in love – that's what I do. Thing is, when something alien shows up on your planet, my department gets put on high alert and suddenly I'm expected to be a border patrol guard or a police officer. There's nasty stuff out there, and it's my job to keep you humans safe!"

The fairy traced a finger across the counter. "Of course, lost tourists crash-landing in New Mexico are one thing. What's a cutie like me supposed to do about hungry space animals or a mean-as-nails slave trafficker?"

Nikki didn't answer.

"So I figured, why not leave it to the expert? Horn-girl was hunting them anyway, so I could just nudge her along – Charlie to her Angels! I honestly thought Bluebell would pack up and leave after she popped a cap in those garduk. I didn't count on you guys falling in love." Kyu's lips erupted in a mischievous grin. "All it took was a smile and you toppled my master plan, Champ. Look at you, seducing that poor alien space-babe with your sexy nerd skillz."

Nikki shot an evil glare and motioned that she was nearly done at the espresso maker. Kyu swallowed and jumped to the point.

"I wanna make it up to you."

"How?" Nikki snorted.

The fairy spread her wings along with her smile. "Let me be your love coach, Champ! With my expertise and your adorable cuteness, we'll make you a walking chick magnet in no time! The city'll hafta re-zone your apartment as the new dog pound, 'cause you'll be shackling up with more bitches than you can shake a stick at!"

"Huh?" Nikki stared at the fairy and resisted the urge to vomit.

"Y'like that, Champ? Dog Pound? Pound? As in, you'll be –"

"You're disgusting."

The harsh words didn't seem to discourage Kyu. "Hey, that's cool. No pressure. You've got your monogamy kinks; I can work around 'em."

"My only 'kink'," Nikki clarified, "is a deep desire for you to leave me alone."

Kyu pouted as she toyed with the top buttons of her blouse. "Don't be such a sourpuss, Champ. If human hunies don't do it for you anymore, I wouldn't mind letting you take me for a ride."

Nikki's eyes shot up as Kyu's shirt slipped off her shoulders. The fairy flashed her most seductive bedroom eyes as her fingers pawed at her bubblegum-pink bra.

"Did my hotness break your brain? Leave it all stuffed with fluff?" Kyu teased. "C'mon, you silly ol'
bear – come take a romp through my Hundred Acre Woods. I know you're aching for a taste of this sweet, sweet hunny. This sexylicious fairy bod's all yours for the taking."

Nikki was stone silent, fairly certain that her memories of Winnie the Pooh had been scarred for life. Kyu's cappuccino was ready, but a sick, sad feeling in the pit of Nikki's stomach told her it would take more than coffee to banish the fairy.

Sighing deeply, Nikki removed her apron and stepped around the counter.

The fairy's face popped with pleasant surprise as Nikki approached, like she couldn't believe her good fortune. Her grin blossomed as Nikki laid her hands on her shoulders. A pleasant murmur bubbled from her lips as human fingers trailed down her bare arms.

"Mmm, yeah. Don't play slow with me, Champ. I can take it hard."

*Can you?* Nikki snapped her hands around Kyu's wrists and squeezed.

"Aw fuck!" The fairy phased out of the death grip, wincing and rubbing at her left wrist. "Shit, I just got my cast off, Champ! It still stings like a bitch!"

"I don't want you," Nikki declared, merciless in laying down the law. "I don't want any other humans or aliens or perverted fairies. I want Celeste! But now I'll never see her again and it's all because of you!"

"Yup, totally my fault! But hear me out – I've got a Plan B!" Nikki just shoved the Styrofoam coffee cup into the fairy's hands.

"Your capp. Now get out! If you ever come here again, I swear to God I'll kick your ass!"

"Kick whose ass, Nik? The fuck you talking to?"

Nikki looked up. Audrey stared at her from the café door, and the diva looked completely mystified.

"You talking to yourself again?"

Are you blind? Did she have to throw up her hands and point? *Over there, it's a god damn love fairy with wings and sparkles, bouncing around and flapping her injured hand!* Then she remembered their invisibility. *That's right, they get to choose who sees them.* To Audrey, she'd been ranting to an empty café all this time.

