let the morning come soon

Summary

You keep trying to pretend this is just some kind of awful dayterror. You'll wake up any minute and go bitch to Kankri about how being on this planet is bad for your sensitive temperament. Any minute.

Not this minute. This minute the humans are shoving you into a scraped-bare ablution block that reeks of unfamiliar, cloying-sweet chemicals and letting you just fall on your front like a miserable mistreated tool.

Notes

Please double-check the tags before you dive into this one, and please also be aware that this is kink fic about those subjects.
Chapter 1

In your room
Where time stands still
Or moves at your will
Will you let the morning come soon
Or will you leave me lying here

Cronus: err severely.

The cool night air feels good on your fins as you sneak out the fire exit of the Beforan Embassy. Nights on this planet are weirdly bright, even though they only have the one tiny white moon—light pollution, apparently, courtesy of a diurnal race who hasn’t gotten over a superstitious fear of dark-dwelling predators. The garish orange smear of Albany on the horizon is almost too bright to even look at.

No one’s around this area of the compound, thank fuck. You find a low bench by the boundary wall, brush the dew off the slats, and settle down to contemplate your prize. The three goldfish left in the bowl swim in aimless circles, staring stupidly back at you with enormous goggly-eyes. Some kind of goodwill gift you got from the natives, though it took like half an hour to clean the musky ape-smell off the bowl and out of your office enough that you could even think about eating any. Also, there used to be twelve. Did the unappreciative pack of midblood incompetents you are forced to call your team appreciate your generosity in letting them all have one? Like shell they did.

You rummage around in the bowl till you snag one glossy little fish by its lacy tail, then flip it into your mouth and enjoy the crunch. They really are pretty, you think. And they taste great. This planet isn’t a complete shithole. If only it didn’t have so many humans all over the place.

As if to spite you, a human chooses this exact moment of much-needed peace and tranquility to climb over the wall. You munch another goldfish and watch the ape squirm down a rope, kind of creeped out. Their shoulders just... hinge differently. It’s not right. At least most of the natives you have to interface with in the course of your assignment have the good taste to move slowly and not climb up and down things, which you suppose must be kind of hard for them considering how close humans are temporally to their tree-dwelling origin, but this one is just making its way down the wall like gravity isn’t even a thing.

When it touches down you can see dark lips, a slight curve of the chest-- the milk glands their females bear instead of proper vestigial thorax padding, and her hair is styled a bright anime pink. By all visible markers, you’ve got an alien girl on your paws.

“I mean, I’d be more than happy to help you back to... wherever it is you need to get,” you continue, heroically. “It wouldn’t do for a pretty girl like yourself to be just going around anywhere
unescorted, you know?”

“Yeah,” she says, loudly. “Yeah, okay, Mister Troll, thank you for your offer. Could you please come here? I can’t see.”

You finish off the third fish really fast, then sigh just loud enough to let her know this is kind of an imposition but not such a big imposition you’re actually mad at her or anything. It’s not her fault she’s from a species who needs like an entire sun’s worth of light to not go blundering around and climbing over perfectly obvious things like enormous twelve-foot walls.

“Seriously, miss,” you say, going over close enough that she can hopefully see you, “The actual entrance is on the whole other side of the compound. There’s a reason we installed a gate in the wall.”

“And like, does the reason for the wall itself have anything to do with anti-troll activists?” she asks, and she takes your arm.

“Uh,” you say, trying to hold your breath.

“Because I got some bad news for you, Mister Sushi.” Then she says “Lol,” in a very unpleasant tone of derision and you feel, even more unpleasantly, something round and hard shoved against your back, just under the start of a gill covert.

“Is that a gun,” you enquire. Suddenly the rank human smell isn’t your biggest priority. Air is a priority, and you’re not getting enough of it.

“Yep,” she says.

“Humans aren’t allowed to have guns!”

“Yup.”

“...Are you going to shoot me?” you ask.

“If you keep being such a fuckin’ bitch, yeah.”

“I could scream,” you say. You could totally scream, in fact, you are completely certain that any minute you are actually going to scream.

“Go for it, big boy,” she says, and does something that makes the gun go click and kind of vibrate against your back. “D’you guys have lungs that still work with extra holes in ’em?”

“Oh my god no, babe, don’t shoot, I won’t scream, don’t give me any holes,” you babble. “I’ll be good, just let me go!”


She kind of awkwardly hauls you back to the wall where the rope hangs.

“Jane!” she calls over. “What do I do with this troll now?”

“There was actually a troll there?” someone else calls back.

“Oh my god, I thought she was just joshing with us,” someone else mutters.

“Hang on, Rox, I’m coming over,” yet another person calls and how many humans are there,
blundering around and assaulting people? Also why hasn’t anyone come out to find you yet? Right, because you made sure no one would know you were gone so you could get some private time to enjoy the remainder of your Earth fish and now you are probably going to throw up anyway and everything will have been utterly for nothing.

You are starting to get really scared.

Another pallid human comes over the wall, sliding easily down the rope. This one's bigger than the first one, orange hair sticking up in a spiky crest, and his bare, speckled arms are corded with muscle. When he lands you realize he's almost as tall as you are.

“Fuck,” he says, looking you up and down in exactly the kind of way to add insult to a guy’s injury. “Roxy, you sure know how to ball up a plan and slam dunk the shit out of it. How do you expect to pull off the heist if we're babysitting this asshole?”

“Let’s kidnap him!” one of the guys on the other side of the wall calls.

“Jake!” hisses the other person on the other side of the wall. “What in blazes!”

The guy in front of you looks at the girl behind you. “Hmm,” he says.

“Oh my god,” she says. “Let’s totally kidnap him.”

“Roxy,” the guy says, and then she’s spinning you around by your elbow and the last thing you see for a while is her arm drawing back, shifting to hold her gun like a club.

Jane: do damage control.

“This is the stupidest thing we have ever let Jake talk us into,” you say, “and I was under the impression that the thing with the Colombian drug lords was our personal nadir!”

“Wow, harsh,” Dirk drawls as he finishes tying the troll's ankles together, but at this angle you can see his eyes behind the shades and he’s just as freaked as you. He clips off the last bit of cord and you hold the alien’s limp, rubbery-skinned hands up to be tied next. He feels more like a dolphin than anything, slick and dense. He has a really astonishing amount of gold rings on, and it’s making you nervous—did you kidnap someone important? Most of the trolls you’ve seen on TV don’t wear this much gold. Dirk strips the rings off once he's secured the troll's wrists behind his back, and you dump him on the van’s flooring.

“Should we tie his ankles to his wrists?” Dirk wonders.

“I don’t think they bend like that,” you say, tugging on the body. “God, this is the dumbest frickin’ thing we’ve ever done.”

“This is the coolest thing we have EVER DONE,” Jake hoots from the front seat. “Independence Day, here we come!” The van skews back and forth as he wobbles the wheel, and Roxy cackles, shooting finger-pistols at the van ceiling.

“This was supposed to be Independence Day,” Dirk grits out. “Find alien computer, bring D. Strider alien computer, figure out alien computer, question mark, question mark, question mark, fuckin’ profit, and yet it seems that we are entirely missing an alien computer and extravagantly surplus one alien.”

“That’s jolly well what happened in Independence Day though,” Jake argues.
“No it isn’t.”

“Yes it was—”

“Jake, you were high as balls when we watched Independence Day,” Roxy interrupts. “Don’t even front. You were so high you tried to eat the dvd afterwards.”

Jake slews the van back and forth petulantly, and you grit your teeth and count slowly backwards from ten.

Then you announce: “We are going to all decide, reasonably and politely, what we are going to do with this alien we just hijacked, or so help me the title of our movie will be three unhelpful young adults found with their heads ripped off in a van in upstate New York my goodness how could such a thing have happened?”

“I don’t think that would fit on the dvd case,” Roxy says thoughtfully, and you smack the back of her head. “Ow! Frick! I dunno, maybe we can ransom him?”

“He’s seen our faces,” Dirk says.

“It’s night, though!” Jake says.

“They’re nocturnal,” Dirk growls. “And he’s heard some of our names, too. We can’t just let him go.”

There’s an unhappy silence.

“We could just shoot him,” Roxy finally suggests. “I mean, like, I was gonna. We could just, like. Bang. Pow.”

There’s a longer, even more unhappy silence. He’s an alien, he’s the enemy, lying there with that smarmy fang-filled ‘oh we’re just here to help’ grin knocked right off his face but he’s still... too much of a person. And you guys are getting desperate but you’re not sure if you’re that desperate. Not yet.

“Do we really want to be the guys who cross that line,” you finally say.

“They crossed that line,” Roxy says angrily. “They crossed that line like that line was a nun who just saw a lesbian shit on the fucking altar, Jane.”

“So shoot him,” you snap, and haul the troll’s head up by one crooked horn. “Go ahead, Roxy, if you want to be so gosh-darn hardboiled, you get to be the one to pull the trigger!”

“Fine!” she says, fumbling her pistol up. “Maybe I will!”

“So do it!”

“I’m going to!”

“Ladies,” Jake says nervously, “can I at least pull over—”

The troll moans. You squeak “Ohmygod!” and drop him with a meaty thunk.

“Fuuuuuuuck,” he slurs, curling up. Dirk lashes out and pins him to the floor of the van by his neck. “You can’t do this to me!” the alien chokes out regardless. His face is sheened with a weird, almost iridescent purple as he hacks and thrashes.
Dirk throws you a panicky look. Whatever script he’s going off of in his head just caught fire, and you need to do the talking now.

“Stop struggling,” you command. “You’re just going to make things worse.”

“Get your thug off me, you hairy bulge-sucking dirt-ape bitch,” the troll spits out. “Cut all this nonsense out right this instant or you are going to be in so much trouble your twisted bones’ll be dust by the time they’re done culling you.”

“I’m gonna shoot him,” Roxy announces, and the troll just thrashes harder.

“No one’s shooting anyone!” Jake yelps. “I’m still driving!”

“I’m important!” the troll wails, which does nothing for your nerves. “You can’t do this to me!”

“Pull over,” Roxy snaps.

“Roxy, shut the fuck up,” you say. “Put that thing away.”

“Wow! Rude!” she pouts, but she holsters the gun.

"Let me go," the troll insists again, and that's it, you've had it, you just lash out and kick him in the ribs before you can stop yourself.

"SHUT UP," you yell at him, and he wheezes for breath, making an awful choking sound. You're shaking. You stuff your hands in your lap to try to make them stop doing that. "Jake is right. No shooting in the van. But that doesn't mean you can make trouble, buster! We can make you plenty sorry without putting any bullets in you."

The kicking seems to have made him take you seriously, at least. He lies still, even when Dirk lets go of him and sits back enough to watch him suspiciously. The van rattles on in the dark, your headlights the only ones on the road.

Dirk clears his throat eventually. "Engineering to pilot, what's our course?"

Jake laughs, and you think even he sounds a little less than perfectly at ease. "This is your captain speaking, and we are on course to land at Ms.—at Roxy's old place."

"You don't even know what the shell you're doing," the troll says, which might be true but is aggravating as anything to hear. "You're just—you're just making it up!"

"If I can't shoot him, can I at least gag him?" Roxy asks.

"Yes," you say without hesitation. You'll probably all feel less of a need to shoot him if he just stops talking.

Cronus: get nowhere.

It feels like it takes forever of being left to lie like a sack of grubmeal on the hard, cold, rattling surface of the primitive human transportation device before it slows and stops. Your jaw aches, and you spent most of the last chunk of eternity trying and failing not to drool on yourself, and the thick gamey fug of humans and automotive petrochemicals feels like it’s sunk into your brain. You’re thoroughly sick. The tiny brown girl that’s been doing most of the deciding gets you by the shoulders and the big pink guy with the shades gets you around the waist, and when they open the doors and your feet touch dirt you should be thinking about non-confrontational conflict resolution and you
should be thinking about how primitives are as much victims of their violent cultures as the trolls that happen to be witness to said violence but actually you think fuck this and start thrashing.

“Shit,” the guy huffs, and you clock the girl in the jaw with the side of one of your horns. Her grip loosens a little and you kick out, shouting incoherently, and they drop you.

You’d forgotten that you wouldn’t be able to actually go anywhere with tied-up ankles.

“Oh,” the guy says, and his voice has none of the ripsaw harmonics of a growl but you’re pretty sure you’re listening to mad as hell. “Now I am going to wreck your fucking shit.”

You growl as threateningly as you can around the stupid gag. He kicks you in the face, practically where they’d rammed you earlier to knock you out. You don’t go under again but the world goes wobbly and rainbow with pain, and when the guy kicks you over and over in the sides and back you just lie there, stunned.

“Dirk—Dirk, okay, enough! Enough! You’re going to kill him, enough.”

You realize, dimly, that you’re making a really humiliating amount of pain-related noise for someone of your social station and general cool guy attributes. You swallow wetly and taste blood and dirt. Your face just throbs, all over, you’ll never not be in pain at this rate. You’ll never feel the comforting touch of a moirail’s hand. You are ruined. Your life is basically over.

"Not quite as tough as he thinks he is,” says the other male, the driver, coming over to stand above you. Now that you can see him you can tell he’s nearly the same shade of brown as the girl you just headbutted, and you wonder if they’re the same bloodhue, or whatever the human word is, and whether that means he’s going to feel honor-bound to kick you in the head too.

"Guys, come on!” Roxy says, before you can find out. "We need to get Crankypants the Troll inside.”

You squeeze your eyes shut. The injuries to your dignity are the worst.

Roxy: redecorate.

You and Jake strip the downstairs bathroom as fast as you can, while Dirk and Jane have their own prim and proper version of a screaming freak-out in the hallway, which involves holding hands very tightly and using words like ‘antidisestablishmentarianism’ while trying not to cry. You swear, no one would get anything done around here if it weren’t for you. And Jake, you guess. Kid has ideas almost as fine as his flawless posterior sometimes. You guys actual-facts kidnapped a real alien. Alienapped. Bugnapped? Score one for the revolution!

Everything in the room but the fixtures has to go, though. You’ve got the shower curtain down and most of the fancy soaps and bottles and stuff thrown inside, and Jake’s fussing awkwardly with the mirror. Anything can be a weapon if you believe in yourself, and shit. Jake gets the big mirror off the wall with a splintery crack that takes chunks of wallpaper and plaster off with it.

“Oops,” he says, looking guilty.

“Sorry, Mom,” you say blithely, and toss another thing of old shampoo in the curtain. “Stop wibbling, Jake, the alien’s probably going to do worse.” It’s a good thing you guys don’t have to use the upstairs bathroom for this. This room’s long since stopped smelling even a little bit of her. Of course, so has the upstairs one, too. But it’s kind of the spirit of the thing.

“He’s pretty ornery,” Jake says. “Jeez, I didn’t think they’d have that much spirit! They seem like
right wet blankets most of the time.”

“Well, this wet blanket we get to beat like a rug,” you say, which is not your finest joke but still gets a laugh. You unscrew the drain and taps off the tub so your fishy friend can’t flood the bathroom, while Jake scrapes cleaning supplies and rolls of toilet paper out of the cabinets, and you’re pretty sure you’re done. One little bare-ass room with a toilet, a sink, and a tub. He’s not going to be able to do much of anything to himself in here but maybe die of boredom.

When you and Jake haul the curtain-sack of junk out into the hallway Dirk and Jane have largely gotten over their feels, and are muttering to each other in words of only three or four syllables.

“So, when do we start dissecting this bad boy?” you ask, which makes his funny gold eyes go super wide. Dirk rests a foot on his shoulder, warningly.

“After the interrogation,” Jane says. “If the prisoner doesn’t cooperate, of course.”

“We’re sure he’s going to be excruciatingly helpful,” Dirk says, “after some initial persuasion,” and he grinds his heel down. The guy whimpers low and pretty and strange, and Jane smiles at you, eyes glitter-bright, and lets go of Dirk’s hand.

God, Jake has the best ideas.

Cronus: hurt.

You keep trying to pretend this is just some kind of awful dayterror. You'll wake up any minute and go bitch to Kankri about how being on this planet is bad for your sensitive temperament. Any minute.

Not this minute. This minute the humans are shoving you into a scraped-bare ablution block that reeks of unfamiliar, cloying-sweet chemicals and letting you just fall on your front like a miserable mistreated tool. Like every other room in this hive it’s too bright, insanely too bright, and every possible surface is a crisply menacing cream-color. The light drills right through your eyelids to sizzle off the back of your thinkpan, and when you try to squint even a little you feel like your pupils are going to contract themselves inside-out.

"Huh," the small female says. You're increasingly sure she's the leader. "His hands look a bit weird."

You try to flex your fingers and it hurts, all pins and needles. Dirk leans down over you and grips your stiff fingers for a second, then pushes your sleeve up enough to hold your forearm instead. His hand is so creepily warm and soft, like half-baked dough. "Feels like the cord's cutting off circulation. This stuff isn't meant for long-term bondage."

"You have something that is?" she asks. You can't see him answer but he must do something, because she says, "Get it."

He doesn't move for a second, like there's kind of a power struggle going on there, but then he does get up and step away. You listen to him stomping off, and try to roll over so you can look up at the others. The way they stare at you, it's like they're a pack of wild animals who've just spotted dinner. Fuck, how is this your life?

If they're going to interrogate you—which sounds straight-up horrifying, you won't lie—then they'll take the stupid gag out of your mouth at least. You should start thinking about what you're going to say. How you're going to make them understand that they're making a huge mistake and they should let you go. How you're going to make them understand that they just can’t do this, they can’t possibly get away with it, your people are going to be coming for you. Any minute. Any minute,
fuck, please. Someone’s got to be coming for you.

Dirk comes back and hands some things to the leader. You catch the glint of a blade, dazzling-bright, holy shit. "Hold those for me?" he asks, and kicks you over onto your stomach again. He kneels on your shoulders and you feel like the breath is getting crushed right out of you.

"Wow," Roxy says, "jeez, Dirk, you keep all kinds of freaky shit in your toybox, huh?"

He's wrapping something thick and sturdy around one of your wrists. "Should I have brought the freaky shit, too?" he asks. Roxy giggles. You're painfully aware that they're treating all of this like a fucking game.

"Dirk," the leader says, "do I want to know why you would have a lighter in your toybox?"

"Candles," Dirk says absently as he messees with your other wrist. "Fearplay with torches. Cigarette burns." He twists your wrists and you hear a heavy, metallic click. "Knife?"

The girl hands it to him and you cringe again, trying not to let yourself whimper—but he doesn't cut you, you're pretty sure. He just saws through the tight cord around your wrists until it pops free, and then ow, your hands start tingling all over with the pain of bloodflow returning to them.

Dirk pushes off your shoulders and stands up. "I had plans for those," he says. "But that does look pretty good."

Roxy snickers. "Keep it in your pants, big boy."

"Roxy," the leader says. "I want you and Jake to—" you can't make out the rest, as she leans in and whispers in Roxy's ear, but Roxy nods when she's gotten her orders and slips out the door. "All right. Let's get started."

Dirk manhandles you into a sitting position up against the wall. The girl stands in front of you, giving you a cold, angry stare. Your head pounds. Dirk tugs at the knot of the gag and finally gets the whole gross rag out of your mouth.

"This is a big mistake," you say, and it comes out a croak. Your mouth is so fucking dry. "My people will have noticed I'm missing by now and they'll be looking for me. You can't really believe you didn't leave evidence."

"Speak when you're spoken to, fishboy," Dirk says. He holds up his knife so you can see light sear off the blade. "We want answers out of you, not bluster." You go quiet and wait.

The girl clears her throat. "What happens to the people that you make disappear?"

You stare at her in utter poleaxed confusion. "What?"

She frowns. Dirk moves, a blur at your side. You feel his fingertips catch the edge of your fin, gripping hard, and you take a breath to yell and then the pain goes hot and sharp and so terrible you can barely see. He flicks something into your lap, a little gray triangle oozing violet out one edge oh god oh fuck that's a PIECE of your FIN and there's a sound happening in your throat and you can't make it stop.

The girl says something and you just can't even deal with it. You're bleeding and it hurts so fucking much, you didn't know you could hurt that much, it's just a tiny little piece of you, sitting there being dead meat and not part of you anymore and you can feel the blood oozing down your fin and trickling along the line of your neck and you can't, you just can't—
A hot, small hand grabs one of your horns, hauling your head back—baring your throat—and you gag and sputter and finally catch your breath.

"Let’s try that again," the girl says, so surreally calm. “What do you trolls do to the people you abduct?”

“You abducted me,” you protest, and your voice breaks in the start of a sob. You wish to god you could hold the tears in, you don't want to look this weak, but it hurts and it's terrifying.

She takes a step backward. "I'm going to give you a few minutes to think about that answer," she says. "When we come back, I hope you'll be willing to cooperate." She jerks her head toward the door. "Dirk."

He stares at you for a few more terrifying, miserable seconds, then gets up and follows her as they leave the room.

Jane: regroup.

Dirk puts a hand on your shoulder as soon as you get clear of the... holding cell. "You okay?" he asks.

You're already shrugging him off as you shake your head. You bolt for the back door of the house. You need to get out.

You just make it outside before you get messily sick. You crouch there for a minute and shake, spitting to try to clear the taste out of your mouth. The air out here is cool and crisp with the smell of evergreens, and you stand still, breathing it in, trying to calm down.

The door opens and closes again. You don't look. "Seriously, you okay?"

“We have an alien in Roxy’s bathroom and are torturing him for information,” you say.

He shuffles over and rubs your back in hesitant, geometrically perfect circles. “There, there,” he says, carefully, like he’s reciting lines he’s not sure about. “...There.”

“This all made so much more sense when he wasn’t crying,” you admit.

"Do you need to not be there?" Dirk asks. "I can handle the whole thing myself, if it's going to bother you."

"No," you say. You don't want to be there, but you’re pretty sure you can’t just leave it in Dirk's hands. Not after everything you've seen so far. He needs somebody to rein him in when he gets... focused like that, and Roxy has too fierce a grudge against the trolls to do it, and Jake doesn’t think hard enough about consequences. It's going to have to be you. "No, I'll stick it out. Let's just try not to push too hard too fast, okay?"

Dirk nods. "He did flip out really hard there."

"You cut a piece of him off," you point out. You're pretty sure you wouldn't do any better, if someone—no, stop, you can't afford to think about it like that. "I asked Roxy to do a little research for us and see if she could turn up information about how this sort of thing is done. Maybe we should see what she finds, and use that to go more slowly next time?"

"It's worth taking a look," Dirk says. He runs his hand down your back, stiffly and awkwardly soothing. "Let's go see how she's doing."
Cronus: break.

You don't know how long they leave you there alone. Long enough that the pain in your fin has gone from screaming panic to dull throb, and you've started to get a really nasty headache from the bright light in the room. The walls are all white and there are three gleaming brilliant bulbs high up on one wall, way too much light for comfort even with your pupils slitted as tightly as they'll go. It's not helping you think. The question they were asking before still doesn't make any sense.

You've been trying to wrack your pan for anything in your pre-landing schoolfeeds that could possibly help you out here. You wish you'd paid more attention to those instead of trying to figure out your odds with the other cadets. That's all turned out to be a lost cause so far, and now you could probably actually use a helpful breakdown of how to deal with hostile natives.

When they come in, you can’t help the reflexive cringe. It’s like your whole body just... curls, like a wiggler scared of thunderclaps, knees to chest, elbows straining against the cuffs to tuck in further, horns forward.

“We come in peace,” you get out all in a rush. That line you can remember, at least. “We come in peace and goodwill, and, and in good faith, and we’re here to help. We come in peace.”

"Humans have been going missing since your people arrived," the girl says. "Heads of corporations. Hollywood executives. Just disappearing. Where do they go?"

You look from her to Dirk involuntarily, and you can't see the knife, but you didn't see him move before he used it the first time. "I don't know," you whisper. Dirk doesn't move. "Do you—why do you think we had anything to do with it? I mean, I-I mean, I've seen the figures, the violence, you people just, you kill each other. A-a-a lot."

Dirk's fist is in your hair and yanking your head back, for all that your shoulders try to hunch up to protect your neck. All you're doing is hurting. "This is different," he says, and you're starting to recognize human growling and that's it.

