you can only take what you can carry to the edge of the sea

by callmearturus

Summary

Crocker Magitech is among the foremost developers of innovative magic and technology for the modern home, and the team of Crocker, Lalonde, and Strider are among the most important cogs in their clockwork machine. After a long dry spell without new projects to work on, Jane hits it big with a grand new discovery: a remote island out in the South Pacific that’s teeming with lost majyyks to rediscover.

What the team finds out there is far more than their next big break: a lost settlement, a forgotten god, strange arcane flora, and a friendly boy living in the lake. Not even the combined knowledge of the team can prepare them for their expedition to this strange, hidden island.

Magic, sex, and mayhem ensue.

(Arc: “I have no idea how to elevator pitch this story, the concept is so *weird*. HEY Y’ALL, THREE DISILLUSIONED FRIENDS GO TO SOUTHERN PACIFIC SEX ISLAND AND HAVE CONVOLUTED SEXY MAGICAL ADVENTURES.”
City: “Make that the exact line right there in the fic summary. Draw people in with what they didn’t know they wanted.”)
southern pacifica

Chapter Notes

or: team the best team takes on sex magic island;
or: lets see phil collins turn this one into a pop hit;
or: how to succeed in tantric magic without really trying.

Welcome to whatever the fuck this is.

There are so many kinks going into this one that I could not even tag them if I wanted to. So we're going to use a different system this time: all content warnings relevant to the chapter will be listed in the end notes of the applicable chapter. That way if you don't need warnings, you can just read on, but if you wanna check for things, you have that option.

But be ready, guys. We're starting with some setting stuff and expedition, but once we get into the sex magic stuff, it's not going to stop. Prepare yourselves for a romp.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There are many hard lessons to learn when living in a world largely populated by magic and mystics, but the most important, abiding lesson is that none of them can fix a goddamn coffee press.

Your name is Dirk Strider. You are an esteemed member of the point-oh-one percent of the population that was born noble. And just to fully embrace your life as a walking aberration against the natural world, you also work for The Crocker Trust For The Advancement Of Magic And Technology.

It’s not like you’re the Head Spell Caster or whatever such a position would be called. The little brass sign on your door calls you Head Mechanic while your identification claims you are Lead Researcher. It carefully does not specify what kind of research, because it’s easier to just answer “whatever Crocker is working on” than to outline your areas of dubious expertise.

Really, when it comes to magic, expertise isn’t the right word. You’re a goddamn expert in reading other people’s theorems and extrapolating from there, but it’s all soulless academia to compensate for the gaps in your understanding.

The point is that, functionally, this all means you’re the head errand boy to Jane Crocker herself and act as the load-bearing pillar that keeps Crocker Magitech aloft.

And sometimes what that entails is fixing the damn coffee press.

With a brassy tck, a message canister taps into place in your office, settling into the end of the
glass and metal tube that serves as the campus’ mail system. For you, it’s a fairly uncommon sound. Since you can’t use it, people don’t tend to send you messages. It’s tantamount to throwing the fancy little canisters in the trash; you can’t send them back, and no one ever comes to collect them.

Tucking a finger into the book you were reading, you shut it and lean over to retrieve the message one-handed, thumbing the rubber seal off and shaking it until the paper falls out onto your desk.

You know it’s from Roxy immediately just by the haphazard way the letter is folded, barely enough to slide smoothly from the canister, a tri fold awkwardly bent to fit the narrow diameter. Trying to open it is a pain in the ass, with the thing stubbornly accordioning itself up as you try to spread it open over the desk.

Giving it up as the lost cause it is, you shove the message into your book and abandon it. You already know its going to be a summons anyway.

Your office is about as far from Roxy’s as possible; the quiet corner at the far end of the airship hangar that you call your own is well out of everyone’s way. Jane’s told you several times you could have a space closer to central operations on the campus, and that there’s “No need to coop yourself up like an unwanted kitten, Dirk,” but you pass on the offer every time. Even if it is a ten minute walk to Roxy.

And you know down to your bones that if you were shacked up in the main building, they’d blame you for every damn thing. Spell misfire? Ritual cock-eyed? Magical focus loosing it’s juice? Milk going off early? Blame the local nobility.

If you are Jane’s left hand man, then Rochelle Lalonde is her right. Her office is on the other side of the Crocker campus, solidly in the ‘magical’ realm. The brass plaque on her door simply says Lalonde, suitably foreboding.

The door to her lab is unlocked when you arrive. You push it open, keeping a half-step back, across the reinforced threshold, just in case Roxy has something dangerous going on.

There’s a colorful and varied list of horseshit you’ve been witness to in the converted scholar’s hall that serves as Roxy’s space on campus. Dark summonings, a sentient patch of malevolent haze, a game of checkers against a handsome man with perfect dreadlocks and a suspicious scythe, an infestation of ectoplasmic kittens… You always brace yourself. Just in case.

Today, it’s blissfully calm. Just Roxy on one of the long, stone tables, laid out like a memorial, her hands folded and resting under her breasts. Her eyes are closed. Her feet are bare, with her boots sitting neatly on the floor nearby.

At the sound of your arrival, she opens one eye, glances at you, and shuts it again. “Dirk. I’m dying.”

“Sounds tragic.” You shut the door and stroll over. “What’s the cause?”

Roxy heaves a sigh. “Perpetual fuckin’ boredom. It’s killing me. I have so little time left. I wanted to see you before I shoved off into the great beyond.”

You lift a hand in a lazy wave. “Hey there.”

“Hey.” She launches upright, swinging her legs over the side of the table to hang, brushing her hair back into place. “I need you to do me a super big important favor. I need a hero.”

“What broke?”
“Coffee press.” Her arm flings up, indicating the next work table over. Sitting on top is a glass pot full of pitch black coffee. The metal press on top is tilted at an awkward angle. When you sigh, Roxy adds, “And I wanted to see your beautiful face.”

You circle around her to the other table, spinning the press around to examine it. “The hell did you do?”

“I don’t know, I tried to press some damn coffee and it jammed and I tried t’ press it more and now it won’t do shit.”

There are stools scattered around the room, and you help yourself to one, and then to some spare gloves laying around. “Right, because when you pushed down and it got stuck, you decided the solution was to keep doing that.”

As you lay hands on, Roxy drapes herself across your back. Her cheek presses against your spine and you can feel her breathe. “Maaaybe I wanted to break it. Don’t you just want to break stuff sometimes, Dirk?”

Careful of the hot liquid, you hold the pot over one of the basins set into the work table and wiggle the lid of the press to and fro. The overbrewed coffee drips out, streaming faster as you try to gently pry the lid off. “I’m not sure I buy you breaking your coffee press for spiritual fulfillment, Rox.”

“Well, nooo. But, dang, Dirk. I could. I’m getting to that point. Next coffee thing I break, it’s gonna be for my soul.” She reaches out and taps a fingernail against the glass. “Just to see something beautiful break.”

You swat her hand away. “Don’t touch, it’s hot.” With the coffee drained, you grip the interlocking parts and try to unjam them. There’s little grounds in there, getting in the way.

“You know what I think?”

“Never,” you answer briskly.

“I think if Janey ain’t back tomorrow, we should do something fun. Like take one of the airskippers out and go… go break into Skaia Transmutations and see what they’re working on.” Her arms tighten around you. “Not to steal anything! Just take a look-see at what they’re up to.”

“I don’t think the authorities will look kindly on corporate espionage. Even if it’s just fueled by ennui.”

“Worth findin’ out,” she mumbles against your jacket collar. With every passing second, more of her weight rests on you.

Despite your by rote resistance-- because if someone doesn’t push back against Roxy’s wilder ideas, she’ll probably actually go through with them, and you will absolutely be the one to bail her out of any mess she gets into-- you get it. It’s been a while since you’ve had any work to really dig into, something more exciting than kitchen appliance repair. For all that Crocker Magitech is in the forefront of the R&D industry… most of the emphasis has been on the D.

(You pause to contemplate that little turn of phrase, deciding if it's worthwhile to share your internal monologue aloud. Roxy would get a kick out of that.)

But point being, the world feels like it’s shrinking. The expanse and mystery of it grows smaller with every year. It might be just another way you’re settling into the more disappointing part of
age, but it feels like the rapid expansion of creation and exploration collapsing back, unable to support its own weight.

The world of today seems so small. All the spaces are known, and to your quiet dismay, none seem to fit you. But that’s not terribly surprising.

You jerk the coffee press apart, a little scraped up but fitting together again nicely when you shut it again. Job done, you slide your gloves off and pat Roxy’s hand where it’s resting against your forearm. She’s spilled like ice across you, the chilled sting in her fingernails as they trace the bottom of your sleeve tattoo.

Her dark nails follow the stalk of the Algiz rune as it runs along your hand to your index finger, it’s branches reaching back to the knot of your wrist. It’s impossible to suppress the twitch in your fingers. “Rox,” you murmur. “I just grounded them last week, come on.”

“Sorry, sorry,” she says, leaning back and off you. “Don’t mind me, just the silly witch without shit to do. I’m not going to break anything for fun or crash into some secret alchemy labs or nothin’.”

“Not without me, anyway.”

“Obviously,” Roxy says, prodding your cheek with a sad smile.

The rest of your day, you spend with Roxy, just in case she decides to run off and do something reckless the moment your back is turned. Not that you aren’t sympathetic, but it’s your job to keep an eye on her when Jane’s away on business. It’s very late when you return to your little dorm on the Crocker campus to turn in for the night. For someone with so little on his plate, you still manage to stay up to an unwise hour, just sitting at your kitchen table doing minor repairs. The astrolabe in your hands will probably lose whatever enchantments were laid into it by the time you’re done taking it apart and fixing the bent plates, but that’s not your business, really.

The complicated little instrument has you awake until past midnight, and when you finally lay your head down, you’re out within minutes.

You’re in the midst of a deep, dreamless sleep when your best friend decides to break into your goddamn home.