"It's nothing," Nikki lied. "Gimmie a sec to clean up, Audrey. There's nobody here."

Walking down the boardwalk under the cool, starry night, Nikki took a moment to appraise her friend's wardrobe. Audrey was back to her extravagant Lolita dresses, her designer purses and her super-sized platform heels. To the world, her clothes were a blunt 'fuck you': That time you saw the Audrey Belrose dressing like a shut-in slob at the carnival? Well you must have been stoned out of your gourd, because this diva is still the most fabulous fashionista this crummy town's ever seen! Oh, and who asked you anyway? She doesn't give a damn what you think!

Nikki smiled, pleased that only she could read the deeper message in those frilly dresses. Ever since Audrey had yanked her from her apartment, the party girl had dressed exclusively in shades of blue. The message Nikki got came from the heart: *You're worth it.*
"That's a good look for you," she said, brushing a hand through Audrey's hair. Still jet black, but now with two streaks of sapphire framing her bangs.

The diva only scoffed. "Please, I make it look good."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Hey girls!" Tiffany's perky voice waved them over, her natural cheerfulness masking the fact that she'd been hospitalized with a concussion. To the cheerleader's credit, she only flinched momentarily after catching Nikki's eye. "Hey, Nikki."

"Oh. Hey, Tiffany." Her hands retreated awkwardly into their sleeves. "Um, sorry I was such a bitch to you."

"Aw, you don't need to keep apologizing! But um… no fairy talk for tonight, okay?"

"Oh, I am so done with that."

Tiffany clapped her hands. "Awesome possum! So, all set for karaoke?"

"Um, I guess. I mean, it's sort of like a rhythm game, right? Just with your voice, yeah?"

"Well, kinda. We'll walk you through it. Right, Audrey?"

"Oh my god, do you seriously not know what karaoke is? Do we need to use video games to give you a dumbed-down Sesame Street Story Time explanation every time you go out into the real world?"

Nikki sighed. "I'm buying the first drinks, aren't I?"

"Pssh! Like I'd drink your crappy colas. You're off the hook this time, but only because watching you try and sing in your shitty monotone is gonna be totally worth it."

"Audrey!" Tiffany swatted the diva on the shoulder, and that set the two of them off chasing each other and shrieking with laughter. Nikki smiled, but when they beckoned for her to come along, she hesitated. The sound of the sea filled her mind.

"Hey, can you guys give me a minute? I'm not flaking out or anything, I just... I need to say goodbye to someone."

She doubted whether Tiffany understood, but Audrey caught her fiddling with the crystal bangle around her wrist. "Yeah, yeah. You know where to find us."

Free of jellyfish and spaceship debris, Turtle Bay Beach was open once more to Glenberry's surfers and sunbathers. Nikki spotted a few college kids drinking and partying around a late night bonfire, but she was able to find an empty stretch of beachfront where she could be alone. She curled up on a beach chair and gazed up at the night sky.

"I miss you," she whispered to the stars. "I miss you so much it hurts." Her arm reached for the distant galaxy, willing her crystal bangle to seize that one special star and bring it back to her.

"There's so much I want to say to you, so much I want to show you. So much I wish we could do together." The tears were welling up again. She paused and allowed her breathing to steady.
"But I can't keep living like this, Celeste. I can't keep waiting and worrying for you. I have to keep going." Her fingers took hold of the alien bracelet, the chain she'd kept over her wrist like a handcuff.

"I'll never forget you, but I won't forget what you said, either. I'm going to live my life. For both of us. So we can both be happy."

Her wrist felt strangely light without its crystal covering. Drawing the bangle to her lips, she gave it a farewell kiss and let it fall to the sand. It was a tiny thing, but in her mind it felt like she'd released herself from a prisoner's chain. *I'm free,* she thought. Free to do what, she couldn't say, but she was free to discover that for herself. Nikki gave a final, longing look at the glowing alien jewel.

*Kos kan, Celeste.*

The bracelet just sat lifelessly among the sand. *Obviously, I mean, it's not like it's gonna –*

It twitched.