"I didn't do anything. I don't, I don't know anything." A tiny scrap of your crisis schoolfeeding comes back to you: Make it personal. Help them see similarities. Exchange names. Talk about what you have in common. "I. I'm. My name is Cronus Ampora. I. I came to Earth to," you'll sound like such an ass if you admit the truth. "To s-see more of the galaxy, and, and learn a-about new cultures, and." Your voice cracks. "I just want to go home."

Dirk lays the cool flat of the knife blade against your cheek and you whimper. "If you want to go home, it would be really smart for you to come up with something useful to tell us."

“If you stopped suppressin’ all the quadrupedal apex predators ‘round here you could shut down the United States Fish and Wildlife Department inside nine sweeps,” is all that comes out. “Then no one would have to go kill any hoofbeasts themselves, it’d all be managed naturally.” It was the last report you were working on before you snuck out to eat your goldfish.

He backhands you across the face and you catch the metal plate of his glove right against the cheekbone. Your horn scrapes against the wall in this way that vibrates right up through your skull and everything is terrible. "If you want to be a smartass, we can do this the hard way."

“How isn’t this the hard way!” you wail.

He hits you again. You need to just maybe not say anything.
The girl sighs, low and slow and patient. “Cronus. Is that how you say it? I’m Jane. Cronus, key figures in a number of different industries and occupations, all tied together by, ah, reservations about the Beforan presence—”

“Interference,” growls Dirk.

“Occupation?” Jane asks.

“No,” you blurt out. “No, no, we’re here to help, not to stay, I don’t want to stay, I don’t even like it here, please—”

“The missing people go to work and don’t come back,” Jane says. “You need to tell us what you’ve done with them.”

Your head’s swimming. “I don’t know where your friends are,” you say miserably. “We can’t have anything to do with anything like that. We don’t. We wouldn’t. You guys are the savages—”

You’re hit again. It proves your point but you don’t say so because you’re too busy swallowing blood from this punch to want another one. You wish they’d hit you anywhere but your face, it just hurts so badly.

"Not just friends," Jane says. "Family. Some of the most important people in our lives. We would do just about anything to get them back safely."

Family. Family. Okay. You know that word, humans use it a lot, it’s their fundamental social unit of genetically and romantically related caregivers and dependents, they all go pretty much shitmaggots off the fucking wall when those bonds get so much as threatened, as early assistance teams found out in a number of embarrassing cultural misunderstandings. And now these guys, these guys with their knives and their fists and their cold blue eyes, think you’ve been deliberately breaking family units up.

You are so f*cked.

"Oh god," you say. You don't mean to, it just happens, you never could hide your feelings worth a damn.

Jane nods like that was the right answer. "You see why we can't let this go. So. Let's say we believe that you personally haven't kidnapped anyone. Who did? Who could have? What would your people have done with them?"

"Nothing bad," you say immediately.

She does a thing where she bares her teeth and it’s nothing like a smile and everything like a flat-toothed threat display. "How," she asks really calmly, "do you know?"

You just gape at her. Why would any of you have hurt anyone? That’s not what you do. That’s not what you came here for.

They don’t believe you, and you can’t find any of the right answers to get them to. They come back around to the same questions over again and you still can't help, can't even guess at what they want to hear. They take turns asking, put the questions in different orders, until you’re too rattled with pain and fear to make your way from one of a sentence to the other. You just go “I don’t know,’ and “We come in peace, please stop, please don’t, I don’t know!” and none of it helps. They just back up and try from another angle, fucking obsessed, relentless. Where did the missing people go? Where did they go? Where the hell did they go?
At some point in one of the rounds of questioning you figure out that they're trying to find their guardians, their relevant adults, which means that technically they're probably still juveniles? There was so much stuff in your orientation about handling human juveniles, and all you can remember is that you weren't supposed to. You're not sure if anyone said why. If the instructors had said because they'll beat your face into grubloaf and carve you into pieces you'd have paid a lot closer attention.

Would it even have done any good? This planet hates you. These violent, unstable, merciless aliens are going to kill you. It was all their idea to drag you away from safety in the first place. Fuck everything so much.

You've lost track of how many times you've answered the questions wrong—I don't know, I wish I knew, I'd tell you if I knew, I promise, I swear—when the door opens and Roxy comes back in. You wonder if they're going to let her shoot you now. You wonder if it would be a relief. "Break time," she says. "Brought you some snacks to keep your strength up."

"Thank you," Jane says, and goes to take some packets and plastic bottles out of Roxy's hands. They kiss. "That'll be a big help."

Roxy leaves again and Dirk backhands you across the face one more time—like you might have forgotten he was there or something, fuck, that clips your wrecked fin and you can't help whimpering—before he goes to investigate the food. The two humans huddle on the other side of the room and feed themselves, while you wonder how much blood you've lost and whether you're dehydrated or anemic yet and if not how long before they'll get you there. You try to just breathe, just focus on calming down. They're not hurting you right now. They're not even threatening you. It's such a relief.

In the movies whenever someone was captured by enemy forces it was always framed as a graceful fade-to-white scene and then rescue by a devoted quadrantmate, and there was never any real suggestion of torture. The heroic captive would be a little dirty and determined looking, maybe scuffed up, but nothing like this.

You don't feel heroic at all. You're beyond scared, you're made of bruises and your gills are swelling on the side where you got kicked the most, and your fin oh god what's left of your fin is burning so when Dirk cracks his knuckles and steps up like he's ready to hurt you more you can't face it. You just break down sobbing.

"Please," you choke out, "please, please, no more, ask me anythin' else, please ask me anything else, I'll do whatever you want, please don't hurt me anymore, please, I'll tell you anything you can, really I will," and you're still tasting your own blood. You swallow it and cringe as he gets closer, but then, thank god, thank god, Jane touches his elbow.

"Okay," she says slowly. "If you promise you won't keep being so uncooperative, perhaps we'll try that." You nod frantically, trying as hard as you can to look like the most cooperative guy to ever have hatched, and she asks, "What are your people's long-term plans for humanity?"

Oh you're going to be sick. "I don't know," you choke out, the last three words you want to repeat right now. Dirk’s already cocking his fist back again. You can’t stop staring at the dark smears of your own blood spattering his knuckles. "No, p-please, please, it's, it's true, I don't know-w any details about your l-long-term development, I'm not, not, not one of the career guys, I just signed up to do my coming of age service with CivCorps, please don't. P-please."

He doesn't relax, but he holds still. "Tell me about CivCorps," he says.

You sniffle. They made you memorize a fucking mission statement and everything when you signed
up and had your training period and you can't remember, just like all the other shit you should be remembering right now, you can't think about anything except the pain. "I-it's a, a s-service group for m-midbloods, mostly. The. The Galactic Civilization Corps. Our job. Their job. Our r-responsibility. As representatives of, of an advanced culture. Is t-to go in on class two and three worlds where we've established a diplomatic presence, a-and w-w-work to b-bring up the local. Standard of living."

"Are you fucking serious?" Dirk asks. "The alien peace corps has decided that Earth is a third-world country and they need to invade us for our own good?"

You slump as far as the cuffs will let you and just cry. You weren't even supposed to be here. You shouldn't have gotten an on-planet assignment in the first place. You should have been in an office somewhere, on board an administrative ship, and you would have been except that you thought stupid Kankri fucking Vantas was actually interested in you when he suggested that you join the corps with him so you signed on for the same tour he was taking. And now you're being tortured to death by filthy fucking mammals on a horrible backwater planet that thinks war is a reasonable thing to do and it's all Kankri's fault. He never even kissed you.

Jane pulls your head back by one horn again and you’re so stressed it’s like foil on your fangs. You can’t believe they’re just... hauling you like this. It feels so fucking dirty. She asks, "What's the standard of living you generally try to impose?"

You gasp for breath, trying to clear your head, wincing at the way your swollen gills try to flare. "B-basic health stuff," you say. There's a fucking list of priority milestones to establish with a new subordinate culture and your pan is too scrambled with terror for you to remember them all. You don’t think you ever did more than skim the list. "Proper diet. Um. P-pacification. Removal of, of prevalent toxins and diseases. S-standardized appropriate, uh, um, appropriate schoolfeeding and re-education."

There’s a minute there where you all look at each other. Re-education. That never sounded ominous before.

“Oh god, please don't kill me," you moan.

"Man, who said anything about killing anyone yet?" Dirk asks. "We're just getting warmed up over here."

"I-I don't know any secrets," you say again, miserably. "I don’t know anything, I don’t know anything. I signed on for a three-sweep tour and that's all. This was my f-first posting."

"So just talk to us about Beforans in general," Jane says. "Dirk, no, you're not going to need the knife any more. He's trying to cooperate." You smile at her in desperate gratitude and she nods. "You said CivCorps was mostly for midbloods. What does that mean?"

Okay at least that's not a hard one. "Middle of the hemospectrum," you say. "Greenbloods, mostly. Green and teal. Rust is the bottom and...and the Empress is the top."

Dirk reaches for you open-handed and you cringe, but he just wipes blood from your split lip and looks at it. The violet of your blood makes a stark contrast against the gross peachy color of his fingers. "Rust at the bottom, green in the middle, and you're purple," he says. "Sure makes you seem important." He flicks your uninjured fin with one finger and you flinch. "Or do these mark you as some kind of outcast?"

Oh, that does it. "Fuck you!" you snap back, too egregiously insulted to remember how frightened
"You are. "Being a seadweller makes me goddamn royalty, you ugly pink monkey!"

Your head whiplashes back and fresh pain blossoms through the whole right side of your face. You didn't even see him throw the punch but it hits like an avalanche. The inside of your mouth just got shredded on your fangs and you're drooling blood down your front and one of your teeth might be loose and you're going to die.

"They really should have given you more lessons on communicating diplomatically," Jane says mildly. You sniffle. That wasn't a question so you don't answer it but, yeah, they really should have. "Are there any other significant features common to seadwellers?" she asks. That you don't want to answer. It'll just give them more good ways to hurt you.

"Here, let's check," Dirk says. He looms over you, reaches down, just tears your shirt open down the front like he's a blueblood with something to prove. You really, really have a bad feeling about the turn this conversation’s taken and you squirm but you can't get away. He yanks your shirt open far enough to expose your gills. "Looks like a yes." His fingers press against the swollen spot and you moan with pain. "Sensitive, too."

Jane nods. "You wouldn't think that would be a difficult question to answer," she says.

Dirk smiles faintly. It's the first expression you've seen from him and it terrifies you. "Our boy's stubborn. Maybe he likes playing rough." He pops the top button of your pants. "More sensitive spots in here, tough guy?"

You're going to die of fear and misery and shame, because your most primitive instincts are kicking in, the ones that say that if you're about to die then you need to pass on your genes right this instant. It feels gross and terrible but when he pulls your pants open the sheath of your bone bulge is dilating and your bulge itself is starting to emerge.

"Damn," Dirk says slowly, not touching it, just staring. Your bulge coils further out, seeking, already dripping wet in case there's anywhere for your genetic material to go. You hate your body so much, this human has a knife and is willing to use it to cut pieces off of you, fuck, if you had your hands free you'd be trying to physically stuff your bulge back in right now. "We get lucky here, mister royalty, or you guys all have a hentai handshake down there?"

"I-I don't know what that means," you stammer.

"That's enough, Dirk," Jane says, and you could kiss her, you're so grateful. "Let's take a break for a while."

"I'm just furthering our understanding of xenobiology," Dirk says, but he steps away from you. "But I guess that can wait for next time."

He doesn't do your pants back up. But they don't hurt you anymore. They just leave.

**Dirk: touch base.**

You put some distance between yourselves and the makeshift interrogation room. Give it a minute to settle. Then you ask. "Jane? You'll let me know if I'm crossing lines, right?"

It takes a second before Jane nods. You watch her putting her thoughts in order. "I'm trying. I'm... glad you stopped. I don't want us to do anything gratuitous." She grimaces. "More gratuitous than listening to Jake in the first place."

"Fair." You're weighing your own words carefully, examining your motivations. "I'm in control of
what I'm doing. And we're still sort of feeling him out at this point. Getting a sense of how we'll get through to him. I don't plan on pushing any one tactic too hard until we know which ones are really working."

"Okay," Jane says, and gives you a one-armed sideways hug. "That's what I wanted to hear."

You lean down and kiss her hair. "You should keep being the good cop to my bad cop, though. I think that's going pretty well."

"You got it, Mister Strider," she says. "I'm going to go poke through the kitchen and see if I can rustle up something approximating a decent meal. Care to join me?"

"I'll meet you there in a few," you say. "I want to go wash the alien panic off first." Jane lets you go and you slope off to the showers.

Jane: seek comfort.

You slam around awkwardly in the kitchen, too nauseous for anything already prepared, too rattled to cook. You end up in the corner of the kitchen by the oven, holding half a cup of flour and feeling like the whole world is going to come apart on you if you so much as breathe too loud.

You’re wet—absurdly, horribly wet, to the point you can feel the slick cling of your panties with every breath.

Roxy wanders into the kitchen, opens the fridge, stares into it. “So how’s my Janey-girl doin’ tonight?” she asks the refried beans.

“She wants a hug,” you say, and your voice is embarrassingly squashed and tiny. You sound all of six, a lost little girl.

“Oh, babe,” Roxy says, and is on you in an instant, between your legs. Her wiry arms are warm and her lips are sticky, and when you shiver at the press of her mouth to your neck she laughs, kindly.

You catch one of her thighs between yours and squeeze, and you’re so on edge you can't stand it, can't bear to even think about how it feels or why. "Okay. Maybe more than just a hug," you admit.

“Shhh, shh, baby girl, shh,” Roxy murmurs. “I’m gonna take care of you, don’t you fret,” and she’s whispering lipsticky kisses all down your throat, working her way under your shirt. Her long fingers are chill from the fridge, and you gasp when she slides them over your breasts. You can feel the shock of it pulse all through your cunt, you’re wordless before Roxy even hooks your bra down and fastens her warm, clever mouth over a nipple.

“There’s my girl,” she murmurs, cupping between your legs. “There’s my sweetie.” Everything is molten heat and the electric pounding of your pulse and you whine in frustration when she stops to tease you. You want something inside you, something to bear down on. You bite her ear and she laughs, and you hear—dimly—someone else laugh, too. Jake, Jake’s watching.

“Get over here, English,” you rasp, and he’s beside you in an instant, sinking his teeth into your lower lip as Roxy finally deigns to work two fingers up your hungry cunt. You come screaming, wordless, clawing at both of them, wild with the relief of it all.

“God,” you finally manage to pant, juddering all over with overstimulated aftershocks as Roxy keeps working her fingers in and out of you. You kneel her gently away. “Goodness, wow. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Jane,” Jake says, laughing a little.
“I did all the work,” Roxy protests, and clicks her teeth at Jake’s nose.

“I was there for moral support,” Jake says, and shoots finger guns at her. “You’re welcome, Roxy!”

“I’ll show you moral friggin’ support, you pompous good-lookin’ blowhard,” Roxy growls, and launches herself at him. “I’m gonna support your head right off your shapely neck!” They go rolling across the kitchen floor with far more enthusiasm than grace, laughing and kicking and shedding articles of clothing.

You’re still holding the half-cup of flour, like a talisman. You carefully set it on the counter, then join the fray. Someone’s got to take care of things around here.

**Dirk: continue.**

You have to hand it to Dame Lalonde: she knew how to trick out a crib in style. The upstairs bathroom is plush, with shiny fixtures and towels as fluffy as kittens, and the shower has water pressure to kill for. Metaphorically speaking. "Things you would kill for" is a less hypothetical category than it used to be.

You strip off, step into the hot spray, and get to work scrubbing that long session of interspecies cooperation off your skin. You're already learning a lot from this experience. Frankly you're learning things about yourself that you were pretty content not knowing.

Still, there's no point denying it now and letting yourself get frustrated enough to fuck something up. You run a hand down your torso and get a loose grip on your cock, which is not exactly standing at attention but at least registering some obvious interest. You think about watching the troll's arrogance crumble, the way his protests just fell apart over the course of that session. You think about the moment when he started saying *please*. It sounds alien in his voice, with that weirdly liquid accent.

*I'll do whatever you want, please don't hurt me anymore.* His hands cuffed behind him and the tension across his shoulders from holding that pose. His sharp teeth and split lip, his eyes stunningly intense with their yolk-yellow sclera and silvery purple irises. His cool too-smooth skin and the fact that he has gills and the fact that his junk was squirming around and drooling on itself while you had him completely helpless.

You knew you liked power stuff. You knew you liked some kinds of nonhuman stuff. You somehow weren't expecting crucial revolutionary efforts to strand you in the heart of Boner City.

Well. Once you're there, the quickest way out is a direct assault.

You imagine him panting out more of those desperate offers. *I'll do anything you want.* You wonder if you could trust him with your dick between those spike teeth. You picture the mix of fear and anger on his face if you said something like that out loud. You hold onto your cock tighter and start pumping, steady and slow.

You wonder what that tentacle dick of his would feel like, whether it would have the same cool pliability as the rest of him, whether the stuff dripping from it would feel slick or sticky. You squeeze your cock rhythmically and wonder if it's anything like he would feel. Does he have a hole you could fuck him in? You think he must. There must be something. He'd be weirdly cool around you, reminding you how inhuman he is, and he'd be so helpless, so eager to please. Anything you want.

You picture him loose-jointed and weak, the way he rolled easily in your grip when you carried him to the van. Easy, soft, willing as a puppet in your hands and that spike of heat in your groin almost hurts. Yeah. Like that. Your puppet alien prince, spilled out in front of you, legs open while you...
work your way into him and thrust into cool smooth strangeness, let him know what he's fucking for, let him know that if he's here to take care of humans like they think they know how to do then this is what that actually means, giving it up, letting you pound him, letting you, god, your breath quick, harsh pants and your forearm aching and your balls tight, letting you drill his pretty alien ass until you come, stifling the noise so it doesn't echo off the shower walls.

You take a few deep breaths, stick your face in the shower spray, shake your head like a wet dog. Fuck. Okay, you've got a weird boner for the captive alien. You know that. You can handle it. Jane's right; you don't want to do anything grosser than you have to. You're fucked up, but you have it under control.

Keep it in your fantasies, and keep it in your pants when you're actually interrogating him. It's a plan. You can stick to it.
Chapter 2

Jane: show mercy.

For your next visit you figure you should bring your captive some food: he has a good idea how scary you can be, so now you need to remind him that's not all you are. When you let yourselves into the bathroom he’s figured out how the sink works, and has contorted his tall, solid frame awkwardly down and around the basin so as to have cold water pouring full-blast over his clipped fin. Your heart gives a weird, acidic kind of throb, and you clear your throat. He doesn’t seem to have heard.

When you kick his ankle lightly, he startles so badly his legs go out from under him and one bend of his horn gets hooked around the faucet, which gives an ominous splintering crackle as his heels scrabble for purchase. He’s making that high warbling siren noise that’s apparently the troll equivalent of crying. You’ve got a hand on his tangled horn and another on his cuffed wrists before you really think about it and you lever him carefully down and back, until he’s crouched on his knees before the two of you and shaking like a leaf. You feel like a monster.

“Don’t,” he warbles, “please, don’t, please, I’ll talk, I’ll talk—”

“That’s good,” you say, as firmly as you can. “We’re glad to hear it. We want to know more about your anatomy today.”

“It’s day?” he asks. “I thought... I...” Then he shakes his head, squares out his shoulders. “I, I mean, sure, boss, uh. Anything.”

“Right,” you say. “Okay. Let’s start with your teeth. Are you an obligate carnivore, or can you get adequate nutrition from vegetable sources?”

You and Dirk run carefully through the list Roxy’s written up, from what you’re pretty sure you’ll need to know to keep the guy alive—water, meat, salt, the temperature in the cell could be warmer but it’s not bad—to where, exactly, it hurts most to get punched. The face. The gill slits. Dirk strips the troll’s ruined shirt off, digs blunt nails at the long dark seams of the opercula, and the alien shakes and warbles and grits those terrifying shark teeth and doesn’t struggle.

Dirk puts his hands on the troll’s thighs.

“It’s an autonomic reaction,” the troll whimpers. “The—my—it just does that sometimes, the bone bulge, when I’m, when, I. I. Oh, god. Please don’t, please don’t hurt me there, I’ll do anything you want but don’t cut me there.”

Dirk’s face is perfectly blank. His hands squeeze the troll’s legs, just a little, and he’s looking at the steady drip of gooey colored tears down the troll’s cheeks. You feel sick.

“Remove his pants,” you say anyway. You’re wearing down his resistance, reducing him to a thing, an enemy, an animal. Your guardians are gone, taken by the trolls one by one. Your world is being revised by aliens with or without humanity’s consent. He doesn’t deserve your forbearance.

He doesn’t resist. He even wiggles a little, to help Dirk get them off.

Finally, he’s naked on the tile, crouched awkwardly down to try and protect the disturbing purple mess of his genitals but not defiant, not resisting, just waiting for the next thing you want from him. You take a step forward and watch him flinch, like a ripple effect. The face is the most sensitive, he’s said. The rest of the body’s tougher, armored with a different kind of skin. You cup his cheek and he
stops breathing.

“You’ve been very good,” you say, and dare to stroke him, very gently. Good cop. His pupils actually dilate, widening out minutely from their needle-slits, and his lashes flutter.

“Ohh,” he breathes out. You watch his shoulders slowly relax from their nervous hunch and wonder what he’s feeling right now.

“Are you hungry?” you ask.

“Mnnh...” His eyes are heavy-lidded, dark. He looks utterly spellbound.

You give him a little shake. “I asked, are you hungry?”

“I. Wh... I, I mean, y-yeah.”

Dirk looks at you for a long moment, then backs out into the hall to fetch one of the bowls, the one with the tuna and salmon cat food from the back of the pantry. You wish you had real fish, real meat to offer, but you’ve been camped out in this house for a while and are mostly down to sandwiches with home-made bread and really creative filling. Shopping is risky, and none of you are entirely certain what to do with your parents’ and custodians’ bank accounts. You all dropped off the grid fast, and now you have this troll to hide...

When you break contact with your charge he starts to lean after you, then catches himself, blinking hard, and refocuses on the food in Dirk’s hand.

You take the bowl, set it down on the floor. He stares from you, to the bowl—his nose wrinkles a little—to Dirk.

“Um,” he says.

“We’re going to need the bowl back,” you say. “So we can’t leave it here with you. I’m sure you understand.”

“Right,” he says. He looks so uncertain.

You wait a moment longer and you can watch the process as he weighs his pride and discards it, the shift in his expression, the change in his posture. He rocks forward onto his knees and leans down, bending himself double to be able to reach the bowl. He licks at the mush delicately at first, then makes a faint, whistly trilling sound and digs in. His tongue is long and just slightly pointed, a dark dry purplish gray, strong and flexible enough to get the food into his mouth with a surprising degree of fastidiousness.

He’s clearly so very hungry. He bolts down the food in quick, needy mouthfuls, not really stopping to chew—that's probably normal if he's naturally carnivorous, isn't it? Not like his teeth are well-suited to grinding things up. The entire can's worth disappears so fast; you wish you had brought a second one with you. Well. He'll just be that much more grateful for it next time.

The bowl skids on the tile when he’s going after the last stray morsels, and he chases it awkwardly. Dirk puts his foot down on the edge of the bowl to hold it still and the troll makes another trilling noise. A word, in his own language? Or just a sound of relief? He licks up every last smudge of food he can find, his swollen cheekbone brushing against the toe of Dirk's boot.

You lean down once the bowl’s been licked completely clean and he flinches, then holds very still. You’re horribly aware of how close your hand is to his cheek, how he’s staring not at you but at
your fingers. His expression is raw, sick hope.

You stroke his face, just once, gently, along his plum-bruised temple. His eyelids shutter closed, and he huffs out through his teeth. His eyelashes are so dark, and so long, the skin of his eyelids a deep sunset-y slate color.

“Good boy,” you say.

You take the bowl, and you tuck it under your arm, and you walk out of the room. Your spine is straight and your face is composed and your knees don’t wobble, not even a little.

**Dirk: play hero.**

You clap your hands on Jake's shoulders and give them a rub. Your star player for today's episode of Masterpiece Troll Theater. "How you doing, champ? You all fired up for this?"