A strong hand grips your arm and jolts you awake, your bed dipped under a solid weight. You jerk, drowsy and surprised, reaching up to shield your eyes from the light from the doorway. Curling up, away from the shape leaning in, you groan out, “Fuck, what?”

As you squint, the shape resolves into the familiar face of Jane Crocker. It’s the middle of the goddamn night, but she’s in your bedroom, dressed elegantly in a high-collared blouse and a bustled skirt that hangs awkwardly off the bed. There’s a long leather scroll tube tucked in her arm, clutched possessively to her chest.

She’s smiling. It’s been a long time since she’s smiled like this.

“We got it, Dirk. We won the bid and it’s ours.” She taps the tube against your shoulder. “Wake
You continue to roll away from Jane, to the far side of your bed, and paw at your alarm clock. You scowl at the hands accusingly. “It’s… three twenty, Jane.”

“Actually, it’s four fifteen, you’re reading it wrong.” She picks up your bedside lamp, tipping the glass vase above it aside. With a huff of her breath against the woven wick, the lamp ignites, bathing the room in flickering light. Satisfied, she sets it down again, picking up her tube and uncapping it. “It took quite a bit of doing, let me tell you. More than a few greased palms, two smear campaigns, and one very good friend of the family showing up in their magister robes at the last moment, but! It worked!” A rolled sheaf of paper falls on you as Jane shakes it loose and begins to use your chest as her desk, reading through the materials.

Resignation settles over you and you reach behind you, dragging your extra pillow in to tuck under your head, propping you up enough to pay attention. “Yeah? Some big break?”

“The big break.” She pauses to look at you, hands fanned wide, moving like a hawker presenting wares from a bazaar stall. “It’s a newly discovered island, even the map is hot off the presses—so to speak, it’s still handmade of course, but maybe the idiom I’m looking for is that the ink’s barely dry on this one, Mr. Strider. Anyway, I got to talk to the scouts who found it. Apparently it has some truly incredible statues and pillars, all obviously the remnants of a magical civilization. Just sailing past the island, they said they could feel the ambient aetheric flow.”

You’ve always thought aetheric flow sounded like a really terrible dance trend, born of the worst ether speakeasies in the city. Now probably isn’t the time to point that out to Jane though.

From the pile of papers, she slides a particular one out, holding it up to her chest. It’s a charcoal sketch, presumably of the island. The smudged dark lines give the vague idea of a volcano, a wide flat plain bracketed by jungle, and a very tall temple set alongside an enclosed lake.

There is something on top of the towering temple. You rub your eyes in hopes it will resolve into an image that makes more sense. “Is that a frog?”

Jane turns the page over and looks at it keenly. “Over fifty feet tall and carved seemingly from a single stone! If that’s not the most magically significant thing you ever did hear, I’ll be very surprised, buster!”

“Sure.”

She whaps your chest with the tube. “Don’t humor me! Or by golly, do a better job of it!”

“Jane, it’s the middle of the fucking night. Do you want me to get a boat right now? Wanna sail out for Frog Island at dawn?”

Jane slides off the bed, gathering her things primly. She squares them all off and rolls all the papers up again until they’ll fit back in the tube. “Don’t be silly. We’ve only got six months of exclusivity rights to the island. We’re taking an airship. She pats your knee. “You get some sleep. I have to go tell Roxy. Maybe she’ll share my intrepid entrepreneurial spirit and drive for discovery.”

“My spirit’s only intrepid between the hours of nine and eight, Crocker,” you inform her, but she’s already whisking out of the room to go terrorize Roxy. Fine by you.

Knowing you’re going to wake up to a very long day, you go back to sleep.
With the new morning comes new understanding of the landscape.

You don’t remember the details, but you know Jane hit it big.

Something about frogs and an island and needing an airship. The vaguearies left over from the late night wake up call are enough to have you brewing a very strong pot of coffee, pouring it into your thermos and bringing it to the hangar. With every sip, alertness creeps up your spine, threatening to entreat on the long-held territory of your listless boredom. A coup is coming.

In the hangar, you find the girls. You also find them stacking up a pile of horseshit: various suitcases and latched boxes and a walnut bookcase stuffed to the brim with texts and a ‘portable’ alchemy station (as if such a thing existed).

You pick up what looks like a mobile with dangling celestial figures and astrological signs, lifting it up. “The hell is all this?”

Roxy hurries over and takes the… thing from you, putting it back down. “Dirk, Dirk Dirk, holy shit? Holy shit, right?”

“Could you elaborate on the question?”

“Could you not be an obstinate stick in the mud?” she shoots back, softening the blow with a quick hug. “Frog Island! Sun and fun and the mad rigors of science!”

“Are we taking the airbus?” you ask, still looking over the pile of crap that presumably wants to be loaded onto an airship.

“No, the Acorn.”

You huff out a humorless laugh. “Then you can bring about a third of this shit with us. Roxy, we’re not moving there. It’s an expedition.”

Roxy waves her hands in the air, bangles jingling musically. “It’s fine! I’m gonna shrink a bunch of stuff down, most of it will fit in a storage trunk!”

The door you just came from swings open, and Jane joins you. There is such a spring to her step, you’d half expect some kind of longstride spell was woven into her boots. She has a box in her hands that she immediately hands off to you. “Camp supplies, ready to go!”

The box is small, like an ornate shoebox, and has plenty of heft to it. You open the hinged lid and peek inside. Within the velvet-padded walls are what look like a collection of very small furniture. Beds, wooden dressers, a teacup-sized clawfoot bath, little scraps of cloth that could pass for rugs. All of it would fit into a dollhouse and is generally quaint as hell.

“What about the reinforced tents?” you ask. “Got the rations set up? Some tool sets ready to go? Any lamps? Water basins?”

Jane’s smile remains resolutely in place, perseverance in the face of your stormcloud. “No, but that’s why we need your help, Dirk. Roxy and I will get our lab equipment together. You handle the essentials.”

“All the boring shit we don’t want to bother with,” Roxy clarifies.
The boring shit. You get the distinct feeling that without you, the two of them would wind up in the South Pacific with an apothecary of magical components and no food or spare clothes. But this is precisely your job here at Crocker Magitech.

The first thing you do is drink about half your coffee.

The second thing you do is find where the Acorn is sitting, resting among its fellow small airships. The Acorn is not an airskipper by any means, but it’s not a big haul ship either. It’s essentially a breeze yacht, stripped and repurposed for more strenuous work and travel.

“So it’s going to be the three of us, right?” you call back to Jane, across the hangar. “Cause this ship isn’t going to carry much more than that unless I lash some poor researcher to the mainsail.”

“Just us!” Her boots knock loudly against the stone floor as she hurries over to your side. “We’re going to be the forward party, spend about two or three months there, and report back what we find. That way, the next team will know what to send.”

Makes sense. The Acorn can cover a distance quickly. One of the larger ships like the Trident would be able to hold more personnel and gear, but it’d take a lot longer to get there. And given how Jane got her contract and map just hours ago and was already running around packing for the trip, time evidently was of the essence.

Leaving them to that, you check the Acorn over. It’s not been flown in a while, too large for daily travel and left abandoned as Crocker Magitech diverted focus away from new ventures. As such, there’s a fine layer of dust over everything, both outside along the deck and inside the living area.

After checking over the steering fins and the envelope for any damage or weak points, you start working to get it air-worthy. Opening the envelope, you throw a fragile glass sphere inside. As it cracks against the sturdy, flat canvas, the charm sealed inside pops off, and air hisses out, starting to fill the balloon by degrees.

As that starts the slow process of inflating and getting the ship off the ground, you grab a rag and just wipe everything down, taking special care with the cockpit. All the smudges and dust on the dials stick stubbornly to the glass, and you polish every single bit of equipment.

It takes longer than you’d like. A quick bit of prestidigitation would likely solve the issue faster.

You toss the rag over into the cabin’s kitchen sink before climbing back out of the ship.

The pile of essential equipment has doubled in size. “Rox, what’d I say!”

Roxy shoots you what is probably meant to be an innocent look. “Hey, the Acorn’s got like two sleeping rooms we can fill with shit! We’ll all just sleep in the living area!”

“On top of more boxes of crap?”

“Uh, yeah, if need be!”

Jane sets down what looks treacherously like a hat box. You’d thought she was on your side. It’d better be a really important magic hat. “We’ll be shrinking all the less complicated items down, Dirk. I know you’re prone to getting worked up at times like these, but we are professionals and we do know what we’re doing here.”

Roxy nods along adamantly and winks at you. Goddamn.

Twenty-four hours ago, you and Roxy were lazing around her lab, bemoaning the lack of projects...
As much as Jane wants to accelerate it, the prep is a two day affair.

Part of the holdup is from the girls and their warring definitions of essential supplies. Your role in the matter starts and ends when you institute a weight limit on their equipment, leaving them to argue intently over which of them has the better field kits for various research disciplines. The battle gets particularly heated when Roxy’s hefty chest of ancient grimoires is pit against Jane’s very specialized and very bulky aetheric geology equipment. Their voices pitch louder and louder during the twenty minute debate.

You don’t get involved, and call it your dubious right as a noble.

Another part of the holdup is the airship. When you take it out for a test flight, it lists drunkenly to starboard. There’s damage to one of the fins, and as soon as you corral the ship back to the hangar, you get to work on that. Strapping yourself into a harness, you’re soon hanging thirty feet off the ground, loosening the colorful canvas from the fin spokes. After tossing the useless mess to flump heavily on the floor below, you start to fit a whole new fin into place. You wear gloves, just in case the superstitions about your ability to fuck up the lifespan of enchantments has any veracity to them.

The modern airship is a precarious mix of engineering and magic. A basic design that defies the natural world bolstered by the supernatural until it’s flight-worthy and safe as houses. The great balloon lifts the hull off the ground, and enchanted fins direct it while a heavy ballast along the keel keeps the whole damn thing from cartwheeling in the first stiff breeze.