Nikki stopped. *Did that thing just -*

It twitched again.

Nikki dropped to the ground, nose hovering above the crystal circlet. She held her breath and -

*There!* It twitched a third time, juiking like a lab animal zapped with electricity, and third time was the charm: gifted with life once more, it started sliding through the sand, away from her.

Nikki clamped her hands over the bangle. She could feel it – the tug of a fisherman's lure on the end of an invisible thread. She stood with the bangle between her fingers. Up in the air, she could see and feel it swing, tugging her westward down the beach.

Nikki started running.

Farther and farther down the sandy beach, panting frantically. Sand gave way to stone; stone grew into boulders and soon she was climbing up mounds of rocky, seaside hills, puffing and sweating as she trooped to the summit of Breakneck Peak, a local diving spot. Nikki looked over the edge of the cliff, into the moonlit waters twenty feet below.

The bracelet urged her forward.

Lesser women would have whimpered and retreated quietly from this calling; more still would have shrugged it off as an impossible hallucination. A good excuse to fall back to the dance clubs, numb themselves on booze and music. But she was Nikki Ann-Marie. She embraced the unknown. She'd stealthed her way into an active crime scene with nothing but her wits and some scotch tape. She'd outrun alien monsters and freed a fairy princess from an evil dragon's lair. She'd fallen from a crumbling building just to be with the woman she loved. And right now she was scanning the dark waters and wondering what sort of chicken-shit tourist divers thought this cliff was a challenge!

Stowing her glasses in one hand, Nikki took a running start and jumped.

The dive underwater chilled her body, but she barely noticed. Deeper and deeper she swam, pulling herself towards a light in the darkness. There was moonlight here in the ocean. Artificial light.
A spotlight.

Nikki swam towards the glowing halo, and it expanded in greeting. The hatch was opening.

An invisible tractor beam guided her forward, welcoming her into a kind of decontamination pod. Sea water filtered out and Nikki gasped in the cold, refreshing air of a refrigerated ship. The hatch locked shut, and Nikki braced herself as the clank and whir of automated machinery filled the chamber. *It's moving,* she realized. The pod was moving from the outer hull, deeper inside until she –

The door clicked open. Barely containing herself, she exited to the cool, metal surface of a familiar chamber, silvery and smooth like the inside of a giant egg. Dimly lit to suit a pilot with night vision. Refrigerator chilled for the comfort of an arctic species.

Was this -?

"*Kosoko kangai, Nikkeee-da.*"

She jumped. Spinning around, she jumped again, seeing the blue-eyed security camera on its jointed stalk. The ship AI leapt back in mutual surprise. "Cogni!"

"I see that reversing the bracelet's polarity attracted your attention."

*Was that a pun? Does she know how to make puns? Oh, who cares, it's Cogni!* Nikki grabbed the ditzy little bowling pin and hugged her tight. "It really is you!" She really was aboard the *Wraith's Wings!* "Wait, how did you get back here? Won't the fairies know?"

"The ship has been substantially upgraded," a familiar voice explained. Nikki and Cogni glanced to the captain's chair, turned away towards the busy computer monitors. "With a visual refraction device installed, any tracking system will be hard pressed to discover this vessel."

Nikki's heart skipped a beat. "Celeste? Celeste, is it really –"

The chair swiveled. Nikki recoiled.

Human. The pilot looked like Celeste – tall, athletically built but … human. An Asian woman with flawless skin and black hair in a regal princess cut. Her unnatural, golden eyes were the only flaw in this terran form.


Nikki stepped towards this bizarre mirage that spoke in Celeste's gentle voice. The Norai allowed her to stand directly before her chair, but when Nikki reached a hand to touch her face, Celeste ducked away.

"Chiletto, the surgeons … there was only so much they could accomplish with my injuries."

Did she still think scars mattered to her? "Damn it, Celeste, just let me see you!"

Swallowing carefully, the alien nodded and punched several buttons on her wrist-top keyboard. The Asian face crackled and distorted, and then faded like a TV signal, leaving -

Celeste.