"Raring to go, Mister Strider!" Jake says, slapping a fist into an open palm.

You slide your hands around his waist, rest your chin on his shoulder. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were excited about the chance to finally land a hit on me."

Jake sputters, adorably blustery, protesting that he damn well can keep up with you in fisticuffs *just fine*. You let him brag. It's cute. Behind you Jane is grilling Roxy on her camera setup again. She's like you, Jane is: she wants to know where all the pieces are and how they're going to fit together. You respect that.

Still, eventually you have to pull the pin and throw the grenade. The plan's only valuable if it gets put into motion. You smack Jake on the ass. "Go get him, tiger."

Jake goes tearing off down the hall. You hear the door of the troll's holding cell slam open and start counting back from thirty. Jake starts shouting. The troll starts making that terrible pulsating siren sound, and—yes. Wow, you weren't even expecting that. He's screaming for Jane.

Three, two, one, and then you're following him, bursting into the little bathroom and grabbing Jake in a headlock to haul him backward, away from the troll. "That's enough!" you bark. "That's enough, get out of here!"

Jake yells more slur-studded invective as you drag him out of the room. Jane slips by you to go in there, and you get Jake down to the end of the hall where there's enough room for a good swing.

You let go of him and pull off your shades. "Okay. Go for it."

He makes a face. "Doesn't seem sporting, I have to say."

You glare at him. "Jake. Come on. We'll be here all afternoon if you have to get past my actual defenses. Man up and do it."

"Don't you let Jane hear you using language like that," Jake says. He cocks a fist. You close your eyes.

You gotta hand it to him, he doesn't hold back once he's committed to it. He belts you a good one right in the left eye and that *hurts*, hot damn. You stagger a little and let your breath hiss out through your teeth and just... take a minute for the bright blossoming pain to crest and fade.

"Ow," you say, to let him know his efforts are appreciated. "How does it look?"
"Purpling up already," Jake says, and brushes his lips over the worst of the sting. "It's almost
dashing, you know."

You snort. "I'll keep that in mind next time I need to dress for a hot date. Okay. I should get back in
there."

Jake chuckles you on the shoulder companionably. "Fight the good fight, sir."

The troll is curled up on the floor right where you left him when you get into the room. Jane's
crouched beside him. "How is he?" you ask. The troll startles and looks up. He's crying again, but
you don't see evidence of any serious damage, just a bloody nose and a few new inky smudges
across the stomach.

"It's not too bad," Jane says. "Are you all right?"

You shrug. "I'll be okay. Fuck, it's bright in here." You're used to going everywhere with your
shades on, and the light in here is enough to get uncomfortable without them. You boost yourself up
on the sink and unscrew one of the bulbs to bring the effective light level down a bit. "There, that's
better."

been bothering him this whole time. You unscrew the second bulb, then climb back down, making
sure the troll gets a look at your shiner. His eyebrows rise. "He hit you?"

"You gotta understand," you say, "Jake has really strong feelings about all this."

He actually smiles at you. You're transfixed at the little slice of bloody fang. Giving him an outside
threat was definitely the right call for this stage of things; he's looking at you like you're his knight in
shining armor. Jesus fuck, this kid is easy.

Jane helps the troll sit up and touches his sides really carefully like she's checking for injuries around
his gills. "He'd already lost his parents when he was very young, so he was exceptionally close to his
grandmother. Having your people take her away has been... very hard for him."

"Wow, yeah, I guess it would be," the troll says, frowning like he's thinking hard. "He had
custodians and lost them and then got another one and lost that one too?"

Jane laughs gently, covering her mouth with her hand. "I'm sorry. Do Beforans use different words
for family members?"

"We don't, um, we don't really have family, not in the same emotional way," the troll says. He's
getting so much more comfortable with Jane, so willing to just volunteer information for her. "Our
eggs are hatched out and go through their early care communally, and then there's a, um, a symbiotic
arrangement with other species later on. Sterile members of their populations come and choose
young trolls and take 'em away from the creche to start growing up an' all. We take care of each
other, us and our lusii."

Wow, fascinating. "But you must have some kind of bonding mechanisms going on somewhere,"
you say. "You're a social species."

His nose wrinkles. "We get by just fine with quadrantmates, mostly," he says. "Um, the people that a
troll is romantically involved with."

So they default to romance with multiple partners, is that how you're supposed to parse that? You
open your mouth to ask and catch Jane giving you the not now, you're getting distracted look. Right.
Alien sociology can wait.

"Okay, we can work with that, then," Jane says. "Try to picture that—suddenly your quadrantmates, your friends' quadrantmates, just disappear. You expect them to come home and one day they just don't. And it keeps happening, but people keep telling you nothing is wrong."

“And there’s all these aliens skulking around,” you say. “Meeting with your political leaders. Smilin’ real wide on TV. Making all kinds of polite, inoffensive noises about how you could clean up this area or reform that sector. And the last thing you remember your—your quadrantmate saying is ‘Yo, man, I just don’t trust those guys’.”

The look on his face is a dawning, sickly kind of horror. He’s already starting to curl up, keep his fins away from you. "It wasn't me, though," he says, this sad, pleading tone like he knows that's not what you want to hear. "I swears it wasn't."

You shrug one shoulder, just a bit. “But you’re here,” you say. “And whoever did it isn’t.”

He looks confused for a beat or two, then outraged. “Are you telling me that dirt-ape attacked me on account of aggression transference?”

“Our partner Jake lashed out because our planet’s getting invaded and our parents are getting fucking abducted and possibly put down, who fucking knows, by a bunch of shark-toothed gray bastards who go cruising our parks and kissing babies afterwards,” you growl. “And because we’ve had you for days now and gotten exactly jack shit to show for it but bruised knuckles.”

"We aren't—we don't hurt people," the troll protests. "We—no, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," and he's cringing then as you raise a hand.

You take deep breaths and let him actually see you keeping your cool. "Don't you dare say you guys aren't hurting anyone," you say. "Don't you dare look at Jane and tell her she's not hurting."

Bullseye. He’s got such a thing for her: his face crumples into a look of helpless misery. "I'm sorry," he says, curling away from her. "I'm sorry. I don't... I don't want to make you feel bad."

Damn, Jane does a good soldiering-bravely-on-through-heartbreak face, too. "I believe you," she says, patting his shoulder. "This is just... really hard for us, you know? We’re lonely, and we’re so worried, and it's so hard to get anyone to even listen, much less give us any help." She sniffs a little. Well done, Crocker. "It's not as though we like hurting you, you know? We just need information so badly. We need help. And we can't...." She looks down. "Sometimes we can't be as kind as we want to."

“I’d help,” he blurs out. “I will, I’ll help you, I’m, I can, I’d—I’d help.” He takes a deep breath, and there’s that fucking unreal blush of his. “Anything, Jane. I'm... so sorry we've hurt you so much.”

Jane glances at you over his shoulder, raises an eyebrow. You shift your elbows a little, nod at the kid. Message received: she pulls him into a tight hug. Those insane carnivore teeth are right at her neck. He could have her throat out in an instant.

Instead all the tension leaves him in a burst, and he makes an eerie cicada sigh, nuzzling into the tight curve of one of her shoulders.

"Anythin'," he says quietly. “Boss.”

"Thank you, Cronus," Jane says. She pulls back, and he looks like he badly wants to stay cuddled up to her, but he's got no way to hold on. She keeps her hands on his shoulders and gives him a friendly
little smile. "How would you like to go get cleaned up?"

He glances at the disabled bathtub, then the sink. “...Go?”

"Upstairs," Jane says. "Come on, up you go."

She gets him to his feet and then you step up behind him, hands on the cool skin of his forearms to steer him out of the room. His fins flutter when you touch him but he knows better by now than to pull away.

Jane leads the way upstairs to the swank-ass bathroom up there, with you herding your troll—her troll, at the rate things are going—along after her. She gets the water going while you undo the padlocks on his cuffs. You don't want to get the leather wet if you can help it; you're still hoping to use those bad boys for recreational purposes at some point. Weird as that's going to be now that you'll be picturing a helpless alien in them all the time.

You take a pair of standard police-style cuffs off your belt, because you'd already planned for this shower exercise. You snap one cuff around his right wrist and march him up to the tub so you can close the other one around the showerhead. He makes an unreal sound at that, this liquid burbling “Agghgh!” and that's right, he's had his hands cuffed behind his back for all this time, not above his head. Stupid. You could have ripped a muscle on him or something, having him switch positions so fast; you didn't think. You press a hand to the taut curved blade of his shoulder, and he moans.

Looks like trolls don't make fists—they flex their fingers in hooks, like he’s clawing, or kneading a stress ball. He doesn't even strike out, just drags his short blunt nails down the tile of the shower in front of him, breathing fast and light from obvious pain.

This is Jane’s territory now, the hurt-comfort thing. You step back. "His shoulders could probably use some work," you tell her. You don't like the idea that you could have screwed him up by being careless; that's not how you roll.

“Hm,” goes Jane, that particular problem-solving noise, and she prods at him. The alien obligingly goes “Agghgh!” again and then.... kind of writhe. Hauled up tall and lithe instead of cringing bloodily all over the floor, it’s pretty captivating. Your mouth is dryer than all the sand in the Sahara.

“Hoo,” says Jane, “well, then,” and she's dark enough that she doesn't really blush visibly but you know that expression well. The troll braces his weight on his forearms, leaning against the shower wall; she slicks her hands up with soap and gets her thumbs into the strangely bundled muscles of his back, rubs small circles. He doesn’t make the aggh sound again, but he does produce some progressively more interesting noises, starting with ‘dubstep cricket’ and scaling up to ‘pigeon buzzsaw boogaloo’. By the time Jane’s hands are drifting around his narrow hips, hesitating over that pretty gray ass, he’s a limp mess of clicks and hums, his pupils blown out like he's a cat on acid.

“Feeling better?” Jane asks. Her breath’s coming pretty fast. You don’t really blame her.

He doesn’t even answer in words. He just nods, forehead squeaking against the shower tile, and what you can see of his face is smooth and strange and rapturous.

"Duck your head under the water for me," she says, "and let's do your hair."

The troll moves like he's dazed, like he's drunk, letting Jane shift him around and wet down his hair. When she starts to lather him up you're back to the experimental zoological electronica, this chirping, thrumming symphony that does things up and down the back of your neck and makes you wish you were recording him. Recording him, hell, it makes you wish you were the one playing that long strange muscular body like a precision instrument. You adjust yourself some in your pants when
they’re not looking and just barely resist the urge to keep your hand down there.

Jane gets him back under the water to rinse the suds out of his hair. You watch the melting surrender on his face and the taut breathless attention on hers and this incident is somehow making the list of 'sexiest things you've ever done,' which was not part of the plan at all. You keep expecting her to kiss him, and she keeps not doing it. She's excruciatingly tender around his clipped fin.

"There," she says, and the troll gives her a little blissed-out smile. She runs her fingers down his chest, barely touching the forward edges of his gill flaps. "Is it safe to get soap near these?" she asks.

"Yeah," he says. It sounds like he's going to start crying again. "You're being so careful. It's good. It's so good, Jane."

She glances over at you as she reaches for the soap again, and he startles, like he's just now remembering that you're there. He gives you this guilty, alarmed look like you just caught him trying to feel up your girlfriend.

You let him see you curl your hands into fists, and there he goes, tension and wild terror snapping every muscle on his body taut again.

“Shh,” Jane says, patting his side, then fixes you with a glare as hot and sharp as a cutting torch. “Dirk, cut it out.”

“Cut what out?” you ask, raising your eyebrows. Spreading your fingers. You can see the glint of amusement in her eyes, the old fond Oh, you. Something wound-up and unhappy in your guts settles back down.

The troll takes a number of deep, trembly breaths. He looks like he’s been hit over the head with a frying pan: totally, comically lost.

"Relax," Jane tells him, soaping down his front with maybe a little bit less lingering attention, her hands still super delicate around his gills. You realize when she gets awkwardly down to waist level that his tentacle junk hasn't even started coming out to investigate—there’s just a neat, nearly colorless slit where all the goo and purple squirmy stuff should be—and you're not entirely sure what to do with that information. It sure looked like he was getting worked up. Conversely, he didn't seem to be having a good time at all when you were hitting him, but his junk definitely wanted to know what was up with that. Aliens: bizarre and fascinating.

She gives him a squeeze of the liquid soap and he washes between his legs himself, awkward and wrong-handed, blushing purple under the older discoloration of bruises. You'd put that down to just embarrassment at you seeing him, but he seems to be trying to hide from her while he does it, too. Your dick is pretty sure all that awkward shyness is great. Jane's chewing her lip while she tries not to stare and her nipples are two stiff little points under her wet shirt and when she glances over at you again it's a sort of commiserating expression: oh no, he's hot.

Jane shuts the water off, finally, and flicks extra water from her fingers. Swipes her wet hair back from her face.

“Towel,” she says, and you toss her one. She mops her face dry and turns to him, getting him dry in brisk no-nonsense strokes that have him tripping out again in record time. Do trolls ever touch each other? He acts like he’s having a religious experience, and when she pats down his ankles and goes to vacate the tub he makes a chirrupy protesting noise, and snags the corner of the towel.

You both startle—he's made hardly any active moves this whole time, let alone pouncing ones—and
he flinches back immediately.

“I just,” he stammers, side-eying you, “you’re—you’re wet too, thought I could, I, uh.” He swallows hard, flushed purple from fins to throat. “I thought I could have a go at making you feel as nice as you made me, sweet thing?”

Okay, that’s a come-on, or you’re a potato. Jane looks like she isn’t sure whether she wants to cream herself or burst out laughing.

“That's sweet of you,” she says, cupping his face in one hand. Bam, instant jelly troll. “Maybe another time, if you’re good, and we think we can trust you a little more.”

“Okay,” he breathes.

Jane smiles at you. "Take him down, please?"

You give her a little salute just because you can. "You got it. Boss.” The troll looks like he can't decide whether you're fucking with him or not. You act like you haven't noticed the look on his face at all.

Basic cuffs off, nice steel-wrapped leather back on. You lock them together in front of him instead of behind his back this time. "That should be a little easier on your shoulders. Don't make me regret it, okay? Jane's going to make sad faces if I have to kick the shit out of you again."

He laughs nervously. "In the state I'm in?" he says. He holds up his cuffed hands so you can see how much the effort makes him shake. "Couldn't fight off a baby mewbeast right now."

"That's what we like to hear," you say, and you wink so he doesn't have to take you seriously if he can convince himself not to. He looks at your black eye like he's trying to figure you out and failing. Good luck, dude. Plenty of people without the alien handicap have tried to figure you out and failed. "Come on. Let's get a move on."

You take him back downstairs and he's a good, cooperative little prisoner who doesn't so much as peep about being put back in the cell. Jane tells him to be good and she'll see him soon, while you scope out the discreet little black box in a corner of the ceiling now: Roxy got the camera set up in there while you had him out. Everything's going fine.

You barely make it to the end of the hallway before Jane grabs you, and it takes all of ten seconds before you have her pinned to the wall with her legs flexing around your head to hold your tongue right where she wants it. Everything's going hella fine.

Cronus: surrender.

You wonder what day it is. You wonder how long it’s been since that bowl of gross processed mush that was your last meal. It feels like ages, like an eternity. You thought you knew what hunger was, you’ve missed meals before, working on one project or another. This isn’t missing meals. This is your stomach replaced with fire ants. You try to drink a lot of water from the tap but it’s just more reminder that you need salt, you’re fucking crazy for salt, for something to put the salt on, for anything. Your head pounds with hunger, your guts cramp with it, and you lie curled up in the empty disabled tub flexing your legs just to feel some pressure against your back and wonder if you can hear yourself dying. It’s not even a poetic thought, just a desperate, scary one that fills your world. All you have left is the sounds your body can make, in this bright, bare little block, the scrape of your horns against tile and plaster and plastic, the wet acidic gurgle of your organs all fighting each other. What sound is dying going to make? You stopped composing lyrics a while back—you can’t think
of the words. You ran out of songs to hum to yourself. Talking’s too much effort and no one’s around, anyway, no one’s fucking here.

You’re so scared that no one’s coming for you, that you’re completely abandoned to this bright white hell. It’s got to have been nights, plural, the last time Dirk said anything about time was before the last, ages ago, hours, he said ‘days’. You hold on to that plural. Days, days, they’d have noticed you were gone. They have to have noticed you were gone.

But maybe they just wouldn’t care.

In another life you were a dumb shit who thought despair was getting turned down by someone cute. You put words like ‘the redolent tang of the abyssal depths’ around the concept, you pompous fuck. ‘An aching gulf of sweetly bitter tears’, the hell were you even on about? You know what an aching bloody gulf is, now, it’s your fucking digestion pouch, and if anyone let you talk to the guy you were before all this happened to you you’d probably eat him raw. Despair tastes like you worrying your lip open just for the flavor of it.

You thought—after that last time you thought maybe you could have something with Jane, too. It was so good, having her touch you like that. So intense. You've seen pale porno that wasn't that intense. She was so gentle, and she took care of you so kindly, you just. You wish she would come back and touch you like that again. It's the only good thing that's happened to you since you got to Earth in the first place. Maybe it would help you forget how totally fucking terrible you feel right now.

What if she's not coming back? What if Dirk got pissed about last time, and Jane decided she didn't want to risk her real palemate over some piece of alien trash? They all think it's your fault their guardians are gone. You guess you are part of the problem, or you were. You're not sure you're still part of CivCorps anymore, if nobody's come to save you.

Like, who are you kidding, they didn’t even like you, even though you tried so hard to make nice. You could tell they resented you for your nobility. Kankri had sold you hook, line, and sinker that you’d all just be trolls together, in the service, that no one’d blink twice at either of you and you’d make all kinds of friends and do such great work, and then it was just the same as ever once the ink’d dried on the contracts. No one ever gave you a chance or a second look or anything more than the bare fucking minimum of respect you were owed, and Kankri went off to some other department without so much as asking you if you minded, and then you were alone with all these strangers you had to play nice with and you hated them and they hated you and you all just spent every day smiling at one another like you weren’t tired enough of each other to scream. They probably just found someone else to take over your department, someone properly greenish and servile, someone who liked taking everyone’s shit, and then they all wrote you off, relieved.

Now you're not part of anything, problem or solution. You're just trash, used up and hollowed out and slowly crumbling in on yourself.

The door opens and you can't even summon the energy to get up. You just lie there in the tub, squinting up at Dirk and Jane, wondering where your strength is. Something smells wonderful, enough to make you start salivating, and you swallow hard against the fresh wave of desperate hunger. You'd cry if you had anything left to make tears with.

"Hold this," Jane says, shoving something at Dirk so she can drop down onto the edge of the tub beside you. You scrabble faintly at the porcelain. "Sshh, here, let me help you. It's going to be all right." She reaches down to pull you up into a sitting position and you move with her, slow and tired and just incapable of fighting. She strokes your face and you chirr sadly.
"Here, start with this," Dirk says. He passes her a plastic bottle full of something bright yellow-green.

"Right," Jane uncaps the bottle. "This is formulated for humans so it's probably not quite ideal for you, but it was the best we could get our hands on. I want you to try just a little bit and see how it sits." She tilts your head up with one hand and brings the bottle to your lips with the other.

The stuff in the bottle tastes mostly like sweet, with a little bit of tangy flavor to it that you can't identify. Your whole body thrums with yes please more like that as soon as it hits your tongue. She could tell you it was poison and you'd still drink it.

When she pulls the bottle away you whine, and you try to lean forward to go after it. "It's all right," she says. She sets the bottle down on the edge of the tub and strokes your belly soothingly. "Give that a minute to settle and then you can have more. We can try some solid food after that if you're up for it."

"Thank you," you croak. "I'm so. S-so hungry."

"I know," Jane says. She strokes your hair back from your forehead. "We've been really low on supplies lately, and it's been hard for all of us. But we had a little good luck today."

"I'm glad," you say. You are glad. You want her to be okay. She's so nice to you. "Can I have more now?"

She lets you have more of the sweet yellow drink and it feels like every mouthful makes you measurably less ruined. Jane and her kind hands and her miracle drink are the best thing that ever happened to you.

This time when she takes the bottle away you don't complain. You trust her. "How does that feel? Do you think you could keep down some solid food too?"

"Yes, please," you say.

Dirk hands Jane the plate he's been holding for her, and when you can see what's on it you whimper a little. She's got a whole fish there, about the size of your open hand plus the tail fins. It's baked golden and smells so good you could die.

"Is that... can I have all of that?" you want to know.

"Only as much as you can eat comfortably," Jane says sternly. "If only you’d been more cooperative sooner you wouldn’t have had to get to this point. I’m worried you’ve gotten yourself to such a state where you’ll just go bringing it all back up. But Jake risked going out to catch a few of these today, so we’re all having them for dinner—it took some fast talking to win one for you. You’re still not exactly his favorite guy right now."

That’s right, they’re in hiding, laying low from you guys. The thought fills you with a weird, queasy shame.

"If you could just tell him for me," you offer, “I’ll thank him for every bone I keep down."

"Literally?" Dirk says, and you look up at him in confusion. "Can you actually eat the bones and scales and shit? Humans tend to have trouble with that unless the fish is really tiny."

"Well, yeah," you say, because that figures, their digestive systems are optimized for soft plant matter, and then you remember they probably want more information. "I mean, us trolls, chief, we can handle bones and scales and junk just fine. Lots of important minerals and stuff in that business.
"Does a body good."
You remember being just a little kid, and your lusus chivvying you to finish everything it caught for you, while you pitched a fuss as it nosed discarded tailfins back into your lap. You were such a dumb shit.

"Well then," Jane says. "Open wide."

You look back at her and discover that while you were distracted she's been cutting the fish up into little bite-sized pieces. You open your mouth and she pops a piece right in there, her fingers brushing your lip. It's the most delicious thing, sweet flesh and bright bone and the wonderful tang of extra salt on the meat. You swallow and open your mouth for another bite. Jane gives it to you.

This whole thing is just turning so overwhelmingly intense, you can barely stand it. You're so achingly pale for her that every little thing she does for you makes you want to purr, to let go and lie back and enjoy it all, brainless and content. You lick her fingers when she feeds you and her breath stutters, her scent changing in odd, earthy ways, getting sharper and saltier. You don't mind the smell of humans anymore, you don't think. It just took some getting used to. Jane smells wonderful, like comfort and safety and soft warm hands.

She feeds you every last scrap of the fish, down to the tailtip, and by the end of the meal you feel so much better. She lets you lick her fingers clean, slow tender swipes of your tongue as you try and tell her how much you're feeling without fucking it up with words. Everyone's always turned you down when you talked to them, sang for them, but if she'd just hold still and let you have this... and she does. You feel like you're getting away with something, but Dirk hasn't so much as raised an eyebrow at you. He's just standing there and watching. It's kind of creepy, but—the way his eyes track your mouth, and Jane's hands, and he's just looking at you so hard, it's kind of flattering, too. It's kind of hot.

After the absolute last of the fish is gone from her skin and you're just nuzzling her palm for kicks and you both know it, Jane says, "Why don't you come out of there? That can't be comfortable."

"Okay," you say, and let her help you to your feet. If there were anything in your cell to build a pile with, you'd hope that was where you were headed now; you just feel so stupidly much better, with company and affection and a belly full of food. You lean into Jane as you step out of the tub, and you want to really make her understand how grateful you are for her patience, her attention, all the overwhelming kindness she's been treating you to even though she doesn't have to. "When I get rescued," you say, "I'll make sure you're safe, alright? I won't let anyone hurt you, Jane, or, or any of you. I'll talk with them, I'll do everything I can for you. You won't disappear."

Jane glances past you at Dirk for just a second. "Oh, sweetie," she says, and cups your face in both her warm little hands. Your vascular system seizes up with tenderness at the warmth of the gesture, and then kicks with fear at the look on her face.

Carefully, slowly, like it hurts to say it, Jane tells you, "Cronus, no one's even come looking for you."

No. No no no, god, you knew it. You knew it the whole time. No one even gives a fuck. But Jane holds you while you cry, and Dirk turns his head to the side, studying the wall all tense and embarrassed, giving your pain some respect. And it helps, it helps, it hurts so bad but they help.
You’re abandoned, but you’re not alone.