The whole monstrosity has a lot of delicate parts, and you’re happy to handle them all yourself. From start to finish, the fin repair takes about two hours. By the time you straighten in the harness, wiping sweat from your brow, it’s oddly quiet in the hangar.

Gripping one of the suspension ropes, you spin around. You spot Roxy and Jane sitting on the deck of the ship, eating lunch and watching you work. As you spin in slow circles midair, Roxy puts her fingers against her lips and wolf whistles at you.

Yeah, you try not to be too conscious of your looks, but the fact of the matter is you got rid of your shirt an hour ago, and you’ve got long arms with dark tattoos on display. Roxy’s interest is always an ego boost if absolutely nothing else. Still, you grip the rope tightly and lean out, over her. “If you’re going to treat this like some exotic show, I’m going to charge you a fee.”

She cups her hands around her mouth and shouts back, “You’re worth every penny, Strider! I got
some singles somewhere.”

Jane covers her face, and even from this distance you can tell she’s blushing furiously.

By the time things are packed and strapped down and repaired and ready, it’s too late in the evening to get started on the trip. Instead, one of the Crocker maintenance people sets up a fuel line to the Acorn, filling it with… some vital essence it’s going to need for propulsion.

While you sit in the cabin, watching over the various gauges on the console before you, Jane slips in and sits on the corner of the dash.

“How’re we doing, Captain Strider,” she asks with a warm smile.

“Going from zero to airborne in less than 72 hours is pretty good, I think.” Lacing your fingers behind your neck and leaning back, you stare out at the quiet dark of the hangar. “What’s management think of that turnaround?”

Jane’s gaze drops, her nails twining with the blue lace in her skirt. “Well, today’s still Sunday, and tomorrow they’ll arrive to… well, some interesting paperwork in their inboxes, won’t they!”

A fishhook catches in your gut, yanking you out of this inertia, the impending journey that’s been pushing you. You lower your tinted glasses down your nose to peer over the rim at her. “Jane. Does management know about our expedition?”

Her sudden sheepishness is discarded as her eyes sharply catch yours. The steel there is nothing to trifile with. “It’s my name on the ledger, and I’ll take the heat for it, should things come to that. But for that, they’ll have to catch us first, won’t they?” She smiles at you, kicking her legs in slow swinging arcs. “Which I think is going to be a toughie, since there are only four copies of the map to the island. Two of which we’re bringing along, of course.”

“And the other two?” you ask.

“Oh, those are in the records room, just like you’d expect!” She bites her lip, the crows feet around her eyes crinkling as she grins. “They are tragically misfiled in the box for ‘Disproven magical properties of kitchen spices,’ but I’m confident the recordskeeper will notice the mistake eventually.”

You can’t help but breathe a laugh. “Damn, Crocker.”

“I just have such a good feeling about this one, Dirk,” she says. Her voice is hushed, soft in the dim light of the cockpit. “And I am not going to let anyone unfoot me.”

“Well, your family owns the company,” you point out mildly. “Hard to get fired with that on your side. Not that you aren’t trying real hard.”

“And you’re up for this, right?” The question spills out of her as a flush steals over her cheeks. “Coming along? Because I assumed you would, but you know that if you wanted to stay--”

You shake your head, grateful for the way her voice fades. “Nah.”

Probably best you don’t elaborate on the matter, lest you freak her out. You’re not going to tell her that the idea of her and Roxy shipped off to the middle of the ocean without you makes you feel like you’re breaking out in hives. The feeling in your gut is an overwhelming, petulant fuck no. You cannot imagine working at Crocker Magitech without them, just as you cannot imagine working at Crocker Magitech without them.
Though you’re not certain where else you’d go. So, rather than deal with that possibility, you’re going on an impromptu two-month tour to Southern Pacifica.

As she stands, Jane takes one of your hands, squeezing it. “I want to leave early. Before those managerial fuddy-duddies even think about arriving on campus. So don’t stay up too late.”

Your kiss her knuckles and nod.

Tomorrow is sure to be a long day.

There is no amount of sleep that makes waking up at dawn easy.

You lock up your dorm and carry your sole bag over your shoulder as you suck down the blackest, sweetest coffee your stomach can handle. There’s a bacon sandwich wrapped in a cloth napkin, tucked into your pocket. You have your darkest tinted glasses on, as well as the sturdiest leather jacket in your closet.

That, and your best pair of shitkicking boots, are what you elect to take with you. There is something bracing about boiling everything down to the essentials.

The bay doors are open when you arrive, and your passengers are sitting in the cabin already. Roxy’s head is lolled on Jane’s shoulder, her eyes shut, a thick swipe of hair covering her face. Yesterday it was blonde. Today, it’s a conspicuous chalk pink.

“Late night?” You drop your bag onto the pile with the girls’ stuff.

“Mmfph,” Roxy says into Jane’s puffy sleeve.

“She claimed she did this on purpose,” Jane claims haltingly. “So she can take night shift and let you sleep later.”

“Rox is always good at making terrible mistakes and turning them into smart decisions,” you opined.

Roxy lifts a hand, pointing at you and moving her head in what could be a nod if she was upright. Then, blurrily, she says, “Heeeeey, Dirk, I packed a buncha stuff for the island. You can’t use charms, right?”

“Can’t use any magic you have to power or initiate yourself, yeah,” you answer. “Self-sustaining shit only.”

“Great. Got you covered.” Her point morphs into a thumbs up before falling back to her lap. Jane sighs, putting her arm around Roxy and leaning carefully back in her seat.

“The map’s in the cockpit,” Jane says.

You nod. “Then… we’re ready?”

To your relief, Jane really thinks about it, her excitement quieted by the reality of the situation. You can practically see her consulting her mental list, checking off items with a slight flick of her eyes as she starts from the top and works her way down.
She meets your waiting gaze. “We’re ready.”

With that proclamation, you launch into motion. Set your coffee down on the counter and start closing everything off. The drop-stairs in the side of the hull pulled up and locked for the flight, the windlock that separates the deck and the cabin properly shut. Down a level, in the narrow space under the cabin, you untie the rope holding the Acorn to anchor against the hangar floor.

The rough texture of the rope slips through your grip, and all around you, you feel the ground come unmoored. The entire ship floats upward, eager to be airborne.

Tall as you are, you place your hands on the ceiling as you move, bracing yourself as gravity shifts around you. It’ll be a few hours before you have your sea legs. For now, you trail your fingers against the ceiling and grip the banister as you ascend up into the cockpit.

It’s a small room, looking out over the deck. From the pilot’s chair, you can see the red and white fins on each side of the ship as well as the enormous balloon above. Ahead, straight over the bow, are the open doors leading out into the pink-purple stained dawn sky.

A brass arm has been unfolded from the ceiling to hang nearby. In its grasp, stretched between two long clamps, is the map, locked into the navigator. A route has been added to the surface, and a sharp pointer sits over your current location.

A spoked wheel and a brass throttle beckon your hands, and you curl your fingers securely around them. Press the throttle forward. Watch the world around you slide by as the aetheric propulsion kicks on and you lead the Acorn out into the open air.

Your toes rest on a pedal under the console; a blue-white spark of light ripples across the edge of the deck, an unseen engine under the hull coming to life. Your stomach drops into your seat as you ascend faster, up and up and up. Soon the campus vanishes over the side of the deck, then the more distant buildings, then the horizon itself as you climb.

Behind you, the cockpit door swings open, and Jane sways in. “Hoo hoo, this part’s always fun to watch!”

“You should be sitting for this,” you inform her.

She pays you no mind and hands you the coffee you left downstairs, moving to grip the back of your chair tightly. You take it, drop it into the cup holder notched into the wooden accents of the console, and offer your hand to her.

Her grip is tight in yours as you switch between holding the wheel and adjusting the throttle. The ship tilts, listing starboard as you carve a wide meandering curve through the airspace above the city. It’s a slow process; the Acorn has an impressive top speed once it has time to reach it, but you’ve yet to see an airship with impressive lateral motion.

At long last, you level out, foot sliding off the pedal. The bow lowers, and beyond you can see no land. Already, the city is out of sight and before you is nothing but a deep blue expanse of ocean, broken up with the foamy cut of waves and a scattering of seaships.

You hear Jane’s sharp inhale and keep your eyes straight forward, the watery quality of her gasp vivid in your ears. Momentarily, after she’s presumably collected herself, she wraps her arm around your shoulder. Her thick, dark hair brushes your temple.

You reach out and curl your fingers around her forearm, holding her there.

There’s a sniffle in your ear before she leans back. “I’ll leave you to it, Mr. Strider. Give us a
shout if you need anything or would like a break.”

“Will do,” you agree, and listen to her slowly make her way back down to the cabin.

You let out a long, slow sigh, and shift in your seat, sinking into a lazier, more comfortable sprawl, your chair turning with you.

The needle on the map starts to move ever so slowly to the island.

You have a long trip ahead of you.

Chapter End Notes

Only one chapter, nothing has happened, and I already have some housekeeping to do.

First, because I am a vain terrible person who should not be trusted with disposable income, I commissioned my pal @lelelego to flex her artistic might and draw this AU’s version of Jake. The piece is phenomenal, but a bit of a spoiler. You can see it here and I highly suggest taking a look. You may realize why I wanted some visual reference for him.

Secondly, @cityinthesea read the full story outline for this adventure and created this jaw-dropping art of Dirk, showing off his tattoos. Another minor spoiler, but god. Who cares. Look upon the beauty. Shit like this inspires me to write better fic, goddamn.

Thirdly, you can find me at @callmearturus. I write a lot of things. You might enjoy some of them.
The trip from the hangar of Crocker Magitech to the illustriously nicknamed Frog Island is about four and a half days.