She'd cut her hair – lopped off the burnt strands and evened it out into a raggedy bowl cut, with only two long bangs of silver framing her cheekbones. Nikki pushed the hair aside, and Celeste shut her
eyes as human hands explored the injured side of her face. Rondarr's laser bolt had cut across her cheek and back to her ear, leaving a white, waxy tattoo over her blue skin. "That's badass," Nikki whispered.

"It is shameful," Celeste countered, but she didn't stop Nikki's fingers from tracing across the puckered skin.

Nikki's hand explored further, towards a stark-white earlobe that felt cold and rubbery to touch. A red light blinked below the skin. Prosthetic. "I can tune it to radio frequencies. Communicate with Cogni without the need of a transmitter," Celeste explained softly. Her downcast eyes didn't entertain any great enthusiasm for having her body parts replaced.

Nikki nodded idly, her hands wandering higher. Celeste's horn was still sliced down to the ivory root, but the tip looked newly rounded, a bud covered in fuzzy white velvet. "It's growing back," Nikki whispered.

"It causes my head to feel… off-balanced," Celeste explained.

They stared at one another, lost for words. Nikki finally broke the silence by launching herself at Celeste.

"Chiletto!" The full-body tackle sent the chair crashing back, leaving Celeste pinned under her weight.

"I thought I lost you! That you'd never come back!" While she sobbed into Celeste's chest, her Valkyrie's powerful arms wrapped around her shoulders, pressing their bodies together. Callused fingers brushed through her hair.

"Where were you all this time?" Nikki sniffled.

Celeste looked away shamefully. "The closest medical station was in the Oryun cluster. It is an irreputable system known for its criminal activity, but I had datari for payment and the staff asked no questions." She picked at her ear a moment, then continued.

"After the surgeons released me, I followed my own counsel and continued my prior life. If returning to your planet would jeopardize your safety, then my only course was to move forward. I resumed collecting bounties, I drifted from one system to the next." Just recapping those empty days made Celeste's eyes glaze over.

"All my life, I took pride in being feared and despised, the terrible Koru-Shikai, but now, I had someone who would welcome my return. For the first time since I departed Tendricide, I had a home to return to." Celeste pulled a string necklace out from under her garment. A set of human apartment keys hung on the strand like a jeweled pendant.

"My resolve was set," she declared, "and I swore by the stars - pa na isho - that I would fight for you."

Nikki felt her chest squeeze, and she wondered how this woman knew exactly how to spur her heartbeat. "What did you do?" she asked.

"I began investigating systems known for cupidammon folklore, searching for some knowledge or weapon I could use against my new enemies. My exploration brought me to a series of ancient ruins on the Shen'to home world. That was when I encountered her."

"Her?" Nikki repeated.
"Madame Butterfly, that's who! Miss me, Champ?"

Nikki yelped and scrambled from Celeste's lap. The pink-haired love fairy fawned over them.

"Aren't you two adorable?" Kyu cooed. "It's crazy how anyone would want to keep you girls from getting your same-sex, age-gaped, interspecies freak on!"

Sitting up, Celeste was less than pleased with her visitor. "We agreed you would notify me before boarding my vessel."

"And miss the big reunion? Yeah, fat chance. You two were this close to ending in tragedy porn, and I worked my buns off getting the gang back together!"

Nikki was stunned. "Kyu, you brought Celeste back?"

"Oh, she could've come back any time, Champ. She just would've had a shitload of trouble from my boss and her 'no outsiders' policy. Me? I saw something powerful as magic spark between you two – a sweet little dork and a badass bounty hunter babe, each of you looking for a little slice of home. I totally 'ship you two! It'd be like 'aw hell no,' if my new OTP fell apart!"

"Um… okay," Nikki blinked.

"So after that fiasco at the apartment, I scanned Bluebell's DNA off the clothes we snatched and logged her in my Huniebee to track! Once I saw that she was slumming around old fairy planets, all alone and sobbing for her sweetie bae, I knew it was high time to swoop in and save the day!"