Jane: watch.

You come out of the day's session with your troll feeling good about the progress you're making. He's learning to believe in you. He's coming around. You make some celebratory lunch.

You've barely taken the first bite of your sandwich when the short-range radio on the kitchen counter crackles with Jake's voice. "Dirk? Jane? You might want to come see this, loves."

You trade glances. Dirk nods sharply. You dash back up to the observation room with your sandwiches still in hand. Roxy catches up with you on the way.

When the three of you tumble into the room together, Jake has the scene projected up on the wall from his laptop, a look on his face that you think is supposed to be jaded and cool, but doesn’t entirely pull it off. He has an unlit cigarette in his mouth and he rolls it from one corner to the other. "When you left he sort of curled up in a little ball, and then that turned into petting himself, and after that, well."

You look. Your alien is... well, still petting himself, one hand stroking across his face, kneading at his cheeks and jaw in an odd kittenish gesture between long strokes from his forehead to throat. So what you’ve been doing with him isn’t that far off from what he wants done, then, that’s interesting. That’s good. Then, abruptly, he pushes his joined hands down between his legs, and lets his purple tentacle... stuff just go wrapping around his other hand, squirming and pulsing rhythmically. There seems to be a lot more of it than you’d glimpsed before. He hunches forward to try to manage both operations at once. It can't be comfortable to hold the position; he has to stay curled fairly far forward to be able to reach, with the limited mobility the cuffs allow, and it seems like an absurdly delicate operation to keep one of his hands clean of the purple... fluid. You find yourself torn between second-hand embarrassment and being weirdly impressed.

"Holy shit," Dirk says softly, which is probably roughly what you're all thinking.

You keep coming back to the petting hand, how the utterly bereft desperation of that gesture shines through how alien it is. "He's trying to comfort himself," you say. The thought does things to you that you're really not comfortable examining closely.

Dirk sucks in a slow breath. "Do we let him?"

“Yes,” you say, and your voice is kind of rough. You clear your throat. “This is a valuable opportunity to gather extrapolatable data about his vulnerabilities and weak points for further manipulation and, and investigation. See?” you gesture at the screen, how he's practically nuzzling his cleaner hand again, focusing on rubbing small tight circles into his cheeks. “What if I did that to him?”

“Right now?” Roxy drawls. Dirk just slants her a sharp glare over the top of his shades. She grins.

“He’s still got another seventeen and a half hours to go,” you murmur. You probably shouldn’t know the time so exactly, but you’ve always liked to be precise.

"I guess it’d be good to know whether this actually helps him bolster his own resistance." Dirk sounds pretty hoarse himself. "Help us figure out what needs are the most intense."

"Right," you say. Roxy snickers. You'd elbow her if she were in reach.

You keep watching. It's the responsible thing to do, you tell yourself. You need the information. He
takes his time; it does look like he's at least as invested in the petting and nuzzling as he is in the movement between his legs. When he has to uncurl for a moment to give his back a rest, he's at least as likely to keep his hands up by his face as he is to keep fondling himself. Maybe part of the Beforans' desire to coddle and fuss over humans is rooted in some instinct they have for reassuring each other. Maybe that's evo-psych bullshit and you have no patience for it. Maybe you have enough data to build a theory on. None of you have left the observation room.

After a slow, shivery buildup that makes him start to squirm and eventually makes the gills along his sides gap open in brief flutters, he climbs awkwardly to his feet. He limps to the toilet and crouches over it, forearm flexing as he twists and pulls at himself more roughly, both hands now, head lolling back against the wall. It looks like he’s talking to himself, calling out, why didn’t you rig this for sound, why do you wish you could hear who he’s calling for—he reaches some kind of climax then, shuddering hard, and you can't see much detail at this distance but it looks like he's releasing a lot of fluid from somewhere behind the tentacle. Your cheeks are hot.

Jake laughs nervously. "Not sure I really want to know what we just saw there," he says.

"Oh," you say, "Oh, shit." You're still watching as your captive crumples, his face twisting up in a candidly ugly expression of misery. His shoulders shake, and tears run down his bruised cheeks despite how tightly he's screwing his eyes shut.

"He's ours," Dirk whispers. "We got him."

You fumble for Dirk's hand and hold on tight.
Chapter 3

Cronus: connect.

You've been trying to sleep just because it passes the time—if you let yourself pay too much attention to the fact that you're just stuck in here, in this little room, alone, where nobody cares and nobody's there to look after you, you're going to start screaming and just not stop. It's hard to sleep in an empty room but you try. You hoped maybe getting off would make you drowsy; sometimes that worked at home. It wasn't enough, even with the awful crying jag after.

When the door opens you sit up right away and curl all your limbs in around yourself even though that's dumb. If they want to see you, they'll make you move. If they want to hurt you, you don't have any defenses left. If you do everything you're told, maybe Jane will pap you a little more. This is all you have now, this room and these visits.

You cringe a little further when you see Jake follow Dirk and Jane in, Jake who was so angry with you before, who hurt you even after Dirk and Jane stopped. Maybe he's talked them around. Maybe they're giving up on you, because you've been too useless, too unhelpful, and he's still angry. Yeah, shit, he looks at you and there's this steely glint in his eye that means you're due to be spitting up more blood in about thirty seconds. Kid kicks like a hoofbeast.

Dirk puts a hand on his arm. "You're cool, right? You can handle yourself?"

"I'm all right," Jake says, bristling.

Then Dirk goes, "Hey, come on, bro," and they kiss, Dirk’s hand to his jaw, so delicately. Jake huffs and wraps one broad dark hand around Dirk’s long peach-candy fingers, but he gentles, inch by reluctant inch. You never thought you'd feel so grateful toward Dirk—you thought you were maybe waxing kind of pitch, if anything—but that looks nice. He looks nice.

"Cronus," Jane says, and you snap to attention, looking at her, hoping your flush isn't as obvious on your face as it feels. "Jake has promised to control his temper if you give him a fair chance to explain himself. We really do want you to understand where we're coming from."

“Okay, yeah, yes, I promise, I—I swear, boss. I want to.”

She smiles and nods once and it makes you shaky with relief right down to your bones. "I'm glad to hear it," she says.

“Us, too,” Dirk says, and you glance at him sidelong. His lips have gone vividly pink, and he stares you down like he knows what you’re fixating on and likes it.

They sit down with you and you try to scoop enough brain back into your addled pan to listen, like you promised, to Jake tell you about losing his guardian. About how awful the Beforans were to him when he tried to find her again, how no one would see him or talk to him or help him and how much it's making him crazy that they just keep pretending they aren't doing shit but helping out with the environment here and there and meanwhile more and more people are going missing. It makes you squirm with confusion, because it’s not right, it can’t be right—it goes counter to everything you ever got fed about culling, that no one would so much as lend an earfin to these kids' distress. How many nights did you compile reports about antlerbeasts and overfishing while somewhere over your head whole divisions of your Corps were apparently up to this shit? You almost can’t believe it. But before all this happened, you wouldn’t have believed they’d just write you the hell off, either. A guy
can evidently believe all kinds of things about reality that aren’t any amounts of factual.

Jake gets kind of loud and blustery sometimes and you're a little scared when he gets really going, remembering how he just hauled off and started kicking you before, but Dirk squeezes his shoulder when he starts to look really dangerous and he eases down again. Is this some kind of kinky thing where they're pale in all directions with each other? Is that why it was okay for Jane to feed you, and bathe you, and everything?

He tells you how humans have their problems and all but they've got their pride, too, and you’re nodding—they wanna be able to sort their own shit out instead of having some other species waltz in and make the choices for them. Isn’t it right for a race to decide their own destiny, and solve their own problems how they think is best? Wouldn’t you want to be left to master your own fate, weather your own storms, go on your own adventures, without getting yanked around by a bunch of shadowy jerks who don’t even know you and don’t care to? And yes, yes, of course you would. Of course you do. Story of your own fucking life, right there: Cronus, don’t stay out late, Cronus, don’t swim so far ahead of the school, don’t shove so hard, don’t play so loud, mind your manners, keep your voice down, let everyone else go first.

Jake has stopped talking and he's looking at you hard and that probably means it's your turn. You swallow. "I still don't totally get family, I think, not the way you guys do. But I, but I'm with you, chief, I feel you. I’m right there. Where the fuck does anyone get off telling anyone else how to live their life? We wanted to make stuff better but none of this is right. We shouldn't be trying to do it for you. We shouldn’t even be here in the first place. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry for everything."

He's quiet a second like you've surprised him with that one, and then he says, "Ha. My mates here did tell me you were a good egg. Should never have doubted them for a second!" He smiles, and it's weird how his face is such a similar shape and color to Jane's but his smile looks totally different than hers. "Now remember, a real man shows his feelings through his actions, not just his words."

You nod enthusiastically. "I wanna help, I do, wanna—I'll prove myself, okay? I know I ain't been good for much so far but I'll do what I can, I promise. I wanna make it right."

Jake smiles at you again and Jane's smiling too and that was the right answer, fuck, you finally did just what they wanted you to do and it feels so good. "Shake on it," Jake says, holding out his hand. It takes you a second and then you remember the human custom. It's kind of awkward with your hands still locked together and all, but you clasp his right hand in yours and he squeezes tight, pumping your joined hands up and down firmly. "In that case, I look forward to working with you, sir!"

You smile back. Has anyone ever said that to you and meant it before? You think not. "I'll do my best, chief. I won't let you down."

"That's what I like to hear," Jake says. He lets go your hand. "I hate to cut things short, but I should probably hike back upriver and see if I can catch us another night's dinner! I hear you were awfully fond of that bluegill yesterday."

"Best meal I've had on Earth," you say without hesitation, and he laughs, like that made him really happy to hear. You're giddy. They're accepting you. You're going to be okay. "So, so thanks for that, and, ah, good luck with the repeat performance."

He makes a rough ch-chk noise in his mouth and pretends to shoot you with finger-guns, winking. “Gotcha, champ,” he says happily, and is gone in a swirl of broad shoulders and bright smile.

There’s a long moment while you just stand there and try to wrestle your vascular system back into
some semblance of order, and then Dirk leans back against the wall and laughs, deep and rich and lovely.

“Holy shit, Jane,” he says, his voice rough with mirth. “He made the face.”

“Seriously? He got Jaked?” and she actually comes around and peers up at you, like you’re on display. Suddenly humiliated, you try to look away, but she just starts laughing as well, hand to her mouth, and she pats your shoulder.

“Oh, dear, no, don’t be shy. Everyone makes that face.”

“Humans, maybe,” you huff. “I don’t even know what face you’re referring to!”

“Yours,” Dirk says.

“‘Oh, Mister English, take me now’,” Jane says. It’s not actually an entirely erroneous summation of your momentary mental position towards the subject at hand. You glare at the far wall and will your fins to stop burning.

“Hey,” Jane says, and takes your chin. Draws you back to look at her. “So you like Jake too, Cronus. It happens to the best of us. Welcome to Earth.”

Your mouth is dry. Her tongue is pink, and her lips are a color you don’t even have a word for, some kind of rich ochre, and you suddenly don’t feel pale at all, just caught and held and hungry.

“Can I kiss you,” you ask, like a fool who always ruins everything. You add hopelessly, “Please?”

And she says, “Yes.”

Your thinkpan stalls. You weren’t ready for that answer at all. You stand there a second longer staring at her, trying to get yourself to move, for fuck’s sake. Then she twines her fingers into the short hair at the nape of your neck and coaxes you down until your lips touch.

You open your mouth, lick your way into hers, thrusting and hungry, desperate to show her how much you’ve wanted this. Instead of swooning, though, she gags, coughs, and jerks back. Then she wipes her mouth. You did it wrong. You are the worst. You want to die.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” she says, and strokes your cheek again, sending a startling little ripple of warm reassurance down your spine. This is so insane it sets your head spinning. She’s not flipping on you, she’s licking her lips while she pets you placid—you’re torn between calm and excitement, between sinking to your knees and pouncing.

Jane pulls back. “Are you old enough,” she says, carefully, “for your species, to, ah…”

“Yes,” you say, “I’m old enough to kiss,” but she pulls even farther back, looking alarmed.

“No, I meant, to, um, to engage in, that is—”

“To fuck,” Dirk says roughly, and the bottom drops out of your stomach. “Are you old enough to have sex with us.”

“You’ve been making slurry for two sweeps now even though you won’t be filling
any pails until at least your coming of age in another sweep, or until you find the appropriate quadrantmates, whichever comes later, which is to say at the rate you were going never. You look at Jane and the future you used to dream of—where you held hands with some pretty troll on beach dates and snuck in kisses when no one was watching, until the paperwork had been properly reviewed and your quadrant status was approved for procreative purposes—seems unbelievably irrelevant. You want her hands on the pail’s rim, on your body. You want Dirk’s. You nod.

Jane looks at Dirk and you're so afraid you've screwed it up again by hesitating, but when she swallows hard what she says is, "We'll take it slowly."

"Yes, please," you say. “I want you, want you both, wanna give you whatever’ll make you happy.”

Dirk makes a low noise like you've hit him, and Jane shivers. Their eyes are like flames, bright blue, rich orange. "Right," she says, her voice shaky. "Dirk, I think you should kiss him. Show him how it’s done."

"If that's what you think is best," Dirk says. He's looking at you like he wants to eat you alive.

"It is," Jane says hoarsely.

"You're the boss." Dirk takes your chin in one hand, his grip strong, commanding, and that ought to make you want to fight back, shouldn't it? But you don't. You don't fight it. You lick your lips nervously and he brings his mouth to yours, so delicate you can barely stand it, a slow brush of soft skin and then a tiny little retreat. His breath is so warm.

He comes back in for another teasing, light kiss, and you part your lips more, hoping he'll take the invitation. His tongue barely flickers past your lips and then retreats again. You chirr in your throat, nervous and he answers with a resonant low hum. He lets the kiss go on a bit longer the next time. Your whole body feels alive and tingling and when his tongue swipes yours it makes your nook clench down with need. You whimper. He does it again. You tremble, leaning into him.

Dirk winks at you as he lets you go. "Try it like that," he says. "Save the really aggressive stuff for further south."

South as in—Jane, apparently. You stumble, getting pushed back over to her, but she steadies you with her hands on your shoulders and tips her mouth up for you. You kiss her, trying to go as slow as you can, just brushing her lips and pulling back, over and over, till she’s on tip-toes and her arms are wrapped tight around your neck. She’s warm and breathing fast and every time you pull back and she follows is like getting struck by lightning, this overwhelming assurance that somehow, by some miracle, she wants you, she keeps wanting you. She bites you, finally, sinking her incisors into your lower lip and doing that moaning human-growl and it’s so cute, so hot, your bulge unsheaths all in one go, flushing so full it almost hurts.

Then there's solid heat against your back and Dirk's hands curling tight and hard around your hipbones. You're trapped between them, pinned between their bodies, your bulge curling up between Jane’s legs as Dirk’s tongue swipes wet and hot up the edge of your uncut fin. You gasp and shiver, and when you squirm between them he grinds his hips against you and that's his bulge rubbing your ass. You trill, a helpless instinctive sound, an ancient wordless plea for them to keep touching you.

“God,” he gasps. “Are all you guys this musical?"

“I—I—no, I don’t know, I was, I, fuck, was a musician, so, so, ah, god, Dirk—”

Sing something for me.”

“Oh, fuck,” you keen. How’re you supposed to think up lyrics now? How’re you even supposed to remember any? You manage, “My feelin’s for you are / the moon for the sea—” before you can’t keep the desperate warble from wrecking all semblance of tune and it breaks into component parts of please and more. You didn’t even make it to the first rhyme. Jane’s stroking your gills and she’s so warm, rubbing her fingers along the covers, it’s too intense.

"Fuck, yes, wanna hear you coming apart,” Dirk purrs. "Sometime I gotta record you making noise like that, sample and mix and make a fucking masterpiece out of your sex noises, babe."

You’ve never even imagined someone saying anything so simultaneously filthy and romantic to you. You want to tell him that, tell him he’s driving you crazy, but your throat’s locked up by now and all you can get out is a desperate warble that hopefully conveys something like the same thing.

“Yeah, like that, just like that,” he gasps, fuck, how is he still so coherent? Either humans don’t have any mating calls or these two are just so much more experienced than you that this—this amazing shit that has you wordless and swollen and dripping—doesn’t even register.

One of his arms wraps around your waist and he slides the other hand down over your ass, giving it a good squeeze and then slipping his fingers between your legs. You shift your weight, spread your legs a little to encourage more of that, and Jane said they were going to go slow but it feels like they’ve forgotten and you can’t honestly be sorry.

Dirk’s fingers trace the widening slit of your nook and you both moan, in harmony. You’ve barely even touched yourself there, because everyone says it’s obvious to your partners how much you’ve been filled before and you wanted to save yourself for them, you wanted to really give yourself to them. But fuck that, you don’t care anymore, you don’t want to tell these two humans no to anything.

“Tell me what this is,” he demands, but you can’t, you try and just get out one stuttering chirp after the next, so you press back against his fingers, hoping he’ll get the idea. God, you wish your hands weren’t bound, you’d grab his wrist and make—but he does anyway, just what you want, circles a finger up into you, careful and slow. You’re giving yourself to him. Holy shit.

“Oh, fuck,” he whispers. “Fuck, dude, is that good for you?” and you nod, almost frantic to get more. You can already feel your nook working, getting wet and soft for him, your seedflap starting to pulse and warm as it absorbs your material in preparation for mixing with—with him, with your partner. You want him to fill you so bad, to soothe this raging emptiness inside you.

Jane lets go of you and steps back and you’d be sorry about that but her hands are fumbling with her shirt, tugging it up and over her head and that is the best reason to stop touching you. Dirk fingers your nook with the same slow teasing control that he kissed you earlier and probably you’re both watching Jane undress. She unhooks the support garment for her breasts and shrugs it off and wow, just, wow, they’re full and round, tipped with stiff, dark nipples. Holy shit, you hadn’t really even thought about this part, but they’re mammals, they come with nipples and fur and stuff, and it’s so—elegant. It’s always looked kind of weird in mythic paintings and sculpture, where gods and heroes have teats and wings and tails and so on, like it would be uncomfortable, but in real life it’s just the kind of pretty that makes your bulge want to tie itself in knots from sheer desperation.

Holy shit, you are having sex with aliens.

"More?” Dirk breathes, finger glancing over—oh, god, he’s all the way up in you, touching your flap—and you nod frantically, letting out the breathiest, loudest keen you can and reveling in how he shivers. You want more of everything. They give it to you. Dirk pushes another finger up your nook
and Jane unbuttons her pants. Holy shit, she’s got fur there, and no sign of a bone bulge.

“Whhhfk?” you get out, from sheer confusion. You thought she was acting on some kind of human flushed feelings, getting you kissed, getting you hot and bothered, but Dirk’s equipment is pressed heavy and foreign to the cleft of your ass and there’s nothing at all like that in evidence between Jane’s legs. You really, really need to be able to ask if she’s okay but Dirk gets another finger in you, draws the pads firmly over the part of your nook just behind your bone-sheath and you can feel the pleasure just ricochet all up the length of your bulge and everything goes really hazy. Your knees buckle and his arm around your waist supports you, easing you down to your knees. His fingers slip out of you and it’s a wrenching loss but almost a relief—you’re shaking and breathless, raw with feeling everything so hard.


Then Jane’s sauntering back over, eyes bright, smile sharp, hips swinging, and she catches you around a horntip with just a curl of index finger. On your knees like this your face is perfectly level with her fur, and you can see the tight strange curls, smell her, you know this smell: this is the sharp tang her scent would take on when she was hauling you around all this time, and it's a sex smell. She’s been wanting you. All this time she's been wanting you, and waiting for you to be good enough. You can see a complicated line of flesh running along where her nook should be, her— you forget the word, representative art was never really your thing, her female phallus, the one that’s internal like a nook.

She leans against the wall and spreads her legs enough that you can really see what she has there, this glistening wet series of ridges and folds, the skin brown at the edges and then pink like her tongue in the center. "Come here," she says, guiding you with that delicate irresistible hand on your horn. "Let me have your tongue."

You let out the most embarrassing trill, because wow, you are going all the way alien here.

Dirk laughs, rubbing your back soothingly. "Just let her show you where to lick, and then stay where she puts you. You'll do fine."

You couldn't possibly refuse, not for anything. Jane pulls you up flush against her... her stuff, and her wiry curls are prickly against your mouth and this is so kinky you can hardly believe it. But you stick out your tongue to lick her, like Dirk told you to, and the flesh is so soft, so smooth, you get chills from how delicate it feels. When your tongue slips back about as far as you can reach there's a spot where you can press in, where the creamy-salt scent and taste of her is the strongest, where she's slippery wet. You think I'm tasting her slurry and almost come right there.

She pulls you back a little from that spot, drags you until the tip of your tongue finds a tiny stiffer nub in the middle of those soft membranes, and at that spot she chokes out the sweetest, strangest sound you've ever heard—more like a wonderfully clear fluting than any kind of regular calling-out but unmistakably approving, hungry, so that all you want in the universe is to make her do that again. You want to play her, fuck, you never want to stop pulling these noises from her, this is the most beautiful sound you’ve ever coaxed out of anything in your life. You flick your tongue against that nub again and she moans again and you feel like you’ve won the keys to the galaxy.

You can do this. You're doing it right, showing her how much she matters and how much you want to be good for her, and you start trilling again even though your own junk isn't getting any attention at all right now. Her thighs tremble and she keeps making those wonderful noises, and it’s so foreign and so beautiful, like nothing you’d ever have imagined. Her hand’s tight around your horn and hanging on like she wouldn’t let you go for anything. The floor of your mouth aches but you don’t
stop, because finally you've got her doing the thing where she's just making sound, not words, and you're full to bursting with this fierce shining pride, you're drunk with it.

Her breathing gets shakier and more desperate, staccato, and you stay right the fuck where you are and don't let up and then she's wailing, her whole body rocking in these hard shudders above you. She pulls you away then—hands you off to Dirk, fuck, you'd almost forgotten he was right behind you—and slides down the wall to crumple on the floor in a panting, giddy sprawl of limbs.

You try a couple of times to get your vocal cords to cooperate. "Okkxay?" you manage, roughly, and Jane smiles at you warmly.

"Wonderful," she says, and you beam.

Dirk pulls you back against him. "My turn," he says, and you realize he's stripped his shirt off and unbuttoned his jeans. That's his bare warm chest against your back, and his stiff, blunt musclebeast bulge against your ass. He bends you over, gets you on your elbows and knees with your ass in the air, and you still can't really get words out consistently so you're just keening, a wordless plea, as he rubs the head of his bulge against your dripping nook and then pushes.

It's so thick and so hot, pushing straight into you, and oh god it's your first time and you're giving it to a *mammal*, which is so fucking depraved you can't even believe it. But you don't care, right, because it's amazing in this really overwhelming, kind of scary way, where his bulge doesn't twist and pulse like a troll's would—it just opens you right up, deep and wide, and all you can do is relax around it and let it stretch you.

"Oh fuck," Dirk groans, rocking back and forth inside you in strange, gut-wrenching motions. "Fuck, you feel so sweet, bro." You've never heard that tone in his voice before, husky and raw-edged, and it sends a thrill down your spine. He pulls almost all the way out and you moan, protesting, and then he slams back in, all one smooth startling rush of sudden fullness, and then again, and you realize he's sort of pistoning his bulge with his hips: it doesn't move on its own so he's just pounding into you, and the alternating states of too full and too empty are driving you both mad in turn. He liked it so much when you made noise before, so you sing out for him now, not even trying to hold back. To hell with modesty, restraint, *virtue*—when you hit just the right pitch you can feel him shudder, all along your back, all the way inside you.

He snarls a hand in your hair and pulls your head up, making you look at Jane while he pounds your nook. His other hand cups over the pulse and flutter of your gillcovers, shockingly warm. You chirr helplessly at the heat in her eyes, the flicker of pink tongue across her lip. It's just so much to feel, so much more intense than anything you've ever been able to do yourself. You want to touch your bulge so bad, but there's no way you can reach when you're cuffed and you need to hold yourself up. Instead you just squirm, warbling, hoping Dirk will take pity on you and help you out.