By the middle of day two, you start to feel pretty haggard. It’s a curious mix of your lack of sleep and of being confined to the relatively small interior of the *Acorn*. More than once, you stand in the small space between the pilot’s chair and the helm, letting the wheel rest against your hips as you place your hands on the ceiling and try to stretch out your back. But each time, you sink back into your seat and all the knots creep back in.

Hours tick by, an enormous horizon of water around you. The slow drag of the needle across the map is the only sign of movement, the only context for the passage of time before the sun starts to set.

You push your tinted glasses up your nose and try to position the hanging navigator in the path of the sun.

It’s the mix of exhaustion and the annoyance of the sun glinting into your eyes as the ship rocks gently in the sky that has your defenses lowered. You’re worn down enough that when Roxy offers you a pick-me-up, it sounds like a good idea. Said pick-me-up comes in a glass vial and you should know better than to try it. You’re not immune to potions by any means, but sometimes they… have weird effects on you.

In a half hour, you have to abandon your post, letting Roxy take over so you can go lay down in the least-crowded sleeping quarters. Jane clears most of the equipment off the bed so you have enough room to sleep. Your head spins and you sleep fitfully with a bucket sitting on top of some magic shit you can’t identify beside the bed.

You sleep through the night. In the morning, Jane catches you on your way to the cockpit, sitting you down and making you toast. Jane, you decide as your stomach finally stops lurching around, is your favorite.

You take over again for day three, sending Roxy off for her own turn sleeping. The scenery is the same as before, but the needle dragging along the map has placed you much further to the southwest, almost directly between your destination and landfall behind you. It’d be one hell of a place to get lost, especially considering Jane’s judicious work ensuring you all stay lost for a while.

You sit up a little straighter and keep your hand on the helm, cautious and alert of any gusts and headwinds.

It’s another exceedingly boring day.

In the evening, you manage to work in another long nap, crashing in the same bed as before. This time, it’s much more restful. The wind rocks the *Acorn* in a close semblance of moving water that permeates your slumber. Your dreams are filled with old memories of visits to the Gulf of Mexico, and the particular sharp smell of salt unique to that beach. The deep breaths of salt tang in the sense memory is about the calmest thing you know.

When you wake up, you are not remotely surprised to find your arms tingling. It’s a familiar
When you wake up, you are not remotely surprised to find your arms tingling. It’s a familiar situation, and probably why you were dreaming of salt water, like a nicotine craving settling into your soul or your aura or aetheric signature.

You can’t do anything about it while you’re thousands of feet in the air. It’s only years of practice that keep you from scratching against the sensation humming over your skin, following the dark lines of your tattoos.

You’ll deal with them later. For now, you ignore them and go relieve Roxy, retaking the helm and letting her shuffle back downstairs.

Day four isn’t quite as monotonous as the previous three. Today, there seems to be some kind of breach in the seal of the cockpit. It’s nothing serious, nothing dangerous, just enough of an issue to fill the room with a high-pitched whistle of air.

If you had the opportunity and means to land, it’d be a five minute fix. But all around you is open ocean, and you’re in a ship that can’t survive water. As far as your understanding of magic goes, actually, dropping an airship into the ocean is a good way to stop having a functional airship. The cleansing properties of salt water are in turns useful and really goddamn irritating.

So, your last day in the air is dominated by a sense of growing anticipation as the needle on the map closes in on Frog Island, and by a growing headache between your fucking eyeballs as the whistling digs its claws into your skull.

By nightfall, you’re sitting with your head resting on your hand, two fingers pressed firmly against your brow.

When Jane checks on you, she lets out a soft tsk noise and moves to stand behind your chair. The first touch of her fingers against your temples leeches some of the tension from your stiff spine and shoulders, just waiting for more.

Her attention on you is as methodical as her professional work. Short, even nails drag up in unison, sinking deep into your thick hair. You inhale sharply as she rakes back over your scalp and gathers your hair in her fists. Fingercombing it together, she holds it tight in one hand, as if on the verge of giving you the least flattering topknot known to man.

Instead, she releases it all, letting it fall around your eyes, and starts the process over again.

It feels so fucking good, your toes almost curl in your boots. And it’s a testament to your friendship that she doesn’t give you any shit for the tense groans her hands wring out of you. It helps immeasurably.

When the head massage has lead you out of migraine territory and started to edge you perilously towards sleepiness, you shake gently, and she lets go of you.

“Better?” she asks.

“You’re on the verge of puttin’ me in a coma here, Ms. Crocker.” You sigh, a long inhale and longer exhale. “If I didn’t have this ship to land, I’d probably let you.”

“I’m glad. It’s always fun playing with your hair.” She brushes it to the side, moving it along the same way you tend to style it.

“You and your ulterior motives. Always trying to mess with my signature look.”

She snorts. “You’re on a small ship with Rox and me. Who do you have to impress?”
“You two,” you murmur, still too out of it and calm to mask your words with sarcasm. “Always you two. Only people worth impressin’.”

There’s a smile in her voice as she laughs and says, “I like you when you get all loosey-goosey.”

You snort and lean your head out of her grip. She leaves you alone, refreshed for the rest of the trip.

That fucking whistle is still pretty annoying though. As much as you’ve been fortified against it, you know you have to remember to patch the seal later or you will crash this ship into the ocean on the return trip.

The evening is dark and peaceful, like a shroud pulled over the world. You can see the sealed lamps lighting the edges of the deck ahead of you, but beyond that is a moonless night and it’s black, the entire world fallen away and obscured by a shroud. It’s the kind of sight that can either give you a bone-deep existential horror or an overwhelming sense of calm, and you decide to go with the latter of the two and enjoy it.

In the morning, the needle truly closes in on your destination. The navigator keeps drawing your gaze, and it’s like watching a pot boil; shit takes forever.

Four times, Roxy leans into your little room to refill your drink or hand you some handheld food, and each time asks, “Are we there yet?”

“You ask me that again, you can swim the rest of the way,” you tell her finally.

But you can feel it, the desperate need to get off this damn ship and step onto new grounds. It jitters through you, your knee bouncing with all the excess energy. You’re a grown man and you feel like a child about to be set loose in a carnival for the first time.

Your eyes are so busy flitting between the navigator and the bow, you almost miss the bellchime. For a moment, you’re not certain what the noise is; there’s plenty of little built in alarms across the airship to ensure you pay attention to the details.

That particular chime, you realise, is linked to the doors that separate the cabin from the forward deck. Given the windspeed that buffets against an airship mid-flight, a simple entryway doesn’t work. You’ve seen plenty of solutions to the issue; the Acorn’s is a windlock.

And that fucking bell only rings when someone opens the windlock.

You look over your shoulder at the ajar cockpit door and call down to the main cabin, “The hell is going on down there!”

It’s Roxy who appears, looking sheepish. “Oh, well, uh, Jane said we should have visual on Frog Island soon, so, she, uh, she’s…”

As she trails off, she points over your shoulder.

Through the window, you can see Jane outside, her hand wrapped around one of the guiding
ropes that run along the deck. She’s gripping it tightly and pulling herself along, leaning against the wind.

“Oh what the fuck,” you breathe, and push out of your chair. “Grab the fucking helm!”

“Right, right! Be careful!”

You take a sailing jump down the short staircase leading to the cabin, landing in an easy crouch before springing up. Your fingers are already halfway done zipping up your jacket as you hustle to the first set of windlock doors. They shoulder open, and you nudge them shut again behind you.

Stuffed inside your pocket, you have an aviator’s hat, and quickly yank it on over your head, holding the long straps with both hands. Unwilling to take the time to figure out the damn fiddly buckle, you just knot the straps together and drop the goggles over your eyes before stepping through the outer set of windlock doors and onto the deck.

The immediate sensation is terrifying; suddenly, gravity seems to lose its hold on you, and the wind threatens to take you clean off your feet. You fumble to brace your hands against the frame of the windlock, pushing yourself down. The moment passes, but your heart pounds in your ears as you take a second to gather yourself.

Fuck, it’s loud out here. You can feel the goggles pressing against your face; squinting, you see Jane at the far end of the deck and watch as she momentarily lets go of the guiding rope to wrap both her hands around the binoculars mounted portside.

You go after her, grabbing the same rope she used and leaning hard into the wind. It takes time to haul yourself forward, step by step.

Eventually, Jane is within your grasp. You throw yourself against the air current and grab ahold of the binocs’ mount, boxing her in. She yelps, the sound almost immediately carried off by the wind. Instead of turning to see you, she looks at your hand curled around the wooden frame and pats it. “Dirk!” she shouts over the wind. “I can see the island!”

From here, there is something on the horizon line. Something other than endless blue.

Even as fucking caught up in this precarious moment as you are, you can’t help the way your heart leaps at the sight of land, holy shit.

Still, you bend to say right into Jane’s ear, “That’s nice, Crocker, but you could’ve seen the damn thing when we landed!”

Her hand flings out, pointing. “It’s right there! I can see the volcano!”

You bury your face against her shoulder. Despite the short length, her hair whips sharply against your face. “Jane!”

“Where is your sense of adventure?”

“Inside the safe cabin!” you shout back. “C’mon, I’ll show you.”

Her laugh is muted on the brutal breeze, and she presses her face against the great metal binocs one last time before leaning back against you. “Alright!”

“Great! Please hold the fuck onto me!”
Getting back down the length of the deck is immeasurably worse than the trip out. Your hands grip the guiding rope so hard, your palms burn with friction every time you slacken your grip to slide closer to the windlock. Jane at least clings to your back and doesn’t decide on any more treacherous detours.

Both of you crash back through the doors, nearly through the inside set from the force. Jane luckily lands against your back as you catch yourself. The deafening roar of the wind dies off as soon as the outer door shuts, and your ears are left ringing as the windlock seals.

Jane turns her hold of you into a brief hug before letting you back into the cabin proper. “Oh, I just couldn’t resist a look, Dirk, I’m sorry.”

“I’m going to live like a king off all this hazard pay, Crocker,” you say back without heat.