Celeste clarified. "At the ruins, I unloaded an entire laser battery into her. When I realized she could phase-shift indefinitely, we agreed to talk and devised an arrangement."

"We went shopping!" Kyu squealed. "I set my girl up with that fancy personal hologram, then I pimped her ride with a sweet-ass cloaking system. After all, I can't have the fairy force pulling over our little starlet to check her ID every time she flies in for work."

"Work?" Nikki repeated.

"Yeah, y' see after this little episode with Lizard Man, I learned something: fairies suck ass when it comes to fighting rabid space dogs and asshole dinosaurs. Solution? Outsourcing! I figured we'd all be better off - human and fairy - if we hired a private contractor to look after local security." With a flourish, she gestured to Celeste.

"From now on, whenever anything nasty, tentacled or creepy-crawly crash lands on your planet, Bluebell here shows 'em to the door. With or without their arms. Lady's choice."

Nikki looked between the two otherworldly women, and her mind flashed to the masked goddess. "And your boss is okay with this? I thought she hated outsiders."

Here, Kyu winced and scratched her neck sheepishly. "Um… let's put it this way: what the Big V doesn't know won't hurt her, right? This arrangement is strictly off the books, if you get my drift."

In spite of the fairy's upbeat attitude, Nikki noticed that her fingers were trembling uncontrollably. She was defying a literal goddess to help them. Nikki reached out and took Kyu's hand in her own.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Kyu played off the quiet moment with a snort and a laugh. "Pssh! I'm a love fairy! Matchmaking
lovable losers like you two dorks is what I do." Glancing quickly at Celeste, she added in whisper.
"By the way, Champ, I'm putting you in charge of payroll. I hear she accepts payment in MasterCard, Visa and long, horny nights without any sleep."

Nikki winced. "You're so gross, you know that?"

"Oh, like you weren't thinking of it too!" Nikki didn't reply, but the fairy seemed satisfied with her mad blushing nonetheless.

"Hey, real talk, Champ? Look after her, okay? Make sure she's wearing that holo-cloak outdoors, 'cause you girls are on your own from now on. Me hanging around would only make the fae back home suspicious. My boss may be a lazy ass, but if word ever gets to her about you two … Well, she calls herself the goddess of love. Love can be a scary thing sometimes."

Nikki jumped a little when Celeste's hands clapped over her shoulders and pulled her into a possessive embrace. "If your so-called deity attempts to harm my Nicole, she will learn that I can just as easily be a goddess of war."

Even Kyu didn't dare joke over that threat.

The fairy nodded quickly. "Welp, I'd say it's smooth sailing fer this ship. Reckon it's time for me to ride off into the sunset, playas! Places to go, O-faces to see!"

Kyu's wings pattered to the walls but Nikki ran after her. "Hey, wait!" She had to know. "When you visited me at the café, offered to set me up with a harem... That was just a test, right? To see if I still loved Celeste? I mean, when you started stripping, you weren't really offering to —"

Kyu's foxy grin cut her off. "Thirsty for answers, Champ? You could always buy me a drink and find out."

"Yeah, um... Pass." Some mysteries were best left unsolved.

"Whatevs! Be seein' ya, Bluebell!"

"Never approach my mate again, cupidaemon."

A green-eyed smirk. "Keep her satisfied, space girl, and I won't have to."

In a jet of pink sparkles, Kyu phased through the ship walls, leaving Nikki with much to think over. Their boss is a complete bitch and they're completely perverted, but I guess they mean well, these 'fairies of love'.

Alone once more, Celeste approached her slowly, arms cautiously slipping around her shoulders as though asking, is this acceptable? In reply, Nikki jumped into her lover's arms for a long overdue kiss.

At least they know a good match when they see one.

"Are you certain this form is acceptable?"

They were walking up the boardwalk into the city, and Nikki scanned Celeste one final time for reassurance. They'd spent a good half hour tinkering with her holo-cloak’s projection, stripping away the hair and ethnic ornamentation for something basic. Her skin was pale pink, her horns were
hidden and her clothes appeared human, but otherwise she was Celeste.