You might not even need him to, honestly. Ordinarily either bulge or nook stimulation is supposed to be enough, and you know damn well you can get off with just your bulge played with—what you don't know is whether the rough alien strokes of his bulge inside you will work or if it's going to just leave you on edge and unable to finish. That puts a little more desperation in your trills, and your claws scrape helplessly at the floor. Your bulge latches between your thighs and your nook's aching and your seedflap's pulsing futilely for a connection it's got no chance of making, not with him so blunt and *pistoning*, pounding in and pulling wrenchingly back again.

"I want to go again," Jane says, looking past you, over your shoulder. "Move him so I can reach. I want to... to try it."

"Hot," Dirk says. For a second he holds still, his breath hot against the back of your neck. Then he
gathers himself. "Okay, we've got this. Let's get you on the edge of the sink. We'll stand up."

He gets an arm around your waist and hauls you backward until you're sitting in his lap, your legs splayed outside his and his bulge driven up deep into your nook. You whimper. There's a puddle on the floor where your bulge was dripping. Jane slips past you to perch on the edge of the sink, her eyes wide, watching you intently.

"Brace your feet, babe. Up we go." You do what you're told, getting your feet on the floor, and then you feel the flex of Dirk's thighs under you, lifting up—up, god, he brings you both to your feet without taking it out of you and that's so fucking territorial somehow, you just want to melt for him. He's got you, he's claiming you, you belong to them. You belong.

Jane's staring at your bulge, beckoning you closer. She's so pink and slick-shining between her legs, and that's right at bulge level with her sitting like that, and Dirk is easing you closer and you can't believe this is happening to you. "Go slowly," she says to you and you'll try, you really will.

The tip of your bulge twists and squirms, finding the wet softness of her, and when it finds her nook she lets out a soft, musical sigh. You push, you writhe into her and she's searing hot inside, her walls silky-slick and tight. You shudder and trill as you work your way into her, and her thighs are trembling, too. You had no idea what to expect from someone's nook other than better than my hand, and oh, this is, this is, this is glorious.

She takes your hands and lifts them up, cups them around her breasts, guides your fingers to stroke and pinch her nipples. They stiffen at your touch and she makes more sweet alien pleasure noises for you, and you've got almost your whole bulge inside her, coiled up and doubled around to account for how her nook is shaped so differently from yours. You can’t remember your biology feeds—you can’t even remember any erotica, which you paid a sight more attention to, but you think, fuck it. Fuck it! The Empress herself could manifest in a flash of light and offer you her nook all framed in gold and you'd just laugh and wave her off. You lower your head to Jane’s gorgeous breasts and you curl your tongue around the pretty crest of a nipple and she howls, dragging her nails down your back. The pain just jolts through you, indistinguishable from pleasure.

"Oh, fuck, Jane," Dirk moans from behind you, “make him do that again,” and when he starts thrusting back in and out you realize he's been going easy on you, being patient while Jane got you situated to her liking. He bites the nape of your neck, not hard, just enough scrape of teeth to remind you that you're being taken, being mounted like an animal. He goes in and out so fast and hard it builds up into this magnificent, resonant ache, pulsing in waves like hard fast music, one-two, one-two, and you're going to go mad with the strange pleasure of it all. Then he gasps, shudders, and loses all rhythm, going fast and then slow and then sloppy. All at once he pulls out entirely, leaving you collapsed and stinging, and you feel a hot wet spatter along your back.

He’s... oh, god. You crane around to look back over your shoulder and find him wiping your slurry off his phallus, and strings of translucent white across your back and bare ass. He’s still dripping with it, just a little, that colorless genetic material thinning out your violet. You hadn’t even considered it wouldn’t be red, but they're alien, they have no hemochrome, of course it’d just be clear. Your seedflap pulses inside you, still hungry, still no more full than when you touch yourself on your own, and you’re shaking with confusion and a weird instinctive hurt—he didn’t share himself with you, he didn’t really take you, didn’t want you, did he? Or is this some other alien thing—Jane cups your face.

“What’s wrong?” she asks. “Cronus, are you all right?” but you can only shake your head and try and soothe yourself in her mouth. Your bulge is still in her nook, tangling around itself in the warm slick confines, and you can feel your material spilling back out of her every time she rocks her hips
back and forth, mimicking that same strange back-and-forth rhythm Dirk was setting, you can hear your slurry splashing loud and wasteful against the floor. You have no idea how they exchange their material but they can’t have repositories and your bulge has found nothing even remotely like a seedflap inside her, just a strange firm wall. It’s just an alien thing, they’re just not built quite right for you, for this to work completely naturally. You’re not unwanted. She still has you. Please, please, you beg wordlessly, please keep me, please let what you’re doing mean you’re keeping me.

Dirk laughs softly. "Sorry, you still wanted more?" he asks, and then you feel his fingers slide back up into you. You trill in desperation, nodding—yes, more, please, please keep touching me, please want me. His fingertips find your flap again and rub it in little insistent circles. "Felt like this was a good spot, yeah? That what you need to come undone?"

Fuck, oh, that’s filthy, that’s amazing. You’d never imagined anyone would ever do something like that but it drives you purely mad with the sensation of it, your flap straining to take in the flow of genetic material and just getting fingers, prodding at the flesh hard and firm and he just keeps moving. Neither of them ever just stops moving, they keep rocking you back and forth, moving you around till you feel like your pan’s been flipped clean upside-down.

Jane finally goes quiet and shuddery, and her arms squeeze you so hard you’re breathless, the ferocious pressure blazing through the sensitive tissue of your gills. Her nook flutters and clenches as her hips roll and you sob with the intensity of the sensation, the way she’s stretching your bulge out and squishing it at the same time, it’s so weird, and you’re putting out material with every wild thump of your vascular system, the drip of it all back out of her rising to a continuous spatter and this is so much, too much, too fucking weird and dirty and good. Everything just peaks, all at once, not so much an orgasm as all your biological processes throwing their hands up and turning in for the day. You’re done, you’re finished, you’ve got nothing more to give her.

“Catch him,” Jane gasps, and Dirk gets you by the horns. You make a vague little noise, practically a cheep, and are guided down to sit on the edge of the trap. You lean your elbows on your knees and just breathe. The world swoops and lurches all around you, and you feel kind of sick, dazed and hollow and endlessly tired.

Hands on you, the cold splash of water on your back, your legs. Your crotch. Your bulge finishes retracting fast at that; you can feel your bone bulge clamping back together at the shock. Someone’s wiping you down with a wet shirt, and, god, that’s humiliating, your seedflap’s released itself all over the fucking place. You whine, achy and ashamed, and a big rough hand strokes your face.


You swallow. Open your mouth. Nothing comes out, however hard you try, so you finally just nod. Give him a thumbs-up.

“You ever gonna be able to talk again?”

Another nod.

“Is it safe to let you sleep?”

You nod as hard as you can at this, god, just—let them let you sleep, you need sleep, please, oh, you need to lie down.

He laughs, and strokes your face again. You lean into his hand with an exhausted chirp. Who knew he had so much kindness in him? "Okay, we’ll leave you to it, then. Gold star for today, bro. That was a hell of a ride."
You smile weakly, turn your head and kiss the palm of his hand. You can't say thank you, but you can at least try to let him know you're grateful.

He kisses your cheek, oh, god, so strangely pale, and guides you back into the tub. A dry shirt—Jane’s, from the smell of it—gets tucked under your head. You take a deep breath, so amazingly happy, and pass out.

When you wake, some long indeterminate amount of time later, there are two fat, salty fish on a plate by the door, and your tub is full of pillows. A folded paper note by the sink reads 'Feel better soon!'. You fetch the food back to your new nest and you think of singing, again, of putting lyrics around this strange warm human concept of ‘family’. You think about music.

Dirk: indulge.

"Hey, killer," you say when you come in the next afternoon. Your troll is curled up in the pillows the girls brought in while he was passed out, and the plate you left for him has been licked spotless. He looks up at you and smiles hopefully.

"Hello," he says. He cranes his neck, looking past you. "Where's Jane?"

You smirk. "I hope she's not the only one of us you like," you say, and he shakes his head immediately, eyes wide. God, it's so easy to pull his strings. "She had to go out and take care of a couple of things, that's all. She'll be back before dinner."

"I... I hope I can see her again soon," he says.

"Yeah." You sit on the edge of the tub and reach in to cup his face in one hand, brushing your thumb over his cheekbone. He leans into you with a little melodic trill. "So, hey, that was a little freaky yesterday, having you just totally lock up all the word circuits like that. Is that supposed to happen?"

For a second he just sits there being blissed at you, and then you remember to let go of his face. He shakes himself and then nods. "It's a, a physical thing. Early troll mating," he's blushing and you love that, "had a lot of specific calls and trills to let a partner know it's okay. So, uh. Our bodies still have some of that built in. You get going enough and your throat gets kinda stuck, you know?" He laughs. "Makes me feel a little better to hear humans don’t have anything comparable going on, really. Worried a bit that I was doin' it all wrong."

"Nah." You run your fingers through his hair. "Maybe a little clumsy, but it was your first time with humans, right?"

"First time with anyone," he says, which you guessed was probably true from how overwhelmed he seemed, but it's hot as hell to hear it confirmed. Yep, you're on the fast train back to Boner Central again.

"Well, I think for a first time you kept up just fine." He licks his lips and you make another truce with the fact that you really like doing dumb shit with your dick. "You want to be allowed to come out and hang around the rest of the house, spend more time with people?"

You know what the answer's going to be, but you're still a little surprised by the intensity of it, the flutter of his fins and the way he tries to reach for you before he gets himself under control. "Wow, yeah, please, I, yeah." Jesus, it looks like he's got tears in his eyes. “More than anything, boss.”

"Okay. All I need from you is one more little demonstration that you're trustworthy." You drop a hand to your crotch and adjust yourself. Today's bad idea is cleared for takeoff.
His fins flare. "You wanna pail me again?" and holy shit, does he sound eager.

"I want your mouth," you say. "Can you do that for me? Be careful with those monster teeth of yours, let me just feel lips and tongue?"

"Wow," he says. He's staring at the bulge in your jeans like he's in awe. You could get used to that. "Yeah, okay, I, I've never, but..."

You trail your thumb over his bottom lip. "I know," you say. "But you picked up the rest pretty fast. Show me I'm right to trust you like I want to."

He nods eagerly, watching as you unzip, and you straddle the edge of the tub so you'll have a better angle as you pull your dick out of your shorts. You don't even have to pull him down; he leans in all on his own and licks you slowly.

It's creepy and weird and that makes it good. The difference between your temperature and his is just enough to be really obvious, to make sure that you'd know even with your eyes closed that he isn't human. You let him kiss and lick and explore for a minute, not giving him any direction yet. When he tongues the slit of your cock you shudder, your breath hissing through your teeth.

He looks up immediately. "Sorry," he says, "I didn't—sorry. You okay?"

"It's intense, that's all," you say. "No harder than that and not for long."

"Right, okay," he says, and goes back to licking worshipfully at your cock. You're going to have to be so careful to keep yourself from getting addicted to this shit, having him so easy and willing no matter what you tell him to do. He looks so fucking pretty there, though.

You slide a hand under his jaw and cup his chin to hold him still for a minute, and he goes a little slow and heavy-lidded, more peaceful than eager. Experimenting, you stroke his face from forehead to throat, like he was doing to himself on camera, and bingo, you've tripped his magic petting reflex. His shoulders slump and he goes soft-mouthed immediately. It's like your libido just got injected with adrenaline. You get your fingertips hooked behind his jaw and the heel of your hand pressed into his cheek and in the space of a few breaths he's gone utterly compliant, limp and purring, eyes glazed over. You feed him your dick, pushing past his slack lips slow but steady. You pet his face with the other, those long firm wiping strokes. He just fucking melts, no resistance at all, only those sweet buzzes and trills that you can feel when you get deep enough in his throat. You fuck his pretty alien mouth and he's liquid for you, a boneless doll, and the way he surrenders is so hot you're pretty powerless to resist.

It goes almost too fast—you'd be sorry, except you're already looking forward to next time when you hit the point of no return and pull back partway. You come in his mouth instead of straight down his throat, letting go of his face so he might be alert enough to handle it.

"Swallow that," you tell him as you fill his mouth, and you see his eyes snap open really wide for a second—more of a hardcore kink for trolls than for humans, huh?—but he closes them again without protesting and you feel his throat working. You let yourself make a little noise so he'll know he did it right, and you milk the last drops into his mouth before you pull out.
He looks up at you with his eyes all luminous and hopeful, purple and gold, pupils blown out almost round. You tuck yourself back into your pants, then tilt his chin up and lean down to kiss him. He makes a sound that's half trill and half purr, smiling against your mouth.

When you pull back, you notice that his junk has decided to sit this one out. You’re starting to suspect you’re triggering some kind of automatic submissiveness routine, when you grab his face like that, like when wolves get each other by the throat. He’s certainly gone as nonagressive as it’s possible to be without a pulse. You’ll have to collect more data to confirm that hypothesis, have to maybe chill him out in a bunch of different situations, see if he goes down every time.

"You did good," you tell him, and his fins flutter, purpling up in the thin membrane. "Okay, let's get you fitted in your around-the-house jewelry."

"Jewelry?" he asks, blinking at you, furrowing his eyebrows in confusion.

You take your keys off your belt. "We're going one step at a time, yeah?" You unlock the big padlock that kept his wrist cuffs together, then unlock one of the cuffs themselves. "Give me your ankle."

He cooperates even while you can see him trying to figure out what your plan is. You fit the cuff on around his ankle, glad they'll adjust big enough to fit, and you thread one end of a two-foot piece of chain onto the lock before you lock it back on.

"Other side." No argument or even questions as you repeat the process. "Good boy," you say, watching him stretch his arms and study his new arrangement—the chain will give him enough room to take short steps, but there's no way in hell he could run.

You stand up and he looks up at you, like he's checking to make sure it's allowed before he gets up too. "Um," he says.

"Yeah, you're allowed," you tell him, and offer a hand. "Come on." You haul him to his feet—man, he's still ridiculously heavy for his size—and steady him while he negotiates the difficult process of climbing out of the tub in his new hobble.

"I want you to stick close to one of us for the next while so we can keep track of you," you tell him. He doesn't seem to want to let go, so you let him keep holding your hand. "If we find you trying to get out of your cuffs or sneak off, you get locked in here again. Got it?"

"Got it, chief," he says. He smiles at you, wobbly and grateful, like you're doing him a huge favor here. "Bein' able to come hang out with you guys sounds really great, you won't get a lick of trouble from me."

You nod graciously. If he's going to be happy about it, then sure, you're doing him a favor. "Come on, then." You open the door for him. "After you."
Chapter 4

Roxy: hang out.

You hang out in the kitchen with Janey when she's cooking sometimes, just to keep her company. And, well, maybe because it's kind of nice, having a little domestic play-pretend time, right? Not like there was a lot of that in this house when you were growing up. And now you can't—no, whatever, you'll find Mom eventually and she'll come home and you will have a chance, okay. But in the meantime there's something nice and family-ish about hanging with Janey while she pokes at the stove.

Tonight you've got more company, too, your troll crouching on the far side of the fridge, all tucked up in a little ball like he's trying not to get in the way. His first time out without Dirk to cling to, and he's still sticking around real close, just watching. The way he looks at Janey is almost embarrassing, honestly, like she's his magical fairy princess or something. And she's great, no question! But she's great in a really solid no-nonsense ordinary way, not a shiny miraculous unicorn way.

"Hey," you say to him as Janey chops vegetables. "Cronus, yeah? Why don't you come over here?"

He straightens up out of that little ball and his fins unfurl. "Yeah?" he says, and shuffles over on his knees until he's right next to you. It's kind of amazing how fast he's gone from panicky and freaked all the time to goofy and eager to please. And how far he's come from that haughty asshole you ambushed at the embassy. It's been, what, a month? Not even that? And here he is on his knees for any scrap of attention. It'd be kind of creepy if it wasn't so friggin adorable.

"Kinda looked like you wanted in on this fine fabulous kitchen party, am I right?"

"It's real nice to have company," he says sheepishly. "I got lonely in my room so bad."

You say, very sweetly, "I'm glad you came around enough that we could let you out."

His fins do a really cute thing. "Me too," he says.

"Aaww," you say, and pet his hair. Any dunkass could guess that social creatures need social interaction, and a quick and dirty pat-down of the internets just confirmed your instincts. Then it turned you on to the effects of solitary confinement, of long-term isolation, of how loneliness can be weaponized, and you thought, why not? and recommended the pompous asshole get a faceful of boot and a week of solitary, and Jane and Dirk had opened the door to their new best friend. Part of you wonders if the complete heel-face turn he did is a troll thing or just a Cronus thing. Part of you might be a little bit predisposed to mad science. He’s just so eager—you wonder what more you guys could get him to do. You wonder how much longer before it’d be anything.

You try the face-petting thing that Janey does to turn him into a liquid, and it works just fine for you, too. Dirk might be on to something, positing maybe you’re doing some kind of dominance display at him and all, but he always seems more comforted than subdued. And now, here, he slowly and steadily gets all dreamy just like always, his eyes half-lidded, purring softly as he leans into you. Not quite a cat noise, but close enough, and it seems like it means the same thing, like ‘yes’ and ‘right there, under the chin’ and ‘hooray’. For a minute you just let him groove, fascinated at what you can reduce him to. Then you stop, and put your hand on his shoulder instead.

"So, what's going on with that?" you ask, as he blinks and his eyes slowly focus again. "Because I'm pretty sure for me it would be like, friendly and nice and all, but you seriously act like you're getting
high. Are we slipping you illicit petting drugs here?"

"N-naw, it ain't like that," he says. “It’s fine, you can keep doin’ it to me.” He's looking at the floor, going purple. Uncharacteristically, he doesn’t go on, just keeps studying his knees. He’s embarrassed.

“Cronus,” you say sternly, and his fins snap back along his cheek.

"It's romantic, okay!" he blurts out. “I mean, really seriously, the sweetest kinda romance there is. It’s like—a soul thing, you get me? Like holding on to a guy's soul, and saying, like, it’s okay. You got him. And so... nothin’ else has to matter. It’s not something that you do with just anyone.” His shoulders hunch in and his fins bristle. "And I guess that means everyone from back ho—from before would say that it's all kinds of wrong how I've been lettin’ you all touch me without meaning it like that, but. Please don’t be mad. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. You just, Jane just, the boss offered, and. Um. It feels nice. It feels so nice." That last bit is barely a whisper. He’s curling again, eyes slitting. Guilty as a motherfucker.

You take a calculated guess, and stroke his cheek. He goes very still and makes an awful little wet noise, a crushed noise, in his throat.

"Who says we didn’t mean it like that?" you ask. “Thought maybe you wanted to be family, Crow-bro.”

He glances up at you through his lashes. “I—I—I don’t really get what that means, not really.”

This is like taking candy from a care bear, holy shit. "I think you're on the right track already," you say. "Your family's there to take care of you. To worry about you when you're in trouble and tell you when you do stupid shit and help you out when you need it." You cup his face in both hands and look him right in the eyes as he trembles. "So it's okay. We got you."

He warbles in his throat, this sweet series of falling notes, like recordings you've heard of whale song. The smile on his face is the most blissed-out contented thing you've ever seen, and you've seen Jake stoned out of his gourd and face down in an apple pie.

When you let go of him, he says, "And it's—it's really okay to, to do that with all of you?"

"Sure," you say. "What, do they not do that where you come from?"

He shakes his head. "No, you couldn’t do this, there, it’d be—wrong. It’d be takin’ advantage, to try and go after more than one partner for the same quadrant, or to, to smear them. Trolls are too civilized to just... do that kind of thing."

“Even though you’re doing that kind of thing right now and your horns ain’t falling off or nothin’?” you coax. He gives you a shaky little smile. His fins are so twitchy. You’ve got him backed right up against some kind of ideological cliff and you can tell he wants to jump.

“They—"

"Man, fuck them, though," you interrupt. "You might have noticed, we're not so big on just doing what trolls tell us to around here. Right, Janey?" You pause long enough for Cronus to look over at Jane and get her nod of approval. "No, it's totally a dick move for those guys to try to make rules about how anyone gets their freak on. How is it any of their business anyway?"

You pause, not entirely sure if face-petting is getting his freak on, but he's staring up at you with tears in his eyes and this dumbstruck face like you just declared National Give Cronus Hugs and Presents
Day. He’s gone, you won, he’s committed to this shit now.

“How is it,” you prompt him.

"It isn’t," he says defiantly. “It isn’t, is it! It’s just ours.”

“Ours,” you repeat, and he grins. "Now come here and let me make you feel good, buddy."

He practically flings himself at you. You stroke him into a purring, useless mess again, get him melting soft and content into your thigh, one hand settled around your ankle like a cuff. It’s cool, being able to do this to him. Being able to shut him down without even trying, and having him treat it like a privilege. Though you think that, maybe, if someone could make you this happy this easily... maybe you’re a little jealous. He never even seems to get hangovers from it, the lucky alien shithead.

Janey meets your eyes, glances down at him, looks at you again. Her lips shape a word. Ours, you think. You nod. You noticed that. You guys have worked him over beyond your best hopes. He thinks you guys are his friends now, his family—and, hell, maybe he’s not so wrong there. He’s a lot easier to like now than he used to be. And you don’t honestly want to be the kind of people who are just emotionlessly reducing someone into their tool. That’s supervillain shit, and you’re, like, freedom fighters. You don’t wanna think you’ve broken him any, just... flipped his alignment around some. If he’s missing anyone from before, he hasn’t really shown any signs of it.

"Dinner’s ready," Jane says, into the radio so the boys will hear it upstairs. Cronus looks at you for directions.

“You stay right where you are, kitten,” you tell him.

“Mnnr,” he goes, and nuzzles a smile into your knee.

The four of you all eat dinner together around a table and it’s like you’re a family, for real, flicking food and making fun of each other, and all the while Cronus’s head rests against your thigh and his fins twitch and flare with the rhythm of your aimless conversation. You slip him most of your meat and half of everyone else’s when people are carefully not looking, the five of you all making an elaborate, giggly game of it, and even if his laughter is more hellcricket than human it still makes your heart so warm.

Jake: befriend.

“Here, sport,” you say, plumping down next to your newest chum. “Brought you a little something!”

Cronus eyes you very carefully. He’s jumpy as a cricket on a hotplate around you, and you can’t say you rightly blame him given your own role in recent proceedings, but a man makes amends for his wrongdoings, however necessary they were, and you intend to get square.

Dirk’s been going on and on about how your catch has said he was a musician, and for all that the girls have dug their heels in hard over the loan of their instruments, you searched your heart and found just enough room in it for a bit of a lend of your battered old guitar. If he wrecks it you’ll just have to wreck him, but it shouldn’t be too much of a bother to nip out to town and get some more strings if necessary.

“Here,” you say, and push the instrument gently into his chest. “You hold it like—” you demonstrate. He sits there stiff as a corpse as you move his hands, and you can see his funny slitted pupils grow steadily narrower. He’s breathing shallowly, fearfully, even when you pat his shoulder and this is going all wrong, you don’t know how to get him to relax. “It’s an instrument,” you finally say, leaning back. You move your hands a little yourself, air-guitaring. “Rumor has it you played
“I can’t play this,” he finally says, his voice gone strangely raspy. His fins are folded tightly backwards, and he’s starting to shake. “Jake, I—I’m so sorry, I can’t play this, I don’t even fuckin’ know what it is, I’m sorry—”

You feel like a monumental cock.

“Oh fuck,” you say, and he flinches. “No, I, no, Cronus, mate, I’m sorry! It’s not a test, you have my solemn word.”

“I’m sorry—”

“I’m not mad!”

“Please, don’t—”

You reach out and cup his face, like you’ve seen the rest of your partners do. He tries to flinch away, like a spooked animal, but you do your best to hang on and after just a moment he subsides in your hold, his eyes glassy, reminding you of nothing more than a hypnotised frog. He’s said it’s a comforting thing trolls do to one another, a kind of intense physical reassurance between partners: well, you want to be reassuring. He’s more than proven himself to you. Now you just have to prove yourself to him.