Before Jane can fire off her riposte, Roxy breaks in, voice muffled through the cockpit door: “Oh thank god you’re back, do y’all think I know how to land a fucking airship?!”

Jane covers her smile with a hand, and you roll your eyes, shoving the hat off your head and into her hands. “Yeah, coming, relax!”

“Hard to relax with land ho right flippin’ there!”

You hurry back upstairs to take over and close out this journey halfway around the world.

When you finally close in on the island, you don’t have a lot of time to really take it in.

Getting an airship in the sky is easier than getting it on the ground. Or, that’s an inaccurate statement. Revise: It’s harder to get it on the ground intact and still air-worthy. The Acorn has to ferry you back across the ocean, back home, so a good landing is important.

You cut a wide loop around the island, nose pointed down, hands braced on the helm.

Below, steeply tilted as you circle around, is land. It’s vibrant as a chipped gem, the pale gold of the beach, the vivid blue topaz of the contained lake, and so much green. Your eyes flick between the gauges on the console and the only space you land you can eyeball from your altitude: a curved plain between the lake and what looks like thick jungle.

You refocus on your work; admiring Frog Island can wait. You have a small target to hit with a big fucking dart.

It’s not a simple process. If you were coming into an air harbor, there would be space to sweep in and ground workers to catch the ship with a mix of spells and literal lassos and hooks. Without that safety net, it becomes a hell of a lot more important to get the angle perfect and to vent the helium from the balloon in precise, controlled spurts...

You push your glasses up to the bridge of your nose and ease the Acorn down, down, down.

For the first pass, the altitude is off, and you bail halfway through it. The second takes three times as long, your throttle completely gutted, the steering fins tilted as steeply as possible to reduce your
speed.

The damn whistling finally stops. That tells you more than any of the gauges that you’re ready to set this boat down.

The Acorn drifts slowly over the field below. Through the cockpit windows, you can see… a lot, more than you have time to take in with your limited landing space. You bring the throttle to zero and lean in your chair to knock the door open. “Roxy! Rox!”

A few heavy steps, and you can just barely see her on the foot of the stairs. Her hands are planted on the wall for support. “Yeah?”

“Grab the anchor and hop out. We need to tie this shit down.”

Roxy straightens to give you a sharp salute, and nearly topples over as a shift in the ship almost upends her. She cackles as she staggers away; she’s always had catlike grace on unsteady feet. A moment later, a bell rings and you watch her weave her way along the deck.

She’s careful about it, thank the fucking gods. Sitting down, she dangles her feet over the edge of the ship, holding onto the heavy railing. Carefully, she takes out her focus from the satchel she hauls around everywhere: a miniature typeset with worn keys, small enough to sit across her leg. She sets her fingers against the keys and the arms of the thing strike against a metal bar, ringing like an instrument.

When she puts it away and falls from the deck, it’s with a faint glow curling around her. You’re confident she’s done something to avoid breaking her ankles on the drop.

Jane teeters into the cockpit, grasping ahold of the back of the chair. “You sent Roxy? I could’ve handled the anchoring, Dirk! You two have been doing so much of the flight.”

You shake your head. “Not allowed.”

She shoots you a stung look. “You don’t think I can do it?”

“Nothing to do with it.” You push the navigator up against the roof, fitting it into its little mooring. “We’re dropping in on a completely unknown location without proper landing equipment. Say you hop onto the island and get eaten by a monster instantly. That leaves Rox and I twisting in the wind.” Around you, the Acorn goes even more still. Presumably, Roxy unshrinking the anchor and attaching it. It looks like you’re settling down further. Perfect. “Jane Crocker, gone on a surprise, unsanctioned expedition and then tragically lost with only the word of a rogue researcher and a noble to explain how the fuck it happened.”

Her lips press together severely. “I don’t think… The fact that you’re…” You wait as she trails off. “Alright, fine. It’s just a rotten shame that I’m not the first person to step foot on my island.”

“I thought the entire point of the big frog statue was that—”

“Oh, hush up. You’re so difficult. It’s-- it’s like you’ve been flying an airship for four days or something, hoo.”

Down in the cabin, the hull door drops. “Anchor’s done, come on! Get out here!”

Jane’s gone so quickly, she’s down the stairs before you finish locking the wheel and standing. The Acorn is still just barely airborne, and will be until you deflate the balloon, but its movement is stilled. In its own way, you find it harder to move through the cabin like this, the natural drift of the ship arrested and confusing your sealegs.
You take the stairs carefully, eyes on your feet. When you reach the last step, three feet below you is springy grass.

You jump gingerly down, and finally let yourself look around.

Frog Island stretches out around you. The scrap of land that had seemed so tiny and quaint from the air is a wide sprawl from the gentle slope of the hill you’ve landed on. From here, you can see the open field of overgrown grass, a perfect carpet of green that ripples like water in the ocean wind.

Ahead of you, the slope evens out to a long flat area before melting into lakeside sand and silt. The lake itself is enormous, the far edge just barely in sight, with heavy trees and the ocean on the horizon. In the lake, you can see a few stone towers, and to the south end of the island, the temple from the charcoal sketch.

There is indeed an enormous fucking statue of a frog, carved from some kind of green-black rock.

North, though, is the jungle. The flat grassy plain gives abrupt way to great trees, stretching high and so densely packed they block out the light, casting a thick shade. Beyond them, rising from that cavernous canopy, is the volcano.

The island is a lot bigger than you expected from the speck drawn onto the map. Big, and bright in the midday sun, every verdant color bursting. Even through the merciful tint of your glasses, the island seems built of fresh artist’s paint. It’s almost a little too much to take in.

You can see the girls ahead of you, each of them holding different pieces of surveyor equipment, hustling over to the lakeside. Down there, a stone pier juts out into the lake, and scattered around it are ruins, short and stocky, like the remnants of housing.

This is what you expected, really; watching the scientists excitedly run off to explore their new toy while you…

Letting out a fond sigh, you turn back to the ship. It floats behind you, containing all the gear and shelter you’re going to need for your stay.

The day is slipping away, and you’ll be damned if you spend another night sleeping on the Acorn. Climbing back into the ship, you get ready to make camp.

The flat space down by the lake sounds like a good place to settle in.

By the time Roxy and Jane stop running in circles waving their magical things around, you have the camp materials dragged out of the Acorn and are in the process of building it up. It’s not a small setup you have going; the three roomy tents everyone’s going to sleep in are a pain in the ass to get up on your own, but you get two of them standing before moving on to something else, just to avoid dealing with the third. There’s a wide canopy made of thick, resilient canvas to act as shelter over where you’ll work and have meals and watch the witches do their rituals and just live for the next two or three months.
There’s plenty of materials to use, enough quality of life items to turn this camp from a cluster of hiking tents into a decent home base. But the majority of them are still shrunk down. It’s a handy trick, but one you can’t undo yourself. All the tables and chairs and mats and beds are too small to put out, and so all the more complicated, unshrinkable equipment doesn’t have anything to sit on.

Comfortable that you’ve reached a stopping point, the limit of what you can accomplish on your own, you elect to lay down in the grass under the newly erected canopy. The shade feels incredible after all the labor, and the wind coming in off the ocean is as bracing as the last gulps of your canteen.

Roxy and Jane finally stroll back up when you take off your shirt and wipe your face on it.

“Nice,” Roxy says.

“Thanks,” you reply, sardonic. “Good to see you two. Having fun traipsing around the tropical wonderland?”

“So much fun,” Roxy says, beaming and literally bouncing on her toes. “Hey, I like the tents. Way roomier than I expected.”

“Yes, they’re for larger expeditions but since the company isn’t really doing larger expeditions, I grabbed ‘em.” You push yourself to sitting, shaking some stray bits of grass off you. “Need you two to embiggen our beds and crap though.”

Jane nods. “Of course. You’ve been over here just slaving away to get us all squared up, we’ve been… Roxy, we’ve been just.” She elbows Roxy.

“Oh, yeah, just the fuckin’ worst, abandoning you.”

“You probably want a break.”

“And, hey!” Roxy waves her hands at you. “Your shirt’s off! Perfect, you are already almost ready for a dip in the lake! Doesn’t that sound just the best?”

You bring up a knee, leaning your arm across it. Across your shoulder, the spokes off your pentacle continue to spin, a little faster than last time you checked. It can still wait, though. For the moment, you quietly push your glasses up into your hair and eye each of the girls up with blatant disbelief.

Jane’s the first to crack. “Okay, so you are an amazing swimmer, Dirk, and! And!”

She holds up her hand. Hanging from her wrist is a long silver cord that terminates in a glass sphere. Along the cord, different curved arms tilt in slow circles. You vaguely remember it from when they were packing things for the trip.

“Pretty,” you opine. It looks like a relentlessly fancy windchime.

“Janey, put that shit away, he doesn’t see aetheric flow.” Roxy claps her hands. “Basically, we’ve been just doing a quick look-see, getting our metaphysical bearin’ round here, and.” She bounces on her toes again, christ. “So, Dirk. If you were to guess what on this rock was the most magical thing, you’d guess…?”

The answer is pretty obvious. “Giant frog statue? Jane said that was significant.”

“Nope, wrong!” She swings around to gesture at the lake. “It’s in there! Maybe not the most magical thing, but absolutely some concentrated bastion of pure aetheric willpower.”
Jane nods, watching Roxy’s bubbling energy with a conspicuous calm and composure, wryly smiling. “Basically, we think that some part of the temple that was the epicenter of its magic might’ve… eroded and fell into the water, basically? That’s our guess.”

It’s not a huge leap to figure out where this is going. You sigh, but not too hard, lest the girls think you’re not interested. You’d just be a lot more interested after sleeping a good eight hours. “And you want me to go see what it is and drag it back up?”

“No! No no no, don’t touch it!” Roxy is quick to say.

When you lift your eyebrows at them, Jane adds, “We haven’t the slightest clue what kind of magic is rooted so deeply in this island, that is going to take some time.”