"It's good. It's you," Nikki insisted. They'd argued back and forth about keeping the scar across her cheek, but in the end Nikki had conceded to a smooth-skinned image. That was a discussion for another day.

"So you're the unofficial guardian of Earth," Nikki continued, switching topics. "I guess you'll be kinda busy."

"According to the cupidaemon, your planet has witnessed five visitations by extraterrestrials over your last century. This includes Rondarr and myself." Celeste smiled. "I anticipate I will have ample leisure time during this mission."

"You'd better," Nikki warned, snuggling up against Celeste's arm. "Cause you've got a lot of missed dates to make up for." She'd been dreaming about this reunion and had every detail planned.

"First, we're going to the karaoke parlour so I can show off my awesome girlfriend to Audrey and Tiffany. Then, you're taking me dancing, somewhere nice where we can slow-dance and hold each other. And when my feet get sore from twirling around so much, you have to carry me home." She squeezed Celeste a little tighter. "And you have to keep me up all night long."

Celeste purred with arousal, and Nikki squealed as she was pulled into another heart-stopping kiss. Celeste's hands began prowling under the hem of her sweater, and loathe as she was to pull free, they kinda were in public...

"Hey look, it's a shooting star!" Celeste followed her pointing hand and frowned.

"Shooting -? Nicole, that is merely passing debris incinerating in your atmosphere. A star is -"

"I can tell a star from a comet, Celeste!" Ugh, another non-literal expression. "Just make a wish!"

The Norai tilted her head. "Why?"

"Look, it's a human superstition. It's good luck to see a shooting star so ..." There she went, tilting her head again. "Oh, just look at it with me. It's supposed to be romantic or something!"

"Ah."

Arm in arm, they gazed up at the sparkling diamonds of the Milky Way, the treasure trove of alien wonders that had enthralled Nikki's imagination all her life. "There's gotta be at least a billion of them out there," she marveled.

"At minimum," Celeste agreed.

"And there must be millions like the Sun, with living worlds of their own all full of amazing creatures and people."

"It is very likely."

Nikki sighed. "All those possibilities and here we are." A nowhere city on a nowhere planet. No warp drive technology, no advanced AI; not even freaking lightsabers! All it had was the friends who cared for her, the family that supported her, and the woman who made her feel like she was the center of the universe.

"Here we are," Celeste agreed. "I could not ask for a more wonderful place to call my home."
And as her Valkyrie pulled her into the first of many kisses to come, Nikki couldn't help but agree.

*Fin*
To my readers,

Thanks so much for checking out this second story of the TrioPop series, and a special thanks to everyone who took the time to comment and review. Hearing your excitement really inspired me to keep going, and hearing your feedback helped me to adjust the story.

Some extra special kudos are in order:

**To Voidwing, Typhoon Boom and CrystalMoonlightII – for acting as sounding boards when I hit rough patches in my writing.**

**To Xellos540 for warning me whenever Nikki’s characterization became too dark or selfish.**

**To King Pepper Steak for beta-reading chapter twelve. Yes, that chapter. Thanks for your advice, and for ensuring me I was on the right track with that yuri goodness.**

**To Freya Dy, whose art piece “Girls Hangout” inspired Nikki’s carnival dress. Check out her work on DeviantArt. (She does commissions!)**

I also have some quick announcements to make before we get to the good stuff.

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=TrioPop is on TV-Tropes!=

One of my readers, Dark Abomination, was kind enough to start a TV-Tropes webpage for this series. Did you know that Celeste exemplifies the Action Girl archetype and gets Drunk on Milk? Or that Kyu is a Trickster Mentor who specializes in Lampshade Hanging? Check out the page, and maybe add an entry or two while you’re at it! (Search ‘Tvtrpoe love fairy’s apprentice’ to find the hub.)

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=I’m co-writing a new story!=

“A Woman’s Woman” is a collaboration between Typhoon Boom and myself. We’ve been writing scenes together for several months and the story has officially launched on his profile page!

What’s to recommend?

--It’s a Huniepop harem story. Audrey, Nikki and Aiko are all on our lady-killer’s hit-list so far.