“D’you,” he mutters, “are you, why’re you... I, I don’t, Jake...” he blinks, slow, his head still twitching against your hands. “Jake...”

You let him go once he’s gone still. “Now that we know we’re all friends here,” you say brightly, reassuringly, “I’d be tickled as toast if you’d do me the very great favor of letting me show you a few chords.”

“...Okay,” he says. He blinks a few times, like he’s shaking something off, and smiles carefully. “Okay, pal, I’d like that.”

“Capital!” you cheer, and help fit his fingers back to the strings.

He makes a wordless sound when his nails rasp against the metal, almost the exact same buzzing chirp. “It talks,” he says, wonderingly, and moves his thumbnail again. *Chrr-krr*, the string goes, and so does he. His fins are unfolding, twitching forward.

That is so bloody cool. “What’s it saying?”

He frowns, skitters his nails gently against the strings, and it’s just the same scratchy noises as always but you’re breathless with interest. “It’s not really words,” he finally says, kind of quiet and shy. “More like, eh... undertones? moods?” He rasps the low E string till it buzzes, and his lips quirk up. “That’s mad.” The tense high whine of the B: “Now she’s scared.” He draws two nails along another string and the resulting twangy chirr makes him go purple in the cheeks. “That’s, um. Well. That’s that.”

You reach out and pluck the lowest string, the note resonating in the guitar’s belly, and his fins snap wide as fans. He’s frozen up with what looks an awful lot like delight. “What’s that?” you ask.

“That’s—” he swallows hard. “Oh my god. Is that what this contraption’s supposed to be doing?”

You laugh. “Sure is!”
“Show me again,” he says eagerly.

After that, he’s a shockingly quick study: you only have to demonstrate the correct sound, move his fingers to the right position, and he nods and smiles and understands. He’s got the basics down inside half an hour, and can precisely play a scale and hold a few chords. You start to trade the guitar back and forth, you picking out a simple little tune, handing it back, and nodding as he echoes you. You’re not ashamed to admit you’re getting jealous of how easily he seems to be matching you—what an ear he has for this, finned though it might be.

Then he looks at you, really looks right smack into your eyes, and grins. Instead of handing the guitar back, he plays his own tune, something discordant and strange, something you’re pretty sure isn’t based on the twelve-note scale you know.

“I can’t do that,” you admit.

He repeats it again, slower, this time frowning. “It’s the ayem-bext,” he says. He plays it a third time, even slower, then a fourth fast and savage. “It’s the ayem-bext,” he repeats, thickly, “it’s, it’s the tune your schoolfeeds teach you your letters’n...” and he plays that complicated tangle of noise a fifth time and you are struck with the reminder that he’s just a kid like you guys, only very much further from home.

“Cronus, mate...”

He shakes his head, waving your concern away. “God, I—I’m sorry. I shouldn’ta. Here. Show me another one.” He gives the guitar back, and you take it, but you put it carefully down at the end of the couch.

“Jake...?” he asks, uncertainly, and you hug him. He’s stiff and surprisingly cool all over, not just his hands but his chest and stomach as well, where he’s pressed against you. He’s just as tall as Dirk—just perfect for tucking your head under his chin.

“We—I. I hope you’re not unhappy here.”


“You’re scared of me.”

Another flinch.

“See?”

“Please, I just...” Cronus sighs. “You’re all so kind, and I know that, chief, promise I do, but I don’t know what you want from me, Jake. If I knew, I’d give it to you fast as I could.”

There are times a man just gets a little choked up, and this seems to be one of them. Trust Roxy to stumble over such a fine upright figure of a troll on her first go! “I want you to be happy,” you say. “I want you to tell me how, I want us to be honest with one another, like comrades.”

“I want you to kiss me,” Cronus says. Then he flinches again. “I, I mean, that is. If you’re into that sort of thing, mate. Kissin’. With, um. With me.”

When you pull back far enough to see his face, his fins have folded back up. It’s fascinating. You touch one, gently, the cool filmy flesh of it, and it’s like nothing you’ve ever felt before. You think, with a weird hot surge of adrenaline, that you are more closely related to the couch than you are this boy, that every part of him got put together from pieces of a different planet. And now he’s here and
he’s just staring down at you, chewing on his lower lip with his sharp teeth.

On one hand, he’s cold and purple-gray and those chompers are no small measure of daunting! On the other hand, your chums haven’t had the slightest complaint about his... performance. And on the third hand, this is all rather exciting.

“You’re not just saying that, are you?” you ask. “You’d really like me to, for, well, for yourself, your own purposes, right?”

He gives you a shaky smile. “You’re very handsome, Jake.”

You’ve been told this before, but never by an alien. It cheers you right up.

“Well!” you say. “Well, then.” And you take him firmly by the chin and apply mouth-to-mouth.

He makes a skritchy noise in his throat, just like the guitar, and then, when you slip him a little tongue, a longer, prettier thrum, more electronic than acoustic. You’ve heard him sounding like this with Dirk and Jane going at him, but it’s different when he’s kissing you. You lay a hand to his throat and enjoy the strange vibration of it, and let yourself sink to your back along the couch.

He stops kissing you about halfway down, and when you open your eyes he’s hovering over you, looking down at you in confusion. His arms are lovely, sleekly inhuman in a way that looks almost like robotics. He’s perhaps Dirk’s size but entirely different, broader shoulders, deeper chest, narrower hips, and a beautifully expressive face. Right now he’s completely adrift. It’d be just Dirk and Jane’s style to order a fellow around till he wasn’t sure what to do with himself without them—you adore your partners and admire their moxy but you’d be the first to admit they can be a bit overwhelming, each in their own ways.

“I’m yours, bro,” you encourage him, setting your hands on those sleek hips. “What’d you like?”

He shrugs one shoulder, laughs a little breathlessly. “You?”

“Well, come and get me,” you retort.

His fins flutter, and he pounces. His tongue is long and strange in your mouth but you kiss him back as best as you can and he makes more funny noises, fumbling at your shorts. You help him unbutton and free your hardening prick, and he nips softly at your lips. His teeth are a beast’s, so sharp and dangerous, and the thought gets your little soldier ready for action in no time flat. Things are happening down there, wet and cool against your flesh as the first shock of lube, but warming. You bare your throat to him, urge his mouth lower. He makes a lovely warble and scrapes his teeth across your adam’s apple, and you can’t stifle a groan.

“Y’likke thaaaaat,” Cronus gets out, and he sounds so utterly strange, the words hardly intelligible.

“Yeah, I do, love, bite me harder,” you gasp. “If you’d like—”

“Yss,” Cronus hisses, like a burst of static, a bad radio signal, and digs his teeth in. Your prick jumps hard at that, the amazing burst of pain and heat. You feel the warm itch of blood just as Cronus makes a grating, stony click and jolts back.

“Oh,” he gets out, “oh, no, oh no, I—I hurrrt you, din’t, dih, fuck, I didn’t mean to, friend, I don’t want that—”

You get him by the face again and he just whimpers. “I like it,” you say. “I like it rough.”
“Like,” he’s breathing hard, kind of scraping his fangs together where they interlock and you can’t stop staring. “Like, hhh, competitive?”

Holy frick, competitive sex. “Yes,” you say firmly. “First one to come wins, mate, what d’you say?”

His fins go wide again, as do his pupils. “Oh.”

The next moment is a blur: you’re crushed back to the sofa, flat on your back, and he straddles your hips, the cold chain of his ankle cuffs pressed down across your thighs. You feel a shockingly soft, cool wetness lick up against you, and you throw your head back and gasp.

“Not improving your odds, bro,” you gasp. “Oh, Cronus, that’s—that feels bloody great—”

He makes a completely unparsable noise, all sirens, and nuzzles the side of his face roughly to yours. That coolness isn’t just licking your prick, it’s... curling, twining around it, and you bite the first thing that comes close enough to your mouth. It’s the top of his earfin, and it makes him loud. He’s so astonishingly strong—he’s not trying to get away from your bite, but wherever he’s pressing you down stays pressed. You wonder what he could do if you weren’t on the couch and he hadn’t gotten the drop on you, if he were unchained and the two of you could really wrestle. You heave up against him as hard as you can and manage to shift him a bare inch. He snarls like a buzzsaw and twists to clamp his jaw around your throat again, squeezing just enough to sting your pulse. Your prick throbs with the awareness of danger. You lick and nip at his fins, determined not to let him best you entirely, and try to grab his gills.

At that he actually rears back, grabs your wrists, and slams them above your head. Dirk’s... well, Dirk’s done this before, Jane and Roxy, too, everyone knows you like it when your partners get a bit spirited, a bit physical, making you lie there and take it and so on.

But none of them have been strong enough to do this to you so easily. How strong is he? Strong enough that you can delightedly imagine that chain’s more of a formality than a real restraint. He holds you as cool and steady as a machine made expressly for that purpose. You’re so close, just from the way his fists don’t move a fraction no matter how hard you struggle. You’re so fucking close.

Then he pulls off you, pulls that strange coiling serpent of a prick away from your own, and you moan in protest. He makes this utterly inhuman noise at that, like the laugh an entire summer’s worth of cicadas might make, and then just stays up.

“Please,” you moan. “Oh, Cronus, please.”

“Whhn,” he gurgles, lips flexing, throat fluttering. He takes three slow, deep breaths, just hovering over you. “Whhxnxnt me.”

“I want you, I want you! Want you so bad, bro, oh, please.”

His grin is nightmare-wide, and you feel as if all your blood’s been replaced with adrenaline and gasoline. He sinks back down, enveloping you in cool plush wetness, soft and loose and squeezing slowly. At the crown of your prick something strange flutters against you, and when you buck up against that tickle he snarls deep and strange and shoves you flat again with one hand. He’s not making words but you can read his lips, the frantic shine in his eyes: stay down.

He rocks, not up and down, but in slow gentle circles, just enough to drive you crazy, to have you squirming with the mad desire to just fuck him already, but he’s so heavy, and he holds you down so effortlessly. He just shifts and squirms with no rhythm at all, and lets your prickhead rub against his
pulsing inner walls in strange aimless patterns. His external package eels in much the same way against your lower stomach, coiling and questing weirdly. You want to touch it, work it in your hands, take it into your mouth and see what it would do with your tongue. He’s taking deep bellows-breaths, now, moving you inside him faster, in wider, harsher swivels, and those astonishing noises are spilling from his mouth continuously. His grip around your clasped wrists is bruising; his palm against your chest crushing. His legs are iron against yours.

You think, innately, in the shallow flickering way a chap does when he’s trying not to come, of the trolls on TV, wearing sober human business suits with their hair combed back, smiling with their lips closed. This naked creature above you might as well be a different species, alight with wildness, crying out to the tune of necks snapping.

It’s enough: your hips stutter and press forward as much as they can, pressing into him, and you feel that strange flutter at your tip and you lose yourself to orgasm, spilling yourself inside of him in waves, and you feel those soft walls clamping down around you, swallowing. He makes the most fantastic shriek, nearly human, and grabs for his writhing prick, squeezing the coil of it till thick purple spurts from between his clenched fingers.

You ride out one tremendous aftershock after the other, urged on by the amazing way his inner walls clench and swallow you, the way the fluttering pressure at your tip has turned into a kind of seal—he’s actually got parts of himself to draw your seed out, or something, it’s so intensely strange and wonderful. You wonder if Dirk’s tried this yet, and find yourself laughing, punch-drunk and giddy.

You wonder what that tentacle thing feels like to the girls, though. You know Jane’s at least had him inside her.

You wonder what he’d feel like in you.

“I win,” you say thickly.

Cronus just looks at you, wide-eyed and shaky. “Yhh,” he says. “Yyyh, kknmm—” He works his jaw, panting, frustrated, then pulls his internal business off you, and lets your wrists go. He rests his head cautiously on your chest. He’s still heavy as fuck but you don’t intend on going anywhere, and you wrap your arms around him and let him snuggle. It’s bally nice to hold a fellow after lovemaking. You bury your face in his hair and he smells like Jane’s shampoo, oddly ordinary except for the cool hard length of horn pressed to your cheek.

“You came inside me,” he finally says, sounding rough around the consonants but basically himself again. “I didn’t... didn’t think any of you would.”

“Did you mind?” you ask anxiously. “Only you were rather holding me down. Couldn’t avoid it.”

A long silence.

“So you were trying to avoid it?” he finally asks, and he sounds so deeply hurt.

“Mmmnh.” You shake your head. It’s not like you object to the idea on principle, or anything! And it felt damned good. “Just to be safe. I think this is one of those... cultural whatsis. Wouldn’t want to hurt you or knock you up or anything. Humans, ah, try not to exchange fluids just willy-nilly like that. It can lead to all sorts of tricky situations, you know.”

“I don’t... I don’t know. But thank you.” He hugs you a bit tighter, like punctuation for that thanks.

“Welcome,” you say, and kiss the tip of one of his horns. You’re awfully glad that wasn’t a problem.
after all. You'd hate to have to regret something that felt so exciting! "So you like it? Being, ah... given our seed?"

"Yes." He shivers a little, and licks your throat. "Very much so, Jake."

Your prick is tired and chilly with residual alien goo, but the heat of his voice, the hissing satisfaction, makes it twitch again.

"Well then," you say. You card your fingers through his hair. "Good to know! We’ll work on that."

You rummage around in your pants pocket then, and find the squashed and rather beslimed pack of your smokes. Cronus flicks a fin as you pull a cigarette and your lighter out and drop the pack off the side of the couch.

"D’you mind?" you ask, and he shakes his head. You light up with deep satisfaction.

He sniffs curiously, as you smoke, and you hold the cigarette out for him.

"Here," you say. He takes it and almost puts the wrong end in his mouth before you’ve got him sorted out, and then he just sort of lies there with it between his lips, looking puzzled.

"Inhale the smoke," you tell him. "Carefully—you might cough a bit, at first, but—"

He breathes in—then he squirms around as his gillflaps all lift at once, and the smoke goes wafting up from between his ribs.

"Eurgh," he grumbles, rubbing at the fluttering violet lines, like they itch. "Tastes terrible, chief. Why do you do this?"

"Chemicals in the smoke," you say, fascinated. "It’s relaxing. Do that again."

He takes another drag, and again his gills all snap open. It’s fascinating. "Should I be letting it back up through my mouth? Only I don’t think I can manage—it’s feelin’ like kind of a reflexive thing down there, if you get my drift—"

"No, no, your way’s fine. Are those really gills?"

"Yeah."

"For breathing underwater?"

"Not much good for breathing above it, boss."

Goodness, that’s strange. You light yourself another cigarette and gesture for him to finish his, and enjoy the way he lets six puffs of smoke right out of his ribcage every time, and the way he goes softer and heavier against you. He hasn’t coughed once, though with his strange lung situation he might just not be built for it.

"Take it easy if you feel sick, mate," you advise him. "Roxy and Dirk don’t much care for it." Dirk had, actually, smoked half a pack with you, the first time you’d offered, then quietly went off to throw up behind a tree. The fellow had odd notions of manliness, from time to time. Roxy just throws things at you if she catches you or Jane smoking indoors. Like... you’re doing now. You hope she’s not around.

"...Tingles," Cronus finally slurs, scratching slowly at his chest. "S’nice."
“You’re nice.”

He laughs a little, quiet and wheezy. “Yeah, okay. C’n I see your guitar again, buddy?”

You grope around a bit till you find the neck, then hand it off to him. A spot more rearranging and you’ve got him sprawled with his back to your front, clutching your guitar, sucking down great enthusiastic drags of smoke as he produces one alien tangle of noise after another. It sounds a bit like Chinese plucking tunes and a lot like whale.

You take a last drag of your cigarette, flick it on the floor to deal with later, and close your eyes to enjoy this.

*

**Jane: unwind.**

The ride back to the house is tense enough that even Jake notices, and his hands creak nervously on the steering wheel. “All’s well that ends well, eh?” he ventures.

Roxy kicks the back of his chair.

“Well it is,” he mutters, and drives faster.

You’re sliding the van door open and heading up the driveway before the van even rolls to a stop, and the strange boxy contours of Roxy’s place have never looked so welcoming. You’ve just spent all afternoon getting talked over in some dingy shithole biker bar and the group of you have scored genuinely valuable new intelligence, you’re grateful for that, for making progress and working together, but if you ever have to see one more scruffy, smelly, sorry excuse for a gentleman wait until Dirk repeats the question you just asked to dish out an answer you are going to open your mouth and scream the scream that ends worlds. Or at least eardrums.

Dirk catches up to you at the doorway, and his fingers shake a little on the keys. “Look, you can’t let them get you down, Crocker,” he mutters, and you very nearly sock him one in the ribs.

“Funny, Strider,” you say quietly. “I didn’t see them trying to get you down.”

The way his face goes into lockdown at that hurts you, and you wish you hadn’t said that. You hug him, very briefly. “I’m sorry,” he says.

You want to say it’s okay but it isn’t, but it still isn’t his fault, or anything he even really gets to apologize for. You pull away.

In the living room Cronus is still parked on the exact same square of couch cushion you’d sat him on this morning. You’d told him that you were trusting him to behave himself while you were out. He seems to have interpreted this as ‘don’t so much as sneeze’. Is he squirming?

“Have you been off the couch since we left you?” you ask incredulously.

“No,” he says. He sounds proud. You can't handle taking care of an overgrown alien puppy right now.

“Someone else deal with this, I’m going to the observatory,” you snap, and stalk off.

“You did good,” you hear Dirk saying behind you as you walk away. "Go on, get yourself to the bathroom before you rupture something." Even now, he's the one taking care of things, while you're
Being hideously unfair to him, you remind yourself. Dirk is on your side, and if it didn't matter what those smarmy jerks thought of the lot of you... But it does matter, so he plays good ol' boy for them and you keep smiling even when you want to scream, and now you are retreating to a space you've staked out as your own, until you can calm down and feel better.

You're out of breath by the time you've climbed all the stairs, which means you have to spend a few minutes just being still and breathing instead of lashing out at anything. You pace when you've recovered enough, doing the circuit round the perimeter of the room while the light outside turns from fuchsia to plum over the trees. You just need to burn off a little frustration. You're winning. You're making progress. You received crucial information from those knuckle-dragging buffoons, and you're going to put it to good use—you, and your team, and not the would-be "commandos" who wouldn't give you the time of day. Surpassing them will be your rebuttal.

A scratching sound at the stairwell makes you look up. Cronus is standing there watching you, eyes wide in the dim light, his fins canted back and down. That's a nervous posture, you think. You take a deep breath and try to be patient as you ask, "What is it?"

"You okay, boss?" he asks. Definitely nervous. Maybe a bit sad.

"I'm—" You can't, you won't, force yourself to say that you're fine. You turn your back so he won't see the wretched face you're making. "I've had a trying day, that's all."

"Oh." You can hear the breath he takes, and the faint slap of his bare feet on the floor; you wonder if he's making noise to inform you that he's moving. "Can I help?"

You try to smooth your face into composure before you look over your shoulder at him. "Help?"

He nods hopefully. "You got a pile right there and everything," he says, nodding at the mess of pillows from that time you and Roxy came up here with a bottle of wine for a romantic girls' night. "You wanna curl up and talk it out? Get a little feelings jam going?"

You can't quite stifle a laugh. It looks like your alien puppy wants to take care of you.

"Alright," you say. "Alright, Cronus, have at me."

He lights up. "C'mon down here, then, let's get comfy." He takes your hand and you let him lead you over to the pillow-pile. You land on the stuffed squeaky salamander and Cronus startles at the noise, which surprises a little smile out of you. It feels odd to cuddle with him when you don't have a purpose in mind, but he's tall and sleek and you fit comfortably into the curve of his arm, and that's nice.

Then he pats your face, which is less nice and makes you sputter.

"Oh, shit," he says, "uh," and tries again, but it just feels startling and weird, and you can't help flinching away when his nails come too close to your eyes. He tries to stroke your cheek while you squirm and giggle and you just end up having to catch his wrists. He's knocked your glasses off, and he's gurgling low in his throat with distress.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"Easy, easy," you try and reassure him, and let yourself relax, carefully, back into his arms. "Humans don't really like being touched like that the same way trolls do, okay? Try stroking my hair."
“Your hair? I—uh. Like this?”

His cool, heavy palm skates cautiously across your head once, then again. His nails feel pretty nice against your scalp. You hum a little with contentment.

“Do you have nerve endings there, chief?” he asks.

"In the scalp, sure," you say. "When you're gentle with your nails like that, it's... comforting."

"Oh," he says reverently. "Good." He gets better at it with practice, threading his fingers through your hair in slow, soothing strokes. You sigh, leaning your head on his shoulder. "You, uh, wanna talk about it?" he asks after another minute of that. "Or is that another thing humans don't like?"

You laugh wryly. "I'm not sure like is the right word. But sometimes it does help." So you tell him about that afternoon. About the frustration of having men refuse to pay attention to you because you're young and brown and female and thus clearly not worth their time. About the fact that this is hardly the first time you've had to put up with that and it won't be the last, because that's just How Things Are and you're not negotiating from a place of enough strength to say no actually things are like THIS. About the way you know the sacrifices are worth it but sometimes it maddens you, to think you can't even negotiate for respect.

He makes an actual growl, ripsaw low and bone-shaking. “That’s not right,” he says. “Men enforce order, yeah, specially us highbloods, we’re hatched with the size for it, the brains wired that way, but —what kind of civilization doesn't listen to princesses?”

“Well, there you go. I’m not a princess,” you sigh.

“You are,” he says. Just a simple statement of fact. “I saw the Empress, did I ever say? She waves all the new CivCorps recruits off planet. And I think, Jane, boss, that you got more royal dignity in your little finger than she had in all her silks and jewels.”

You open your mouth and then just close it again. Your cheeks burn and you feel fierce and hot behind your ribs. You've seen how bad he is at lying, over and over again; it's like the idea doesn't even occur to him. And now he's making a declaration like that— "Thank you," you say softly when you can make your voice work again. "Nobody's ever said anything like that to me before."

“Well,” Cronus says, and swallows. “Well, you lot are savages.”

You laugh and elbow his ribs, and he wheezes and laughs too.

“If I’m a princess, what does that make you, then?” you tease. “My prince? My knight in shining armor? We’d have to cut holes in your helmet.”

“Oh, leave off," he grumbles, and goes back to petting your hair. When you glance up at his face though he's chewing on his lip like he's trying not to smile, and his fins do a pleased flutter.

"Or maybe my court jester," you say. "Someone to make me smile."

He shifts and looks you straight in the eyes. "Every damn day, if you'll let me." That ought to sound ridiculous and cheesy, but he seems so utterly sincere.

You kiss his cheek. "How would you feel about giving your princess a backrub, then?"

"Happy to serve, your highness," he says. That is nice, isn't it? Being... being spoiled a little. You've all done without much spoiling since you got involved with resistance efforts.
His hands are pleasantly cool and firm as he helps you spread out on your front, and for all that he doesn’t quite seem to have any idea of what he’s doing, he’s eager enough to learn.

“Knead at the muscles with your thumbs, and the—mm, yes, there. The heels of your hands. Like that.”

“Like this?”

“Yes. Good boy.”

He purrs a little. Paired with the tentative in-and-out kneading of your back, the resemblance to a great big cat has never been stronger. You let your head rest on your forearms. Jake’s a great deal better at this, courtesy of growing up with a bossy grandmother, but you’re not thinking about Jake right now. You’re enjoying yourself.

And Cronus learns quickly—you’ve all done a good job of making sure your happiness is important to him, haven’t you? So when you sigh at a particularly nice stroke, or hum as he finds a knot between your shoulderblades, he trills musically back at you and focuses on that spot. It’s a relief you didn’t know you needed, being able to just get taken care of for a little while. Being able to be the princess.

By the time he’s worked through all the knots in your shoulders and made some good progress down your spinal column, you’re drifting, mellow and calm, drowsy with relaxation. Maybe this is how he feels when you pet him into his trance state. You hope so. It’s a good feeling.

"Boss?" he asks quietly as he reaches the waistband of your jeans. "Should I, um, keep going, or is there—is there anything else you want...?"

You roll over underneath him and look up. There’s just enough light for you to see his face, his sweetly hopeful expression, the upward-tilted flare of his fins. You smile. "Thank you," you say. "I do feel much better now."