“Gotta get attuned to the place, run some experiments, loads of meditation.”

“We just…” Jane links her fingers together, tucking them under her chin and swaying in a way that reminds you more of an earnest child than a top mind in the magitechnological research field. The puppy eyes are on full blast. “Before we lose daylight, we wanted you to take a quick look. It’d help a whole lot. And then we’ll help set up the camp! You really do deserve a break, we weren’t buttering you up.”

“Not just buttering you up, muffin,” Roxy says.

You are tired and have been working in the hot sun for hours after days cooped up inside a series of very small rooms.

But fuck it.

“Alright,” you say, climbing to your feet. “Where do you want me?”

Fifteen minutes later, you have a pair of googles strapped over your eyes, a mouthful of saltwater taffy, and a trident spinning in your hands, twirling over your wrist and back across your palm.

The temple looms over you, situated along a rocky path on the outer rim of the lake, the wide stone base of it straddling the land, its ornately carved stone feet sunk into the ocean on one side and the lake on the other. Parts of it have clearly crumbled apart over the years; it’s not a stretch to assume something could’ve fallen into the water.

You take your time contemplating this as you chew.

Roxy brought waterbreathing charms along for this trip, each one a shiny, polished hunk of coral carved with emblems of air and sea that allowed a witch to simply breathe the water. It was transmutation work, as far as you understood, and while the components weren’t easy to get ahold of, the charm itself was as old as magic, it seemed. A tried and true standby.

Charms require a spark of magic to kick off their spellwork, a small attunement to the aura of the user.

Thus, charms are absolutely useless to you.
Instead, you chew at the waterbreathing taffy Roxy had as a backup. Instead of some tricky transmutative water-to-air magic going on in the lungs, the taffy just works together as you chew, the disparate ingredients grinding together into a gummy substance that clings to your teeth. The components activate, and air begins to fill your mouth.

It feels weird, but it works, and when you’re noble, that’s often the best you can hope for.

Once the taffy activates, you give the girls a wave and take a dive off the rock face into the lake.

You’re braced for the crush of cold to hit you like a locomotive right in the chest.

Instead, the lake is… warm. Just a touch above lukewarm but not quite as hot as a good bath. It’s a far throw from the chill of most large bodies of water. The sensation is so surprising, you hang there, floating on the faint current as you look around, as if you’ll find a source of the heat nearby.

Swimming further in, you squint into the water, trying to find anything of note. There’s tall strands of kelp and ribbony grass further down, a few stalks dragging against your skin as you kick your legs and propel yourself forward.

Normally, you’d throw your body into this to hurry along, but you’re breathing steadily. Before you know it, you’re used to the mechanic of it: shutting your mouth to inhale, letting out a stream of bubbles on your exhale, and shutting your mouth again to let the taffy fill you with your next breath. You have time to look, and are more concerned with the way the light shifts through the water, at the impending sunset, than the need to resurface.

Buttering you up or not, the chance to swim like this is pretty nice. You’ve always been a skilled swimmer, but the magic associated with diving wasn’t available to you. Even as you look for signs of arcane ruins, you enjoy the luxury of it.

For the moment, it’s peaceful down here, the streams of light cutting through and shimmering off everything. The kelp, the scattered stones along the lakebed, the occasional driftwood, the flit of passing fish…

You swim deeper, trying to find what Roxy and Jane were detecting.

You don’t find any significant ruins in the lake.

You find a sudden rush of motion through the kelp, abrupt and swift enough that you spin towards it, your hand clenching on the trident Jane gave you. Her focus, magically useless in your hands but still pointy enough to cause some fucking hurt if need be.

Bracing the trident, you squint into the mirage-shiver of the water, trying to focus on the shape until it resolves into something.

It moves closer, and resolves into someone.

The first thing you notice is the tail. This deep in the lake has rendered everything muted in color, faded like cloth left in the sun, then in the dark. The desaturation is cut through by a solid lash of vivid green, sweeping fluidly as it propels its owner forward.

The next thing you notice are his eyes. They glow bright like green stars, luciferin and arcane light. Set into a handsome face, dark with glimmering spots of smudged gold across the cheeks, splattered down his neck and chest. He’s something other than human, a familiar torso of cool brown skin accented with translucent yellow fins shifting into shiny… scales? Something bright green encasing his legs and long, finned tail.
He doesn’t see you at first. In fact, you watch him as his eyes find you. They drift aimlessly through the water, as drowsy as the swaying kelp, before they catch on you, and stop.

His eyes grow wide, lips parting as the serpentine movement of his tail stills.

You stare at him, and he stares back, both of you equally frozen.

His lips move; you hear nothing. But it’s a slight warning before he flicks his tail and darts closer, eliminating the space between you so fast, a swell of panic takes you. Jerking up the trident, you fit it between the two of you, your hands aching from your desperate grip on the red metal.

The prongs aimed at his chest slow him down, his tail flicking up between his legs as he leans back. The current from his movement is so strong, you feel yourself pushed back a few feet.

His eyes tear away from your face reluctantly to examine the trident. It’s only for a second before his attention returns to your face. His own brightens, a palpable gold glow spreading over the apples of his cheeks and framing his face.

He doesn’t seem terribly impressed with your weapon. Or, he won’t stop staring at you.

You remember mesmer magic and force your eyes to unlock from his, flicking away, over his shoulder.

He moves, darting to follow, tilted in the water and still watching you.

You almost choke on water as you fucking forget how to exhale your enchanted breath, the muscle memory knocked asunder by this… being in the lake. Not a merman, you don’t think?

His brow furrows as you hack a bit, trying to regain the rhythm of your breathing, his arm extending towards you.

Fuck, you need to get out of here. You’re solidly out of your domain here in a way that has nothing to do with being underwater and thousands of miles from home.

Carefully, keeping the trident ready in hand, you kick away from the not-mer, back towards the water’s edge and the powerful magic users who can back you up and explain shit.

The not-mer follows you, but keeps his distance, swimming out to your side, almost circling you. He drifts down towards the lake bed, and you struggle to keep him in sight while staying course. You keep losing him in the kelp forest; for a glowy creature, he melts into the scenery fast.

It takes too long for your heel to brush against the beach. You shove the trident against the sand and use it to lever yourself out of the water, surfacing with a gasp.

The girls both hurry to you, standing at the edge of the rocky lip that encircles this part of the lake. “Hey, you’re back! Did you find it?”

You hear a splash behind you and whip around, heart in your throat.

Across the water, about a hundred feet out, the boy’s head rests above the surface. His eyes widen even more as he spots Roxy and Jane.

“Holy shit,” Roxy says. “Who the heck is that?”

In a flash of a wave, the boy disappears, back under the water.
“What?!” Roxy says.

“What?!” Jane echoes, covering her mouth.

“A little fucking help, please and goddamn thanks,” you say, spitting out water. “I found your mystery in the lake.”

An hour later, the camp has furniture at last. Having just put your life on the line in the name of science and magic, you reserved the right to take a walk after getting out of the water.

Barefoot, you carefully made your way back across the field, past the airship and the sporadic ruins. The late afternoon sun began to dry you as you walked to the opposite beach, the pale sand that led to seafoam and ocean.

After filling a water pouch, you returned, calmer.

Now, you sit in the actual papasan chair that Roxy squirreled into the supplies, your feet held out to the firepit. Tipping salt water into your mouth, you gargle, feeling the taffy’s effects on your mouth start to seize and break apart like fragile ice chipping and melting. It’s a relief; the magic lingering around your teeth feels uncomfortable out of the water.

Next to you, in a proper chair, Jane taps her pen in fast tpk-tpk-tpk beats against her notebook.

“No…” she murmurs. “No, he’s not a mer. Which, gosh, that’s a really lucky thing. Could you imagine how much trouble we’d be in? Throwing someone into a mer habitat, armed and without any delegated peace? They do not like humans swanning into their territory.”

You lean over to spit the salt water onto the grass, careful to avoid the sturdy bamboo mat that’s been rolled out to act as the floor of the camp. “Great. Maybe whatever the hell he is, it’s less prone to murderous retribution than mers.”

“I can’t imagine them being remotely comparable.” There’s a brimming excitement in Jane’s eyes, and in her hands as she starts to gesture, punctuating her words. “For one, he’s freshwater, that’s certainly new. Two, you said you couldn’t see any gills on him. And legs. Oh, that’s what has me very interested. There are plenty of varieties of mers, but this is a huge divergence. We could be looking at something more similar to… to an amphibian than to a fish.”

Roxy snorts, not even looking up from where she’s hunched over, working her magic. Her fingers tap rapidly at her typeset, filling the air with brassy tings. The last tent, the one you neglected to set up, hovers in front of her, juttering around like a drunken goose with too many wings, but opening up and popping itself open. It’s a little weird to see the work you did by hand being translated into kinetic magic but you still prefer it to doing it yourself at this hour.

“I see where this is going. Janey’s already thinking up names,” Roxy says before singsonging, “Dear King Philip Come Over For Soup.”

Jane turns to glare at the back of Roxy’s head. “It’s-- Actually, the mnemonic is Good Soup, and I don’t see what’d be so horrible about the three of us singlehandedly discovering a new magical species!”
“You gotta name it after Dirk,” Roxy shoots back. “We sat on the fucking grass and ate cookies, we didn’t discover shit.”

“Pass,” you say. “Naming some magical shit after me is more trouble than its worth.”

“Aw. Would be a real stick in their craw.”

You shake your head, shutting your eyes. Today has been exhausting. The last week has been exhausting. You’re so tired, you can’t resist the urge to scratch at your arms. The tingling in them has only intensified. If it wouldn’t be so much more work, you’d handle that before bed, but… it’s gonna have to wait until morning.

At least the bathtub is going into your tent. It’s a small gesture you appreciate.

Around you, the girls continue to talk. As you relax into the chair, it’s harder and harder to follow along.