--It’s a lesbian harem story.

--It’s got a supernatural twist.

--It gets plenty steamy as the relationships build. Emotional arcs and bedroom scenes? Yes please!

If you’ve enjoyed my TrioPop stories so far, I think you’ll like what the two of us have cooked up. Leave Typhoon a review and let us know what you think.

Oh, and speaking of new stories, let’s get to that preview, shall we?

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“Nyaa~! Those fishies look suuuper cute, Mister!”

Fishies! Big fishies with silver scales and flappy tails, all taking their nappy times. They must be hot, ’cause Mister is letting them rest on top’a ice cubes. Do all fishies sleep with their eyes and mouthies open? Momo isn’t sure, but it makes her giggle – they all look like such silly willies! She presses her face against the glass and tries to make that same face – big googly eyes and kissy lips.

“Hey! Paws off the merchandise, ya dumb cat!”

*Mrow?* Mister’s carrying a broom, and he comes from behind the counter and – eep! He swats at Momo!

“Hey, Momo was just looking!” She tries t’explain, but Mister keeps on jabbing with his broom.

“Don’t hiss at me, ya stupid stray! Now get!”

Meanie! Momo runs off, but she doesn’t get it. There’s lotsa people looking at Mister’s fishies, but he doesn’t get mad at them. He even gives some fishies away in little newspaper sleeping bags. Why’s Mister picking on Momo?

Well, maybe Momo should visit another stall. When Momo saw the big tents, she thought it was a circus, but this is even neater. All sorts of Misters and Misses are settin’ up tables and showing everybody their tasty foods! There’s so many yummy smells in the air and they make Momo’s nose tickle! All the smells are smooshed together like a big ball of yarn an’ Momo wants t’chase ‘em around!

Ooh! Momo’s nose finds a super-duper tasty smell! She’s not sure yet but… hmm, just a little over this way and … Yaay! It’s shish-kabobs! Ooh, now Momo’s tummy is all rumbley-wumbley!

“Misses Lady Ma’am, can Momo have a kabob? Pleeease?”

“Eww! Get away, you filthy beast! Shoo! Harold, get rid of it!”

*Mraaw!* The Lady Ma’am has a helper boy and he chases Momo with a rolled up newspaper! *Nyaa!* H-he just hit Momo! R-right in her private place! Momo has to run all the way out of the tent just to get away, and whenever she passes people, they yell and shoo her like she’s a bad kitty.

There’s a car park place next door, and Momo curls up on the grass t’catch her breath. Momo’s cheeks are hot and wet an’ - … Is she crying? No! N-no, Momo can’t cry! She hasta be brave. She hasta remember what Misato told her:

*Chin up, Momo. Not everyone can see it, but you’re a special little girl. My special little Momo…*

Oh, Misato… Momo is trying her best t’make friends, but it’s just so hard. She thought this place would be different, but everybody keeps treating her like a regular, dumb ol’ cat. Little girls try ta pick her up, little boys grab her tail or squirt her with water, and whenever she tries ta talk, the Misters and Misses kick at her. It hurts, Misato. It hurts…

“Mrow?”

Momo looks over at the noise. It’s a cat, a chubby-wubby tabby with orange fur and a big, frowny face. Momo sticks out her hand, and after they’ve sniffed ‘hello’, she picks him up and nuzzles his
big, fluffy face. “Why do they think Momo an’ you are the same?” she asks. The chubby-wubby doesn’t answer, of course. He’s a cat. Only kitties like Momo can talk.

Momo digs around in her kimono an’ pulls out her little piece ‘a looking glass. Her face looks the same as a little girl, but people all look at her like she’s a cat. Why’re they all doin’ that?

Maybe … maybe Momo just needs to learn more about this place. That way everybody won’t think she’s a strange kitty. Where is she, anyway?

Ooh! There’s a big sign right above Momo. What’s it say? Momo scrunches her nose lookin’ at the letters, tryin’ t’remember Misato’s lessons. Hmm… The first letter looks like a curled-up paw… Oh, that’s ‘G’! The next one is a scaredy tail sticking up straight. Um… ‘l’! It’s ‘L’! Smoosh ‘em together that’s ‘G-L’. Gluh!