"I’m real glad," he says. His voice thrums with some of the same melodic undertones it takes on when you’ve been petting him, like he takes the same sort of pleasure out of being able to comfort you.

"Okay," you say. You take his hand and give it a quick squeeze. "I think I can face everyone now. We did make some good progress today. We should be celebrating."

Cronus: celebrate.

You get to hold Jane’s hand all the way down the stairs. Your whole body just fucking sings with pride. She was feeling bad enough that the other humans didn’t think they could do anything for her, and you went after her, and you helped. You finally managed to do something for her, after all the things she’s done to take care of you. She didn’t even laugh at you when you told her how you feel. Well, okay, she laughed a little, but in a sweet, teasing way, not like, you dumb shit, who would ever want your attention? like you were used to from trolls. With Jane and her crew you finally have a place to belong.

You and Jane find the others in the kitchen, and when they catch sight of you the three of them cheer. Jane goes hoo!, warmly, and gives a regal wave. Roxy and Dirk descend on her, laying loud kisses across her face till she’s laughing, and then Dirk picks her up and carries her off to the couch on the other side of the counters. Smooching aside, they’re the kind of moirails that get movies made of them, and you can’t even be jealous. It’s good just to watch them.
“Cronus, mate!” Jake calls, and you spot him sitting on the counters, which isn’t allowed, and smoking indoors, which also isn’t allowed, though he seems to be on the counter so he can blow his cigarette smoke out the open kitchen window, which might make it alright. He’s got a glass of amber juice and a half empty pack of smokes, and your gills tingle longingly. You steal a quick glance at Jane—busy with smooches on the couch—and head off to Jake’s side. He pulls you up onto the counter, which makes you feel kind of daring and excited. You make very intense pupa eyes at Jake till he lights a smoke up for you and oh, fuck, god, yes. The first drag of smoke tingles so nice.

“You like those more than you like me, bro,” Jake says.

“They like me more than you like me, champ,” you retort, and when he presses a hot, wet kiss to your fin you choke on your next inhale and get stuck. You have to smack at your gills a few times to close them up again, and Jake just laughs, the ass. When you elbow at him he just kisses you again, with more tongue. He tastes sharp, not just like smoke, like something chemical and biting.

“Pfaugh,” you grimace. “What the hell’ve you been at, mate?”

He gets his scary grin on, the one that means he’s going to teach you something Real Men do. Humans have an apparently endless number of social conventions to maintain appropriate levels of masculinity, and a lot of them involve pain. Some of them involve fire. By your own count, you and Jake are probably the manliest couple of grubfuckers on the planet.

“Neat whiskey,” Jake says, reverently. You understood half that answer. Probably not the important half. He offers you his little cup of juice and you take it, wary but interested—this is pretty likely to suck, then be awesome, then suck again.

“Knock that back, champ,” Jake advises. “It’ll put some hair on your chest right quick.”

“You’re gross,” you inform him, and toss the whole thing down your throat as fast as you can, which is a huge mistake. This is definitely one of the man events that involves fire, and you were dumb enough to let Jake fucking English persuade you to put it in your mouth, and you deserve this. Every single vein in your body throbs with alarm and your stomach feels fried.

Jake pats your back with absolutely no sympathy as you whimper and claw at your charred ruin of a mouth.

“I’m going to die,” you let him know.

“You’re not going to die,” he says.

“I’m going to die and you killed me,” you wail. Dimly you can hear the other three laughing. Probably at you. You settle for using the hem of Jake’s shirt to wipe at your burning tongue. You’re amazed that only spit comes off and not the top layer of skin.

“You took your first drink like a true champion and a man of honor, up until the last part where you were an absolute fucking nancy,” Jake says gravely. “Son, I am disappoint.”

Oh, that tears it. You chomp his hip bone just gently enough that it doesn’t break the skin, and let yourself get shoved back upright.

You sniff, regally, and recover your dropped cigarette from the counter. “Give me another,” you demand, after a long, soothing puff. “I’ll show you who’s nancy.”

“You don’t even know what nancy means,” Dirk calls. You ignore him. It’s obvious enough from context, isn’t it? You’re not that dumb.
You cuddle up flush to your hatebuddy’s side and sip the next one, and lay your fins back when Jake smirks. He’s stupid amounts of pretty when he’s smirking at you. "Okay, I'll bite," you say when you've gotten about half the stuff down without betraying any reactions. "Are we just doing this to prove how manly we are, or do we get something else out of it too?"

"You're doing whiskey to prove how manly you are," Roxy answers as she swans into the kitchen with you. "But you drink liquor in general because it makes you feel good." She refills her empty glass with a mixture of some kind of red juice and what looks like water in a fancy bottle. You are completely positive that whatever she has is delicious, and that Jake will laugh mockingly if you ask for it and Dirk will probably do that quiet little thing with his eyebrows that means he’s laughing at you too. You finish your drink.

“Another,” you tell him, brandishing the glass.

“Don’t actually kill him,” Roxy says, and climbs over the back of the couch. Jane is missing a really interesting amount of shirt, you can kind of see if you lean over a little—Jake refills your glass.

“How do you feel?” he asks, holding your wrist.

“Fine and dandy,” you tell him proudly, but he just catches your chin.

“Seriously, mate,” he says, looking you over really intently. “Come on, give me a status report, how’s the old giggle juice treating you?"

You consider yourself. Pharmaceuticals were pretty tightly regulated on Beforus, and for all that humans like dosing themselves up with whatever you still aren’t exactly human. No one’s exactly sure what the cigarettes are doing to you, even, though you like them a lot and they haven’t hurt you yet.

“I feel good,” you conclude. “I feel warm. A bit tingly?"

He puffs his cheeks up, then sighs out a breath of relief. It’d be a glub if he had the anatomy for it, and is unfairly adorable regardless.

“Yeah, that’s about what should be happening,” he says, and lets go of your wrist in favor of hugging you around the waist. You take your next sip with a weird sense of accomplishment, kind of giddy, and enjoy the strangely companionable feeling of consuming human recreational drugs with your human friend.

Who keeps nosing at your fin, in between drags of his own cigarette, kissing you light and ridiculous. It’s ticklish enough to make you laugh, even while you can feel yourself getting wet, and he manages to keep timing the attacks for when you’ve got a mouthful of whiskey. Finally he blows a raspberry on the side of your neck and you choke on a laugh, spewing the liquid all down your chin and chest, and drop the glass. When you fumble for it you realize everything’s kind of off, everything’s gone kind of hot and soupy, and the glass hits the floor and rolls away with a wobble.

“Welp,” Jake says, and you can’t stop laughing, don’t want to stop. He keeps kissing you, and everything feels really wonderful. He murmurs, “Alright, I think we’re cutting you off.”

“No, it’s good, I like it,” you protest. “It’s good.”

“You’re good,” he says warmly, and his mouth tastes so much like yours, all firey, you can hardly tell where you end and he starts. You suck on his tongue and enjoy the rough moan he makes at that, so much lower than Jane’s but just the same kind of thing. You trade sloppy kisses back and forth, just enjoying yourself. Human drugs are so great. What the hell did your old crew know, trying to
campaign against them?

One of the girls, you think Roxy, shrieks delightedly from the couch. You startle a bit and Jake laughs. "Do we need to come break it up over there?" he calls.

"No!" Jane and Roxy chorus. They sound about as happy as you feel. That's good. That's great.

"In that case, perhaps a referee is in order," Jake says, hopping down from the counter. He takes your hand. "Dirk's a fine fellow," he tells you, "but he has no eye for the ladies whatsoever."

You're not entirely sure what that's supposed to mean—as far as you can tell, Dirk likes Jane and Roxy just fine, and they're wonderful, so what's the problem?—but you follow Jake happily enough. The floor feels off-kilter under your feet, almost but not quite like you're on the deck of a ship. That's a sort of comforting feeling. Maybe someday, if you're really good and really helpful, you can ask your family to take you sailing.

Then, like an idiot, you forget to be careful of your chain and try to take a full step. Your balance goes right out from under you and you flail, but with the way your head spins you can't catch yourself in time and you fall. "Ow," you complain, and you glare at Jake's boots. "Stop laughing."

"Sorry, champ, I really am, I know it's unkind of me but you should have seen yourself."

"Hey," Dirk says sharply. Something whistles through the air and Jake catches it with a metallic jangle.

Jake goes down on his knees beside you as you sit up, and he's got Dirk's keys in his hand. "There, and Dirk's got the answer, as always," he says as he reaches for the first of your cuffs. "You'll probably want to get your legs spread further than this soon enough, won't you?"

You whimper. Jake winks when he pulls you to your feet again, and you leave your chain behind on the floor as you go join the rest of the party.

Jane and Roxy have claimed either end of the couch, and are leaning into each other for the kind of sloppy makeouts that involve a lot of nuzzling and giggling. They're pretty much in Dirk's lap for this, since he's sitting in the middle, and he looks like he's barely more than mildly amused. Maybe that's what Jake meant about him and ladies. You're pretty sure you'd be more excited if Jane and Roxy were kissing on top of you.

"Ladies," Jake says grandly, and throws his arms out in clear invitation.

"Fuck off, Jake," Roxy says, and then squeals when Jane bites her nipple. "'n second thought, fuckin' come on, I want your mouth."

Jake goes and sinks down between Roxy’s legs, and Jane starts working at his shirt. You shift from foot to foot, enjoying the show and anxious for an invitation of your own. Dirk pushes Jane gently over to Jake’s side, gives her a fond pat on the butt, and then pats his own lap and shoots you a look over the tops of his shades. Your bulge pulses, hard, and is already curling out into the cool air by the time you make it to his lap. Your head’s spinning. You’re tremendously glad to cling to his warm solidity.

“Hi there,” he says, that pretty little smile tucked in the corner of his mouth, and runs a thumb over your cheek. “You’re flushed.”

“I’ll be anythin’ you want,” you tell him, and turn your face into his palm. Then, daringly, you rock your crotch up against his, mimicking that human rhythm and enjoying the rough friction of his jeans
against your slit. He takes a sharp breath and holds you, an arm low around your back, a hand to
your cheek, and you laugh. “I like you so much, Dirk,” you tell him. “I w-want you to know that,
okay, I like you, you’re great, did you know that?”

You can see his eyes through his shades and he’s fixated on you. “I could stand to be reminded from
time to time,” he says slowly, and you grind on him faster.

“No, it’s true, I’d tell you all the time if you wanted, don’t know why I haven’t, I told Jane just now
how much, did I say, I love her, but I love you too, I love all of you, even Jake, love you so much.”

He breathes out roughly, kisses your earfin. His hips are rising to meet you and you can feel his
bulge getting stiff, it feels better against you but you want more, your fluid’s slicked the fabric until
there’s hardly any friction at all, even with the hard lump of his erection to press against. You lean
your forehead against his, till you can feel his breath against your lips.

“You tease,” you accuse, kind of distantly amazed you still have your voice in this haze of warmth
and need. You’re slurring a bit, but that’s all. “C’mon, give it to me, please, come on, need you inside
me.”

“You sure?” he asks, and you chirp eagerly. He relaxes, at that, reaches for his fly, and you’re
touched that that’s what he’s been waiting for, that he’s learned to read an alien’s signals.

“Yeah, I’m sure, I’m so fkkxkin’ sure, Dirrrk, plzsse,” you say, and it’s all mixed up with a long low
warble but you’re getting it out. You laugh dizzily and lift up to your knees as he shoves his pants
down, frees that beautiful cock of his. You stuff yourself down on it and keen with pleasure.

He makes that low, quiet groan that means you're getting past his self-control, and gets you by one
horn to pull your mouth to his. You part your lips to let him in, happily, loving the way he claims
you. He's the most territorial out of the four of them and it's glorious, the fierceness in how he
touches you, the way each thrust of his thick cock and each scrape of his blunt teeth remind you that
you belong.

He keeps that grip on your horn, keeps kissing you, and his other hand trails up your side to your
gills, finding the smooth edges of the opercula with his fingertips. You're sensitive there and it would
be so easy to hurt you but he's careful, stroking them gently while you work his cock and chirr into
his mouth. You're dizzy and this is beautiful and something the others are doing is making Jane sob
with pleasure, this sound that goes off like a depth charge behind your ribs and fills you up with
light.

The more people are in the room, the less Dirk talks during sex, which means that this time he's
almost completely silent, just breathing hard against you and swallowing low moans. You take
advantage of your strange new ability to speak through your arousal to pick up the slack: "Ssw g’d,
nnn, whhn’t," and maybe you're overestimating your skills a little there, maybe it's getting to you
after all.

But Dirk nuzzles up against you, nips your cropped fin and breathes out hot against your skin. "You
want it," he says, and you nod, so thrilled and giddy. You were close enough. You got him to
understand. "Tell me what you want. Let me hear you loud and clear."

You whine. You want to tell him, and you're doing your best, but you're still fighting for the words
even with Jake's whiskey to make you loose-jointed. "Whhxnt yy," and you take deep breaths,
slowing down as much as you can when he's pounding your nook and teasing your gills, "wwhhnt
y'uurrh khhnm," and that last bit breaks into the edge of a snarl just because you're frustrated with
your vocal structures for not cooperating.
The sound does something to him, though, makes him tense up and tighten his grip on you. For an instant you're terrified you've made him angry—what if he thinks that was meant to be a threat?—but then he pulls you closer instead of pushing you away, and he's growling back as he shoves his cock up in you harder, raw and pushy and letting go of his self-control in a way you usually only get from Jake. You stop worrying about even attempting words, just crooning and whining, hissing when he hits your seedflap a little too hard to be comfortable but that doesn't fucking matter because you want this and he wants you, he does.

His face is flushed pink by now, the way it gets when he's close, and his thighs are starting to tremble under you. He grimaces, needy and struggling for it, and all you want is to feel him come, to have him give it to you. "Plzzss," you beg, the best you can manage, and you reach down to get him by the hips, to pull him up into you, to keep him there.

"Hhnn, fuck," Dirk gasps, with an almost trollish break in the middle of it, and then you feel the first hot splash of his fluids and your nook ripples, waves of glorious contraction as your seedflap drinks in his come. Your bulge thrashes against your belly, an echo of the way everything inside you feels.

Dirk is breathing hard by the time he's done, his chest rising and falling steadily, his tank top damp with sweat. You purr down at him, steady and soft, feeling the little glowing kernel of warmth that he's left inside you. His glasses have fallen askew in the excitement, and you think—you think there's something beautiful, and special, and secret in the way he looks at you right now. A tenderness, maybe. It feels like he's really looking at you, really seeing you, in a way that most people just never manage. He reaches a hand up to touch your face, so carefully, and his eyes are wide and fixed straight and intense on yours. Your bloodpusher stutters.

"Oi, Dirk," Jake says loudly, crushing into the barely-existent space between Dirk and Jane, "terribly sorry to interrupt your touching moment here, but can I have him if you're done? Only I'm about to explode otherwise."

Dirk's sunglasses go back in place immediately, and he does something you can't even pinpoint with his shoulders that makes him look almost bored. "Sure, bro, far be it from me to impede the upward momentum of a gentleman’s pocket rocket." He slides his hands under your thighs to lift you off his cock and spill you into Jake's lap, his lips quirked up at one corner in the tiny smile that means he has everything under control.

You hold tight to that strange, delicate moment, though, still dumbstruck by it right up to the instant when Jake tumbles you both onto the floor. You swing at him, weirdly loose and clumsy tonight, and he dodges easily and bites your shoulder. His incisors are nothing to flick a fin at, either, and you squall and thrash. You feel giddy and strange, and his weight on top of you makes you just want to go limp, give in, get him inside you. You let your head rest back against the rug and bop him, weakly, in the temple. He just laughs, and hooks a finger into your mouth, of all things.

"By jove, look at this whopper of a catch," he snickers, tugging on your cheek, "Six feet if he’s an inch!" and you feel a stab of real, true ebon desire. You twist your head just enough to snap your fangs shut on his finger, and enjoy the way his face goes slack with lust as the hot tang of human blood spills across your tongue. You dig your teeth in a little tighter, then release him and make a show of licking your lips, reveling in the way he watches your mouth and the high thrilled woo! Roxy makes from the couch.

“H’nkry,” you snarl, and grab Jake’s cock. He yelps and you don’t even care. You’re burning with lust and stronger than the four of them put together and something in you feels frantic, almost savage, and you really like it. You can feel the genetic material Dirk left inside you and it’s not enough, it’s nowhere near enough. You want to know what it’ll feel like when you’ve got more, got Jake’s in
there too.

He doesn’t protest a bit when you help guide him into your nook, and you both moan in unison. You love the way humans sound in pleasure, that low fluting gasp, and the way he drops his sweaty forehead to your chest and goes “Cronus, mate,” like you are, like you’re mates. If Dirk’s a locked record then Jake’s a schoolfeed in eighteen point font, and it’s fucking glorious.

He fucks you like he's storming a beach, full frontal assault, no finesse, just overpowering. Your defenses crumble; you capitulate easily, no resistance now that he's demanding something you want, too. You arch your hips up to meet his pounding thrusts, trying to elaborate on the simple back-and-forth rhythm. You’re not as desperate for a looser, more complicated touch as you were when the boys first started fucking you like this, but it helps, it’s still so good. He makes a low rough grunt and grabs your bulge, pulling it straight and taut with his thumb smearing heavy and rough over your desperately sensitive tip, and you know he knows to handle you more delicate than this, you know he knows your bulge isn’t a dick and the way he treats it like one anyway is punishing. It feels divine. You throw your head back and keen high and breathless, you just let him work you over, let the ache build up inside you in waves. You’re not built for this kind of treatment but you like it so much, you like taking it, being strong and worthy enough to meet him thrust for thrust.

When he comes it’s a shot of fire, burning clear through the heavy, blurry ache of sensation that your nook’s become. You convulse as he buries himself up into you and shakes, biting hard at your shoulder once more, right over the sting of where he’d chomped you previous. Your fingers are clamped tight around his hips and ass, keeping him tight between your legs as you work on getting every last bit of his genetic material where it needs to go, where you want it so desperately. You want to be full, for real, for the first time, you want them to really give themselves to you like for real and for true, and the heat and weight inside you sings. This is good. This is right.

“Cronus,” Jake sighs, and kisses where he’d bit you. You can’t even speak, so you just lay a kiss to his temple, and slide your hands softly up his broad back. When he pulls out of you it makes the both of you shiver as one.

For a little bit you and Jake just lie there, gasping for breath, grinning up at the ceiling. It feels good. You have enough material up your seedflap by now that you’re starting to get hungry for release, kind of glorying in the anticipation of how good it’s going to feel to let this warm weight go—but this is all so good that you don't really want it to be over yet, either. You haven't even done anything for the girls, and the idea of getting your bulge into someone tonight is pretty compelling.

Dirk kneels beside you, cupping your face in one hand, and you lean into his touch. He's taken his shirt off at some point. That's nice. "Caught your breath yet?" he asks, gently amused.

"Mnn," you say, nodding. "Murrh?"

"Yeah," he says. "I wanna get you between me and Roxy."

You beam up at him, purring and nuzzling against his hand. It's like he knows exactly what you need, almost before you do. You've never been so well taken care of as you are here.

"Listen to him, he's like a big kitten," Roxy says, and she sounds so fond. "Here, kitty kitty."

You roll up onto your hands and knees, purring louder just for her, and arch your back in a stretch. When you crawl over to her she smiles, slow and warm. You climb up onto the couch, between her soft, spread thighs, and lean down to lick your way up between them. Her skin is salty with sweat, and the soft pink folds between her legs are rich with creamy musk, the same strong, delicious taste as Jane’s fluids but different again, unmistakably Roxy’s. She makes a long, low moan when you
taste her, and then she's pulling you up with one hand around your horn.

"Come here, pussycat," she says. "You're a fuckin' virtuoso with your tongue, it's true, but I want something bigger in there."

"Yssss," you say, and you're pretty sure you couldn't actually manage anything close to thank you right now, so you'll have to say it later. She raises her knees as you lower yourself down above her, and your bulge sinks into her warm, soft heat.

She throws back her head, making another one of those low moans, this sound like she's so deep in pleasure she's lost to it. You kiss the line of her jaw and the delicate flesh of her throat—careful with your fangs, because Jake's the only one who encourages you to bite, and you don't want to hurt her even the tiniest bit. She keeps holding onto your horn and that's wonderful, too, having her keep you close, feeling how she doesn't want to let you go anywhere. Your bulge twists inside her, curling around itself, rubbing and coiling. You can't get it to really mimic the stroke of a human cock but the girls seem to like it anyway, and you're so glad.

The cushion behind you dips and you feel Dirk's hand on your hip, steadying and possessive both at once. The head of his cock rubs up between your legs, stiff and blunt, teasing your slit. "Yeah?" he says as you squirm. You nod, trilling desperately, and he fills you.

He's slower this time, much gentler than Jake, and you don't know if that's for your sake or his. But he drapes himself over your back so you're sandwiched between their two warm bodies, and his steady, slow thrusts press you deeper into Roxy every time he gets all the way into you. It draws different sounds from your throat this way, your chirrs drawn out in a longer, more even buzz, counterpoint to Roxy's breathy, dreamy sounds.

Roxy keeps one hand curled around your horn, making a game of teasing at your horntip the same way you tweak her nipples, but after a minute she reaches up with the other one and Dirk takes it, lacing their fingers together as he fucks you into her. It's fucking beautiful, this tender affection, and you hide your face against her hair because it's almost more than you can bear, being invited into the middle of this amazing thing they have together. She licks at the bite-bruise on your shoulder and coos, “Cronus, Dirk, my boys, oh, my pretty boys,” and it shakes you to your bones. Yeah, hers, you're theirs.

You kind of lose it, then, in the rhythm, the relentlessly sweet pain of it all, just moving and reacting and working up bit by bit to climax, until abruptly Roxy shivers and calls out and then squirms off to the side, panting hard.

“Nn-k-k-,” you object when your bulge is pulled clear. You were so close. You twist to follow her, laying pleading, clingy kisses on her face that make her laugh. She reaches back for your bulge and you're nodding eagerly, arching your hips up to let her, and Dirk swats Roxy’s wrist away. You both squeak.

“Wow, fuck to the what, Di-Stri,” she says, rubbing it. He doesn't say anything but he must do something, because she looks over and that means you do too.

Jake's watching you. Well, okay, Jake and Jane are both watching you, but she looks happy and tired, and he looks like he's still hungry and you're dessert. She’s got a hand on his thigh like some barbarian conquering queen might rest her hand on a prize, languid and confident and fond, and he squirms, just a little, as she avoids ever directly touching his flushed erection. When she sees you staring, she winks.

“Think you can hold your horses a little longer, champ?” Dirk murmurs, low and intimate against
“Yeah,” you mouth, completely voiceless, and Roxy laughs and ruffles your hair. Dirk licks the top edge of your fin, then wrenchingly, slowly, runs his tongue along your cut-off tine. The attention doesn’t hurt this time, but it floods you with sheer nervy adrenaline. You shudder, wracked right down to your bones, and Dirk growls against your nape. He still doesn’t speed up, doesn’t fuck you any harder, but you can feel the way his breathing starts to stutter, and how he holds you tighter when you call for him. Then he starts to stroke your face, gently and in wrenching counterpoint to the way he’s pounding your nook, and you feel your pan start to rip in half with the overload.

If you were human you could tell him, now, still, with your words, everything you felt for him, everything he was making you feel. But you can’t, not anymore, you’re struck stupid with it all. You’re too turned on in too many directions and your body’s betrayed you and you hardly even have the presence of mind to fight it, so you just purr, louder and louder, trying to encourage him and tell him how much you still want him even as you can feel yourself slumping boneless and compliant onto the couch cushions. And he gets it, you think, or at least likes how you’re still so different. He likes it when you lose it to him and you like giving yourself up, because he’s got you. Right from the start he got you.

The sound he makes when his cock finally starts to pulse inside you is a soft, desperate, "Oh," more lost than you’ve ever heard him, and it wrecks you almost as much as the ripples of your seedflap drinking in his come. You reach back clumsily to put a hand on his hip and just let it rest there, like you could steady him, like you could communicate this way when your voice fails you.