“We keep saying ‘he,’” Jane points out, tapping her notebook again absently. “He might not be, we have to keep that in mind when writing our reports. I mean, Dirk made him sound more humanoid than a mer, but there is some convergent evolution here, potentially, and we all know mers don’t always have prominent breasts, depending on where they’re from, for the same reason fish and birds don’t.”

“Chicken have breasts,” Roxy replies.

“Oh gods, please shut up,” Jane says, exasperated. “You have a degree from Ithaca. How. Who gave it to you.”

The ambient sound of chatter is fast lulling you into a doze.

It’s broken abruptly when something whacks into the canopy, the noise startling you upright so fast, you grip your sore neck, cursing.

Jane’s on her feet next to you, eyes scanning outward.

A hundred feet away is the stone pier. You can see a disturbance in the water near the end.

Nothing else happens, and the water is calm again in seconds.

It takes a few minutes longer before you and Jane are calm again. She drops her notebook onto the table and drags a hand through her hair. “Just a rock, I think. But… I’ll set up a little ward around the camp. Just for tonight.”

“Good idea,” you mumble, blinking back your exhaustion and watching the lake with tired eyes.

Chapter End Notes

jake: "gosh golly there are PEOPLE here"
jake: "i should say hello."
jake: "/throws a rock and immediately hides"
jake: "THAT WAS THE WORST HELLO"
One thing you did not bring with you to Southern Pacifica is your alarm clock.

To be fair, you didn’t anticipate sleeping in so severely. A night in a new place, a new bed, and outdoors no less did not add up to a situation conducive to getting any real rest. But instead of a tepid slumber, being jostled awake by every little sound around you, you sleep.

In hindsight, the embiggened camp bed is more comfortable than you would have assumed—especially since Roxy, “just for funsies,” over-sized the bed. It’s a bit of a climb to get into, but also about thirty percent larger than intended, enough for even you to sprawl out. And the night is filled with the quiet susurrus of the ocean and the breeze through the overgrown grass around the camp. And you are just exhausted, like you’ve been a conflagration of midnight oil that’s finally run dry.

You sleep deeply, and do not wake up until what feels like an ephemeral time in the mid- to late-morning. For a moment, you lay there, eyes barely open, looking at the lax curl of your fingers on the empty stretch of bed next to you, and the soft way the canvas filters the sunshine, leaving your tent a little dim cave shining with light the color of yellowed parchment.

It’s only the restless feeling in your skin that pulls you to wakefulness.

Between the long airship trip and, you think, being here in some kind of magical epicenter, the black ink wards written into your arms have become charged to a degree you don’t often see. Normally, you would ground them before they got this wily, but there just hasn’t been time yet.

This is also why the clawfoot tub is in your tent. It’s a nice consideration on the girls’ part.

Outside, you can hear the fire going, and morning conversation. It’s a cozy backdrop for this, the only magic you know.

The term is ‘noble’ these days. Before, it didn’t have a nice euphemism like that. You are magically inert, aetherically challenged, and often quietly allergic to the very powers that are harnessed and channeled to make the world work.

The tattoos had been a necessity. Human-made magic gave you… a weird feeling. Like nausea at the best times, like a bodily anxiety at the worst. Something about it fucked with you, untender and unpredictable.

So. You doubled down on the one ‘talent’ you could, and went to an open-minded specialist in wards, who took the core of you, of your affliction, and wrote it out on your skin. Symbols of protection and purification and nullification and payment, as perfectly outlined as any ritual circle from any accomplished witch. It was a barrier over your body, helping keep the ambient magic of the entire world at bay.

Now, the Sixth Pentacle of Mars, the centerpiece at the top of your right arm, spins with worrying speed, like a millwheel struggling against a flood. You can feel the rosemary and thyme sprigs shift restlessly as you get out of bed, and the vague clean waxy feel of the honeycomb as it loses its solid shape, and the slow liquid drip of your icosahedron as its crisp lines start to blur and run like damp ink.
It’s more of an annoyance than anything, and dealing with it is old routine for you.

You draw up a bath; given your proximity, you could use the fresh ocean water for this, just cannonball right in, but the idea of walking that far and leaving the safe comfort of your tent ain’t too appealing. Instead, you retrieve a deceptively heavy metal jar from your bag. It’s one of the few magical object you willingly own. It’s too convenient not to.

Popping open the lid, you start pouring.

It takes a few minutes of standing there holding the jar, but enough water flows out of it to fill the tub. A satchet of salt and herbs gets tossed in, and you stir it up with your hand to agitate it and help it dissolve.

You’re not sure what the herbs are. The market stall that you use, the one that gives you the least suspicious look when you need to stock up, mixes it differently every time. There’s a whiff of sandalwood and ginger to this one. Jane always said sandalwood suited you well.

You get in, and you submerge.

Thank fuck Roxy over-sized the tub too. Your legs are not easy to situate underwater, and the nullification takes a lot longer when you can’t wrestle your entire body under the surface.

But this time, it’s easy, and you wait, eyes shut, hair drifting freely, breathing out your mouth slowly.

It takes a long time to empty your lungs, and you remain under even longer; you can hold your breath a fairly long time. There’s no rush, and it’s always a relief to feel the tattoos settle as the collected energy is leeched out of them.

If you are very still and quiet, you can feel the spokes of the Pentacle slow to a drowsy halt.

You sit up, and inhale salt and spice. Exhale it meditatively.

And you’re damn careful not to open your eyes until you wipe them with a towel. Lessons learned the hard way.

Resting your head against the edge of the tub, you relax for a moment.

Outside, it’s quiet. Way too quiet.

“Shit,” you mumble, and reluctantly climb out of the tub.

As much as you’d like to languish a while, and have earned the right to through the amount of work you’ve done, there is just no chance when you’re in the service of Crocker and Lalonde.
water, and they are both standing at the furthest edge.

You walk closer, cupping your hands around your eyes to see better.

Roxy has her hands wrapped tightly around one of Jane’s arms, feet braced, weight shifted back. Jane herself leans over the edge of the pier, her free hand holding out what you think is a breakfast sandwich, cheese and sausage smushed between bread.

Below her, in the water, is the boy in the lake. His hand is cautiously extending, taking the food from Jane’s grasp.

Your shoes are sitting aside, under the canopy, but that’s time you’re not willing to waste. Sprinting down, you clear the grass and feel sand and fine silty earth beneath your feet as you try to catch up to the girls. Peripherally, you are well aware that either one of them is more formidable than you could hope to be, but that flash of logic does nothing to slow you down.

Luckily, the sun hasn’t been up long enough to start baking the sand and stone. It’s all still cool under your feet as you hurry down the pier, drawing three pairs of eyes to your approach.

The boy in the lake looks at you and lets out a surprised noise, half gasp and half trill, and throws himself under the water. Inverting, his tail flips up and splashes hard against the surface, sending up an impressive spray.

Jane stumbles back, lifting a hand to shield herself. “Oh well, fine then! Okay! I-- I guess that’s that!”

At her side Roxy groans, throwing her head back dramatically. “Diiiiiiirk, why?”

“I could ask you the same damn thing, both of you,” you shoot back, slowing to a stop as you reach the end of the pier.

Jane gives the water a sour look. “Well, I don’t know how that sandwich is going to taste underwater…” Turning to you, she frowns.

Crossing your arms, you frown right back. “Jane.”

“Don’t Jane me, buster. We have to get a closer look at him. He’s definitely not a mer, and not a kelpie either. I’ve never seen anything like him, honestly. You were right about the mix of humanoid and aquatic limbs…” She looks back out over the lake. “I wish I got a longer gander at him.”

Bumping her shoulder into Jane’s, Roxy says, “Well, we’ve got a little time. We lured him up once already, we’ll do it again. Food and pretty girls? No one can resist that, human or not. Sometimes especially not.” Flashing a sharp grin, she waggles her eyebrows.

“Hm. Do we have any sort of underwater-friendly foods?” Jane asks, ignoring Roxy’s lasciviousness. Which, fair. There are more than a few articles on the use of tantric magic in summoning that Crocker Magitech made her publish under a penname.

Resigned again to being the voice of reason, you say, “Hey, why don’t we discuss this back at the camp, away from the lake with the unknown magical being living in it?”

“You’re such a baby,” Roxy says, but the three of you wander back down the pier and to your camp again. While you take the opportunity to put on your shoes, ready to chase down any more distractible witches, Jane makes you a sandwich. Between that and two clementines, you’re soon ready for the day. Mostly.
“Did we bring coffee,” you wonder as you eat your oranges in carefully separated sections.

“Dunno. Weren’t you in charge of the survival essentials?” Roxy pokes your arm, smirking.

“Weren’t you in charge of work essentials?” You sink back into the papasan, legs stretched out in front of you. “There’s your perfect bribe for the not-mer.” You look aside at Jane. “What the fuck are we calling this guy?”

She has another sandwich in hand, and her cheek balanced on her fist as she watches the lake contemplatively, her hair tousled out of its usual flip. It’s been a very long time since you’ve seen her in anything but business-suitable garb, and the loose blouse and khaki skirt is weird and intimate to see.

With a hard *phoof* noise, she blows a lock of hair out of her eyes. “Well. We can’t keep calling him a not-mer, that’s just silly.”

“S’not like we’ve got the review committee ‘round these parts, Janey,” Roxy points out. “Just Dirk.”

“I resent that deeply,” you say.

“We could call him water babe.”

“No.”

“See! So critical.” Roxy says, waving a hand at you expansively. “You come up with something, hotshot.”

There’s a wry challenge in her voice, but the look she gives you is earnest. And with Jane still staring through the lake, offering no options…

You lean your head back in the chair and take a long sip of water, considering it. You’re not the magical research expert, honestly, and taxonomy isn’t your thing. More esoteric things are. Literature especially, the older stuff that was written before the modern study of magic took forefront and… left you high and dry in many ways.