“Gl – Gluh … Guh-len-berr-?”


“Nyaa! No helping! Momo could’ve figured it out on her own!”

The lady starts laughing. “Oh my god, you seriously couldn’t read that? Shit, what a dumb bitch!”

Dumb … wha? “Hey, Momo’s not a puppy, she’s a kitty! An’ you’re the real dummy if you can’t tell!” Hmph! Momo bets this lady couldn’t answer even a single kitty quiz.

The lady says some words Momo doesn’t know, but they all sound naughty. She’s a funny-looking lady. Momo thinks she’s a calico – her hair is black, but with blue stripes, an’ she wears a poufy blue dress that looks like present-wrapping paper. Her smell is super weird. She’s wearin’ lotsa the pretty-smelling flower juice ladies spray on themselves, but there’s something weird underneath. It’s a yucky, sour smell, an’ Momo’s trying t’remember it.

“Hey! Are you even listening to me?” The lady stamps her foot and flips her striped hair. Wait -striped hair! Momo’s got it! “Skunky! You’re a skunk lady!” And she falls on her back, laughing.

“What?”

Ny-uh oh… The lady’s eyes turn into fire! Nyaa! Now she’s stomping forward! Momo hides her face. “M-Momo’s sorry! Momo’s sorry she said those things! Please don’t hit Momo!”

“Yeah, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? Go tattle to mommy and get me picked up for assault!”

Momo just stays in her safe ball and whimpers. The lady doesn’t answer right away and when she does she sounds surprised. “Oh shit … you really thought I’d -? I mean … Fuck, who hits a kid? Shit, this is messed up…”

Momo peeks an eye open. The funny lady’s walking back ‘n forth, and now she looks scared. The lady sits by Momo’s side, makes her sit up. She holds up her open hand and orders Momo. “Listen up, kid: make a fist. Like that, yeah. Now punch me.”

Mrrow? Scratching is probably better but Momo bops the lady’s hand anyway, and she makes a mean-looking smile. “Yeah, like that. If anyone tries to hit you, hit them back, okay? And if they’re a guy, you hit them here. See?”

“In their skirts?”
“No, dumbass, their … Okay, yeah, hit their skirt. Just don’t take shit from nobody, you got that?”

Momo’s nose twitches. Momo knows scratching is stronger than punching, and that boys don’t wear skirts, but the lady sounds like she wants to help Momo in her own funny way.

That makes Momo smile. “Thank you, skunky lady! Momo will try her best!”

The funny lady rolls her eyes. She seems cranky, but not at Momo. “Honestly, why’d Tiffany want to meet up at a shithole like this?”

Wait.

“Hey, you can see Momo?”

The funny lady laughs. “Um, duh! Kinda hard not to see you with those shitty cat ears and tail. You’re one of Nikki’s people right? A furry?”

Momo wrinkles her nose. “Momo isn’t furry, she’s fluffy!”

The funny lady shakes her head like she hasn’t had her nappy time. “Whatever. Later, loser.” She flicks something from her hand into the grass. Is it a treat? Momo jumps after it but –

Eww! Pee-yu, it’s one of those smoky sticks that makes Momo’s nose itch. Blech! “Hey lady, you forgot your –”

Oh no. The funny lady’s gone!

The funny lady spoke to Momo. Not in baby-talk, but actual people talk! She … she could see Momo!

Momo’s head spins up ‘n down. Where’d she go? Oh no, oh no! Momo makes a paw and clunks herself on the head. She’s such a dummy!

Momo has to find that lady! She hasta find the lady who could see her!

Momo’s heart beats wonky-clonky while she runs around the market, searching for the lady’s smell. She hasta find her. Hasta, hasta find her!

Because … just maybe, if Momo finds her … Momo won’t hafta be a stray kitty anymore…

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*Nikki and her friends will return in*

**TrioPop - Book III:**

*The Kitty Cat’s New Master*

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!