When he’s given you every last drop, he lays his hand over yours and squeezes. You feel so full of warmth and comfort. Jake shuffles over toward you. "How about it, champ? Up for one more go?"

You nod, smiling at him warmly. Dirk pulls out so you can move, and you go pliant in Jake's hands, letting him push and pull you into whatever position he wants. You wind up on your back with your glutes hanging off the edge of the couch and your knees hooked over his shoulders as he slides his cock up your nook.

It's the gentlest he's ever been with you, and that's nice when you've already gone so hard tonight. He rolls his hips, sliding in you easily, and you trill softly to encourage him. You want to finish and you want to go on forever, you're not sure which. It seems to go on for ages, regardless, and everything is warmth and sloppy friction and the heaviness low in your belly, that tension you can't release. When he comes again you sob, so full now, your bulge twisting helplessly against your abdomen as you take in his material. Your nook aches when he slips free.

Jake claps you on the shoulder with a damp, shaky hand, then pulls himself up onto the couch and curls up between Dirk and Roxy. “Dashing good show, everyone,” he murmurs. “Top marks.”

Dirk claps his hands once, twice, very slowly and sarcastically, and you tip your head to the side enough to grin at him. Jake is already asleep, or very nearly so, and Roxy’s stifling a yawn.

“You’re all pussies and I’m ashamed to be seen with any of you,” Dirk says. “Who’s up for another round?”

“Boo,” Roxy says. “Your face is a pussy, is what.”

“Quite right,” Jane agrees, getting to her feet and stretching out her back in a way that pushes her breasts out in a way that, even fucked full to bursting, you can’t help but admire. “It’s been a long
day, and I am fairly sure if you stuck your anatomy anywhere else it would fall off, Mister Strider, I expressly forbid you from trying. To bed, everyone. Up.”

“I,” you start, and work your throat awkwardly, groping for coherence. “A--ah.” You haven’t come yet, and while you’re sure a few minutes alone with your own two hands would fix that you don’t mind fixing Jane with a big pathetic gaze and hoping. You even let your lip wibble a little.

She gets the idea, and smiles kindly.

“You too, dear,” she says, and tugs at your horntip. “Let’s finish up in the bathroom, shall we?”

You chirr with adoration, and when you stagger to your feet she wraps a strong warm arm below your gills to steady you. You put your arm around her shoulder.

“Race you to the top of the stairs, you slugs,” she calls over her shoulder.

Roxy just burrows her face into Jake’s chest and moans. Dirk flips Jane off. You find yourself giggling conspiratorially with Jane all the way up.

She steers you into the big bathroom where—where she washed you that first time, when you were so messed up and scared. You step into the shower and she comes with you and you're overwhelmed with raw tenderness at the same time that you still badly want to come.

"Look at you," she says, one hand cupping your cheek ever so briefly before she lets her hand trail down your chest. She splays her fingers across the tightness of your lower abdomen and just that faintest pressure makes you gasp. "We've given you quite the workout tonight, haven't we?"

You chirp helplessly, smiling, because it's true, they really did, and you liked it, and you'd do it any time they wanted to. Your bulge snakes against the softness of Jane's stomach in a desperate search for relief. When her fingers reach the tip of your bulge you wail shamelessly with need.

She brings her other hand up to touch you, too, playing her fingers along your length, stroking and squeezing and giving you something to wrap around. Your bulge gets astonishingly slicker as she plays with it, coating her hands thickly in your purple and spattering in long drips to the tub’s floor. You're so fucking full, your genetic material so heavy and ready inside you and you're almost too worked up to bear but god, you don’t want this bliss to end. You reach up overhead and curl your hands around the showerhead just to have something to hold on to, and now it really echoes the first time you were here, with you helpless in the face of her impossible kindness.

That's the thought that wrecks you, as Jane works your bulge with her clever small hands, and you flood yourself messily. She kisses at your chest, laps at your gillslits, and you just shake and cry helplessly, reveling in the way she holds you together, in the way she’s orchestrated this astonishing, overwhelming experience and then pulled you through it safely.

When the blaze of pleasure dies down enough for you to actually open your eyes and have some thoughts again, she’s still smiling at you. You take some deep breaths, and if your knees feel like noodles right now then there is a deep and intense stillness inside you.

“Empress,” you say, and it comes out clear and strong.

She kisses you. It’s slow and sweet as anything any of them have ever done, and fills you up, tips to toes, with calm reverence.

“Don’t cry, silly boy,” she whispers, sounding a little teary herself. “Oh, my Cronus.” You don’t mean to, just—
“I love you,” you breathe. “I love you.”

She nuzzles your cheek. “We know. You’ve been so good, Cronus. You’re so good for us. We never wanted to hurt you, you know, I—we never want to hurt you again, never.”

You snivel helplessly. You’re exhausted, head spinning, legs shaking, but you feel like nothing could ever hurt you again, not so long as you have her and her family to serve.

“I’ll be good forever, then,” you say, and smile for her. You know it’s a weak little thing but it’s the best you’ve got and you really mean it, you mean it so much.

Jane helps you rinse the mess off, her hands sweet and gentle as the water runs down the drain violet, then lavender, then finally clear. You blot each other dry with fluffy towels, too clumsy with exhaustion to make a good job of it, but Jane laughs when you fumble and it’s the most beautiful sound.

She takes your hand and leads you out of the bathroom, and then instead of heading for the stairs to see you back to your tub she goes further up the hall and pushes open a half-closed door. It’s a respiteblock, what’s the human word? You can’t remember right now, but there’s a sleeping platform in the middle of the room that’s as large as a raft, with Roxy and Jake and Dirk already flopped across it. They wriggle and fuss and remind you of nothing more than a bunch of juvenile barkbeasts in a basket, for all that they still smell sharply of human sex, and your vascular pump goes shivery and tender when Jane pulls you down with her as she climbs into the nest.

You’re a trembling, grateful wreck, and it doesn’t take any more encouragement to burrow into the warm mess of arms and legs. Jane wraps around your front immediately, though Jake gets your horn tips to some part of his spine and shoves rudely at your head, and you hear Dirk dodge fast to avoid horns to the face. The girls just laugh as you stammer apologies, and Jane stubbornly wrestles you back down when you try to retreat.

“Just scoot up a bit, dear,” she murmurs into your chest. “Your headgear won’t bother anyone that way.”

“Shoul’ just lop th’ damn things off,” you grumble, and Jake grunts loud agreement.

“We’ll talk about extreme body modification when you’re not tanked, hotshot,” Dirk says firmly, and lays a rough, possessive hand on the nape of your neck. You shiver happily, and clutch Jane a little tighter. You can hear them all breathing, their hearts beating, and you feel absolutely saturated with their scents. You’re really, truly, finally where you want to be.
“You look good,” you tell your alien, because it’s true and because he looks like he needs to hear it. Instead of kindling at the flattery like usual, though, he just grimaces and smooths his t-shirt down across the chest another time. He’s twitchy, anxious and doubtful like you haven’t seen him in a long while.

“I—” Cronus frowns, chews his lip, smooths his shirt again. He keeps looking at himself in the bedroom mirror and then looking away. “It’s just. I don’t...”

“You nervous, bro?”

He shakes his head. “No, no. If you think—you say I’ll do fine, I’ll do fine, I won’t let you down, scout’s honor. But the... the shirt...”

The shirt fits him like it got painted on: he’s broader than you in the chest and shoulders, and you can see the shadows of his violet gills under the stretched-taut white cotton. The sleeves are torn out at the shoulders, showing off the not-quite-right muscles of his arms. He looks like a xeno pin-up.

You step up behind him, then reach around to hook your fingers into the beltloops of his—your—black jeans, because why not. You meet his eyes in the mirror. “Tell me,” you command him.

“I’ll be goin’ out without my sign,” he says all in a rush, and drags his fingers across his chest again.

“And that’s a problem?”

He nods, looking miserable. “It’s just not right, a guy going around without his sign. Ain’t proper at all.”

You don’t flinch outwardly but you know what it feels like for things to be not right, for everything to feel just a little off, how the imbalance creeps up on you. But you need him to hold it together, and that means you need to unlock this problem he's got and figure out how to disarm it. “You didn’t have a sign the last two months you’ve been lounging around our place bare-ass naked.” You kiss his neck.

His fins twitch. “Yeah, I was naked. And it was just you guys looking at me, you’re human.”

The way he says that, human, sends a heavy thump of heat down into your guts. You reach up and tug his fin, thumb and forefinger pinched firmly around his clipped tine, and the breath locks in his throat. You smooth his fins back against the sides of his head, hiding them with your hands, making him just that slightest bit less alien. It’s a token gesture, when his skin is dolphin-gray and he has those vivid, jagged horns—but it’s enough to break his circuit. He shudders, looks at you with this weird mix of want and shame in his eyes, and leans back into you like a puppy.

“We’re human,” you agree. Pause, and he starts to nod. “And you’re with us, right?”

“Right,” he says, and leans his ass up against you a little harder, hopefully. “Yeah, boss, all the way.”

“You can do this,” you say, and you splay your own hand over his against his chest, your brown freckles and pink knuckles looking surreally vivid against white cotton and pewter alien skin. He
purrs, and yeah, he’s definitely grinding against you now, not that you have complaints. He’s so fucking compliant, so eager to be what you need. You close your eyes and hold onto him, measuring your breath, getting a firmer rein on your own wants. You can’t let yourself lose control.

Because it’s so easy to push him up against the mirror, hook your—his jeans down below the firm curve of his ass and tease your way into his wet nook from behind, easy to drive steadily into him as his panting breaths fog the glass, easy to lean up and lick his cut fin until he screams for you. He makes everything so easy.

* 

Cronus: protect.

You’re so nervous you feel like you’re going to be sick. You try to calm yourself down focusing on the comforting, sexy feel of the material Dirk left in you, but even that’s not enough to really make you feel better. Bits of the plan your four buddies are formulating between themselves have been presented to you, and you know they’re leaving out a lot—you’re not a stupid guy, okay, you know when you’re being handled—but the picture the pieces make is not nice.

Your job, as it got explained to you, is ominously simple: look mean, and if anyone fucks with Jane you break their wrist. Jake had said that, and Roxy had laughed, and Jane had said “No, for pete’s sake, don’t,” but behind her head Dirk had nodded sternly, and when you nodded back, it was at him.

What the plan amounts to is getting weapons, because your family needs weapons to go rescue their family, and so here you are, getting out of the van with your borrowed clothes nipping at you all wrong, trying to feel like you’re not going to fall into the looming sky and possibly hurl chunks along the way.

Roxy brushes a hand along your spine. “Deep breaths, fishsticks,” she says. “Give me a snarl.”

You bare your fangs, feeling like you’re all of three again and playing Imperialists And Diplomats.

“Wider. Wider. Spread those fins. Mmm, you’re hunk. They’re going to fuckin’ shit when they see you coming.” She pops a kiss to your jaw, and you feel marginally better about everything.

You get behind Jane’s right shoulder and Dirk takes her left, and while she takes her own series of deep breaths Roxy goes dancing off front to go meet—you don’t know. People her progenitor knows from somewhere. Nowhere near the kind of humans you’ve ever met before. The kind of humans you used to have conferences about, the kind of humans that were statistics on print-outs you’d doodled sharks all over while some blueblood on piles of mood stabilizers blathered on about outreach programs.

Well, you supposed you’ve bloody well outreached.

The meetup is in a rickety old barn at the top of a hill instead of anywhere more civilized, which you suppose makes a certain kind of sense. Your people don’t want these guys to know where their hive is, and obviously these guys don’t want you to know their hive, for fear of invasions or whatnot. It’s all very suspicious and primitive, and your airsacs are burning as you slog upwards after the humans. Jake raises his eyebrows when you lag too far behind and you just grimace. You weren’t made for scampering up and down inclines like they are and anyway it’s not like you’ve had the opportunity for exercise this past while.

They pause when they're almost to the meeting point so you can catch up, which is shameful, but
you do catch up, and get back in position as Jane's honor guard. Roxy waves to you from the barn and the lot of you march inside.

It's creepy as hell in here, smells of dead dry plant matter and the sun filters in through gaps in the roof, eerie horrorfeed light that's just bright enough to seem threatening. And that's before you even take the humans into account. You've seen humans like this on documentaries about struggling small communities, mines and farms—the cheap clothes they're wearing, the leathery look to their faces, the frankly gross mass of hair growth all around their jaws. They're lowbloods, or whatever humans call it. Your Empress is having to go ask for help from a bunch of menial dirt-scrappers. Peasants, actual peasants. That's disgusting, and you find yourself glaring at them.

They glare back. If they were capable of proper threat displays you're pretty sure they'd be making one right now. "Holy shit," one of them says in alarm.

"He's all right," Jake says blithely. "He's giving us a hand with the big score."

Are you? That sounds important. For a second you're distracted from this sordid mess just by the pleasure of being part of their important plans.

Then the middle one of the three monkeys sneers, "In bed with the enemy? Fucking disgusting," and spits at Jane's feet.

All of a sudden it's easy to play the part they've laid out for you. Your fins snap open and your lips skin back from your fangs, baring all of them, growling like a feral in a wiggler's horrorfeed. Two of the dirt-apes swing up their guns, and they stink delightfully of human fear.


Your growl stutters and you swallow it down, but you can't look away from the monkeys and you can't relax your snarl. They think they can stop you. You're sure you could tear their throats out before they managed. A kid’s cautionary tale, that's what you are now, daylight glinting off your fangs like some primeval horror, you're powerful.

Dirk cuffs the back of your head. "What did I fuckin’ say," he says, and the hard edge in his voice does awful things all down your spine. You're a tiny bit reminded of the way Kankri used to lecture you about not being respectful enough of the trash you dealt with on a daily basis, but Kankri never yelled at you when you still had a piece of him inside you, never made it personal like this. His disapproval never actually mattered.

You look down, clenching your fins back. "Sorry, boss."

"That's better." You can feel when Dirk's attention shifts, even without looking at him. "So, gentlemen. Shall we?"

"The fuck do you even have one of those for," one of the dirt-scrappers mutters.

"You'd be surprised how useful he can be," Jane says lightly. "Now let's get business taken care of. I'm sure none of us want to draw this out."

They still grumble some, and one of them keeps staring at you like he's expecting you to jump on him, but at least they listen. They lead the way further into the barn, where there's a tarp over one of the stacks of bound plant matter. When they pull that back you can see the sleek dark shapes of human-made guns, and your bilesac rolls. They're ugly things. For a second you're remembering the schoolfeeding you got before you came planetside about human propensity for violence, about how easily they maim and kill each other. For a second you're remembering the up-front lessons you've
been dealt, the crack of a rifle against your temple—

"Roxy," Jane says.

Roxy steps up to the display of guns and reaches for one of them, a lightweight long-barreled rifle. "Wow, yeah, come to mama," she says, lifting it smoothly to her shoulder and sighting down the barrel.

"That one and which others?" Jane says, and you know that tone of voice, that’s her you did something cute and I like you tone of voice. You keep working on wrapping your pan around the idea of your family—who are all so good to you, so nice, so comfortable, they like you, they do—also being happy to handle lethal weapons. For a good cause, you remind yourself. None of you are the bad guys here—except maybe that scruffy jackass who won’t stop eyeballing you like he thinks he can set you on fire from across the barn. You still don’t like the look of any of them them, dirty and sullenly hostile, like a pack of nasty mongrels looking for any chance to bite.

Roxy picks out a few more guns, rifles but also a pair of small blunt-nosed pistols, and then boxes of ammunition to go with them. She’s smiling but intent, moving fast from one box to the next. You try to keep focused on glaring down all the monkeys, keeping them intimidated. That’s your job, you can handle it, and when you flare a fin or bare a fang at any of them in particular and they flinch—

that feels good. That feels fucking great.

"I think that should be enough," Jane finally says as Jake helps Roxy collect all of her choices. "What do we owe you?"

The head ape breaks off your little staring contest to look her up and down in this insultingly familiar way that puts your hackles up higher than ever. You want to smack that ugly insolent look off his face.

"Twenty grand," he says.

You hear Dirk's breath come sharp between his teeth, and you can see Jane's shoulders stiffen. "That's a lot more than you suggested it would be when we made this arrangement."

"Yeah, well, we made this arrangement," and he makes the word sound like a curse, "before we knew we were dealing with a filthy gray-fucking dyke."

You dig your nails into your palms hard to keep your hands at your sides. That last word was clearly an insult from the way he says it, and you don't need an explanation to know why gray-fucking would make him sneer like that. To think he'd dare look down on Jane for how good she's been to you—and filthy, he called her filthy!

She holds out one hand to offer the shit-wrangler a sheaf of human paper money. "That's ten," she says, and you can hear the anger in her voice. The bills are shaking just a bit in her hand. "Which is twice your original estimate and should be plenty."

Monkeyboy makes a face like something smells bad. "It'll do," he says grudgingly, reaching out. "For a start." Instead of taking the money from her outstretched hand, though, he grabs her by the upper arm and pulls her off balance.

She—she squeaks.

Something in your pan just goes snap and you see white. The growl is still rising in your throat when you lash out and catch the treasonous motherfucker's wrist. You squeeze hard, twisting until something crackles, howling in fury and baring all your fangs like you could eat him alive. Everyone
 starts screaming at once. Shitmonkey's yanking out of your grip—his flesh tearing under your nails—and he goes stumbling, falling back against the stacked matter. You want to follow, rip his throat out, flay him, lay his guts out flat for Jane to piss on—

The crack of a gunshot sounds from behind you, then, and everyone goes still. "Thanks ever so much, chums," Jake says, and you've never heard his voice sound so tight. "We've got the goods, you've got your payment, time for us to be saying goodbye."

Dirk grabs you by the shirt collar and hauls you backward, and because Jane comes along you let him. You're still bristling, aching to grab and crush and tear, and the monkeys reek of piss and terror. The three of you back toward the door and in your peripheral vision you can see Jake on one side of you with the pistols and Roxy on the other with a rifle, both of them keeping you covered as you retreat.

Then you're out the door and the others are yelling about getting to the van, all of you stumbling over each other as you pile inside.

*

**Roxy: recover.**

You put the pedal to the metal and send the van roaring away from the rendezvous, and you take the first corner so sharply you can feel the whole thing sway. You curse, coaxing as much speed from this fucking deathtrap tank as you can, praying you don't hit a deer.

And, you know, praying that the monster in the back of the van doesn't eat all of you, holy shit. You're going to be sick on nerves and adrenaline. Behind you, Cronus keeps making these frantic gulping sounds like he's trying to swallow the terrible growling-whine that's still coming out of him. He's trying to calm down, right? He wants to calm down. You're all freaked, is all. You really hope you're reading that right.

And then, way too soon—you can’t be more than ten, fifteen miles down the road—Cronus’s unhappy choking whines rise to siren-pitch. “Cronus, mate—” Jake says, leaning back anxiously, “Are you quite—whoah! Crikey!!”

“Crikey?” you demand. “What crikey, in what goddamn sense crikey, Jake—”

“Bugger just took a swipe at me!”

“Cronus, no,” you hear Jane saying, firmly, soothingly, and then a pained yelp and a thump. You can see his eyes shining red in the rearview mirror like two coals and it’s horrifying. There’s more thumps and finally the eerie alien freakout resolves into actual words, harsh and unintelligible.

“Out,” Cronus wails in English after a few false starts, “Lemme out, lemme out, stop, I need out!”

“Cronus, no! We can't.”

“Lemme out,” he pleads, and you're pretty sure he's not angry, just like... panicking, "please, please —”

Another pained yelp, this time from Dirk.

“Roxy,” Jake says, worried, and you glance over. He’s got a little scratch on his cheek that he doesn’t seem to have noticed, but that decides you. You pull the van to a halt on the side of the road. “Roxy!”
“Let him out,” you say, unbuckling your seatbelt. Cronus is a thrashing mess in the backseat and it feels almost like when you guys first got him, but this time you don’t think he’s scared of any of you. He just pulped a guy from the elbow down. Probably he’s scared of himself.

Jane pushes the back door open and Cronus keens again, shakes Dirk smack into the wall, and bolts off into the woods.

“Tarnation,” Jake says.

You open your own door. “I got this,” you say.

It’s easy enough to follow along after him: he’s crashing wildly around, wailing his fool head off, and you head towards the deranged cricket rave noises until you find him huddled into a pile of leaves and junk, half buried and still burrowing.

“Go away!” he cries when you touch his shoulder.

“No can do, kitten,” you say, and kneel down by him. You can see his teeth flash just before he clamps them over your wrist, and that’s—okay, you’re not going to lie, that’s fucked up and terrifying. He gets snappy with Jake sometimes, but it's always obvious they're just playing, and he never does that with any of the rest of you, not ever. You hold really still, and fist your other hand against the animal surge of fear. He's not biting hard, you remind yourself. That's only a little reassuring. Those are very sharp teeth really close to some really vulnerable veins and tendons.

You guys sit like that for a while, while he glares up at you and you try to act more relaxed than you feel. After a couple minutes you start humming a lullaby you learned as a kid—you can't remember the words, but the tune stuck with you, and you think it might help. Eventually, when it's been long enough for one of your feet to fall asleep and for sweat to work grossly all down your spine, he lets you go with a long low moan.

“I’m not a bad guy,” he says. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“I know, man. It’s cool,” you say.

“Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad.”

"I didn't mean to," he says again, completely anguished. His eyes are back to normal, you notice. They're also shiny with tears. "Y-you've—how did you make me—you turned me into—I'm not supposed to be like that," and then the tears spill.

“You’re just all kinds of upset, alright?” The bit about you guys making him like that is kinda worrying, but he seems to not want to dwell on it either. "But we’re gonna sit here. We’re chill. It’s fine.”

He sniffles. "You're s-so fragile," he says. "And I knew that but I didn't know, and now I—that's not what a highblood's strength is for, it's, it's not for h-hurting people, it's to protect..."

"Ssshhh," you say. "You did just fine. You did just right." You brush his hair back off his face, running your fingers through it. "Somebody was going to get hurt there no matter what. You didn't make that happen. Douchebag McJerkmade that happen. What you did was protect Jane, so the hurting didn't happen to her. You did right."

“I wanted to kill him,” he whimpers, like some wrenched-out confession. “He touched our Jane and I
wanted to take his whole arm off for it.” He says it like he expects you to get up and leave him there, like this is the end of the world.

“Good,” you say, and cup his cheek, just where he likes it. *Our Jane.* “Good boy, Cronus. It’s alright. I’d have taken off his head.”

“Hurting people is wrong,” he says, really small and quiet.

“You don’t actually believe that,” you say. "Not when Jane's in trouble. Not when there's a threat to one of our own." You stroke him gently, trace the dirty tear-streaked curve of his jaw. He curls into you, shuffles around in the leaves until he can lay his head on your knees.

“No,” he finally says. “No, I don’t.”

“Good boy,” you say again, and you can feel him finally relax into you.

Movement in the trees catches your eye; it's Dirk, of course, and he raises one eyebrow over the rim of his shades when you look at him. You nod, and he disappears again. A few minutes later he's back, with Jake and Jane in tow. They approach slowly, and Cronus tenses up, clinging to you, but there's no sign of returning freakout.

Jake crouches down in the leaves beside you. "Storm's blown over, mate?"

Cronus sits up, sniffling. He winces when he sees the cut on Jake's cheek, and halfway reaches for it but doesn't quite touch. "I'm sorry," he says, "I'm so sorry, chief."

"Tch, I've had worse shaving," Jake says, which is total bee ess, but he chucks Cronus companionably on the shoulder. "Stop making a fuss over it and all's well, right?"

"Can do, bro," Cronus says with a little wobbly smile. Then he looks over at Jane, and you're afraid he's going to fall apart again. He swallows hard. "A-are you okay?"

"Right as rain," Jane says. There's a quirk in the side of her smile that means she's not thrilled at how everything went down, but you all seem to be on board with Operation Chill Cronus Out. And anyway, you got the guns.

Cronus does the sad-kitten-in-the-rain thing with his fins. "Thought maybe you'd all wanna get rid of me after I was like that," he confesses. "If you—if you do—"


"Never ever," Jane agrees. She offers Cronus her hand, and when he hesitates halfway through reaching out, like he's too scared to touch her, she laces their fingers together and pulls. "Come on. Let's go home."

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://www.example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!