No matter what, Jane will pick something more official later, presumably when she knows more about the lake creature. In truth, you just want to stop calling him not-mer. Something more befitting the green whiplash of color through the water and the way he reached out to you, how just thinking about the danger of it made your heart beat faster.

“Call him the lorelay, be done with it,” you murmur eventually. It’s a fairly deep pull, and you climb out of your chair, ready to go busy yourself with something before they ask for an explanation.

Roxy *cackles*. “Oh, really, Mr. Strider? Pretty lonely virgin haunting the water, luring sailors to their doom with her beauty? Whatsit, Germanic or something?”

Well, shit. You push your glasses up your nose, breathing out hard. “You asked.”

“And *what* an answer! Did you get a close look at those big green eyes? And that jawline?” She throws an arm across her forehead, falling back onto the mat. “Swoon!”

“Christ, Rox,” you mutter, caught out and sort of pissed at yourself for giving her the leg up onto the high horse.
“Something mythological could be a good placeholder until we figure out more about him,” Jane says, coming to your rescue and reminding you why she’s your favorite in the whole goddamn world. “Oh, what about the nice sea nymphs? The Greek ones, they were helpful and friendly, not like sirens.”

“Pretty optimistic of you, Janey,” Roxy says, just as you nod and offer up, “Nereids.”

“Nereid!” Jane snaps her fingers happily, nodding. “Let’s use that for now.”

“Lorelay,” Roxy whispers at you.

“Can we do some fucking science or something?” you ask. Surely there is some fucking science to do on this goddamn island.

Under the direction of your esteemed leader, the three of you head out to explore the temple.

Your camp sits on the western bank of the lake. Following the curve of the island, you carve an easy path to the temple sitting astride the southern bank and the ocean. It’s not a long walk, especially over the easily-traversed slopes of the plains. Over here, there’s very little tree cover for much of the journey, until you get closer to the temple.

There are fairly regular scatterings of what looks like the ruins of whoever lived here before. Toppled, heavily weathered logs laid at conspicuous right angles to cornerstones and crumbled rock walls, a few stone paths almost completely swallowed by the grass, and detritus too worn down to be recognizable as anything more specific than a lost sign of life.

You’re quiet as you walk past these remnants, even Roxy’s amiable chatter trailing off in some weird uncertain respect as you cut right through the apparent center of what used to be here.

Soon, the temple looms. It’s really way too goddamn tall. Even with the use of magic, you can’t help but be skeptical at how the enormous frog statue wound up at the top of the narrow, tall, four-sided pyramid. It’s big enough that you step into the shadow it casts several minutes before reaching the great square base of it.

Roxy takes off her hat to look up at it, grinning. “Wow. I don’t think I like anything the way these folks liked frogs.”

“No kidding, wow,” Jane breathes, squinting upward too. “Perhaps it’s related to our nereid. There might be a connection between the two. He could be an important cipher to understanding all…. this!”

“Leave ‘im alone, Janey.” Roxy says, patting Jane’s shoulder before soldiering on over the overgrown path to the steps. “Gotta give the cuties their space, let them come to you.”

“How do you make everything sound so… so underhanded!”

“I wake up before either of you two and practice.”

“Hey,” you interrupt, tapping Jane’s arm to draw her attention out to the ocean.

From here, you can see that a few hundred feet out from the beach are pillars. They are tall carved
stone, describing a wide dotted line around the coastline before disappearing out of sight beyond the trees.

Jane flips open her notebook and starts writing something down. “Yes, I noticed them yesterday too. I’m not sure that to make of them, but from a distance, they do seem to be made out of the same sort of rock that the temple is. That would indicate some sort of connection.” Walking closer to the temple, she presses her hand against the carved green-black facade. “Given the sheer amount of this particular stone and the aetheric flow it puts off, it must be linked. But whether the rock is inherently magical or was made so…”

“Gonna be tough to suss that one out without a full lab,” Roxy says, putting her own hand on the temple stone next to Jane’s. “If we can find where it was harvested from and compare, maybe?”

“Keep an eye out for enormous green-black rocks,” you mentally note. “Got it.”

“You kid, but if you find them, we definitely want a close look.” Roxy drops her hat back on and starts up the stairs. “C’mon, time’s a-wastin’. We’ve only got some fifty-nine days to solve every mystery this place has to offer.”

Offering Jane your arm, you follow Roxy up the steep set of stairs to the deep archway at the top. Without a word, Jane waves her hand, and her focus appears in a red metallic flicker. Tapping the pitchfork against the floor, she summons blue lights, one seemingly balanced on each pointed tip of the prongs, illuminating the way ahead.

Compared to the outside with the impeding plant growth and the crumbled ruins and broken pieces of the past, the inside of the temple is… suspiciously well-kept. Empty, but untouched by time. You expect a series of interlocking rooms or tiered floors, something to make use of the ridiculously tall structure, but through the archway is just one enormous ground floor room.

It reminds you a bit of the hangar back home, on the rare occasions the airships were out, exposing the scope of the space. Jane slides her hand further down her fork and holds it up, casting blue magelight further along.

Almost everything is made of the same green-black rock. Stone benches set up similarly to church pews, stone braziers long left cold spaced evenly through the room, raised stone steps leading behind a stone half-wall and a centerpiece of a stone altar of some kind. There are dark, frayed mottled coverings on the floor, what might’ve been tapestry rugs before the ocean air and time eroded them away to a vaguely sodden mess beneath your feet.

Jane approaches the front of the apparent procession, shining light against the half-wall. The light catches and glints brightly.

Crowding in close, you and Roxy watch as Jane presses her fingers against the wall. It’s extensively carved and engraved with some sort of lettering. The light catches on some yellow glass that is perfectly fit into a few of the carvings, accenting the inscription vividly, a starved gasp of reflection in the largely staid stone temple.

“Move your butt, Jane,” Roxy mutters, nudging her aside and kneeling down to peer at the glass symbols more closely.

“Recognize any of it?” you ask.

“Eh…. no, not immediately. But this shiny stuff.” She pulls a pocketknife from her bag, flicking the small blade out.

“Oh, Roxy!” Jane admonishes.
“Relax, Doc Crock, I got a theory.” She slips the knife into one of the carvings, gently working it in with a slow rocking motion.

All at once, the glass comes apart. In fact, it splinters into thread-thin shards, chipping and falling like gossamer strands to the floor.

“Yeah! See that?” Roxy taps the filaments with her knife. “Volcanic glass, it’s like… the stuff that comes out of the top and cools in the air and it’s all stringy and shit. They made it into these little accents.” She taps the wall itself. “Betcha this rock is from the volcano. Basalt with some, what’s the green stuff called, Jane? Fire mages love it.”

“Pyroxene. Because, with a name like that, how could they not.” She looks up at you. “A similar sort of thing is basalt-olivine mixtures. It gives it a color almost… exactly like this, yes.” Her fingers trail over the rock almost reverently. “But still, these are all… they’re all solid pieces carved to suit. That’s…”

“Yeah,” Roxy agrees, and taps her knife again. “So we are going to super figure out what this stuff says. I got a few lexicons back on the Acorn. Anyone got the stuff for rubbin’?”

It’s in your bag, and you hand over the paper and the charcoal over to Roxy. She remains sitting on the floor, just scoots her body towards the far corner of the half-wall, where it sharply terminates. “Probably the place to start. ‘Less we’re real unlucky and these folks read right to left, but I’ll take some rubbings over there too.” She spread a wide sheet of paper against the wall and starts sweeping the charcoal over it. “I’ll do this, you two go on.”

Jane smiles at you, excitement palpable, and leads the way.

For the next few hours, you find just a lot of… temple stuff.

After a while, Jane hands you her notebook and pen, and you dutifully start taking notes and transcribing Jane’s observations. Watching her paw over everything and vacillate wildly between thoughtful conjecture and yelps of pure delight is a good way to spend an afternoon.

Even being one room, there’s plenty to discover in the temple. Under some of the pews there are long, heavy stone boxes that open on a hinge. Inside the one Jane pries open is a lot of dust and the remains of a robe, the cloth dark and ruined but with green glassy accents beaded along the neck and the hem.

Putting it back into the box, Jane makes a face at the dirt left on her hands. “Where are your work gloves?” you ask her.

“I detect aetheric signatures best through touch,” Jane grouses, sounding very put off and disappointed in herself, brushing her hands against her skirt. “It’s a terrible burden.”

The braziers still work. Jane blows on a few of them, lighting them and dimming her focus. The smell from them is like an old attic set ablaze, and you step away, coughing until the fire burns away whatever was lingering in them.

To Jane’s delight, rings of volcanic glass around the circumference of the braziers glow with the flame. “Could just be to make it look nicer, or something might happen when we light them all!”
You light them all. Turns out, the extra magic is just for show.

With the extra illumination, you find under the altar an array of bottles, each sealed at the neck with a bit of shaped sponge.

Jane turns one over in her hands, tipping it upside down with a hum. “Anointing oil, maybe? The little sponge is clever, you could just dab at your skin with it this way.”

“There’s a new Crocker Magitech patent,” you say.

Jane lifts her eyebrows and nods. “Actually… Not the worst idea.”

“I want my name on that one.”

She grins. “I can try to arrange that. Oh, hoo hoo, the Strider Glider, the best new friend to the local mage!”

You let out an amused huff of breath. “Nevermind. Holy shit, forget I said anything.”

“You’re no fun at all. Won’t let us name anything after you.”

“I’m just the valet, Jane,” you say, moving her along.

There are a few more things of note. A few raised basins, like empty pools, large enough to fit a couple of people, sit towards the back of the room.

A little closer to the center stand strange pedestals that neither of you can figure out the purpose of. Each is about waist height and about the size of a platter, but with a three inch pole sitting in the middle, standing straight up. The entire piece is made of the basalt, but covered in a glossy coating of some sort of resin.

Jane curls her hand around the pole with a moue of determination, but shrugs. “Nothing.”

The mystery of the pedestals is set aside in the face of the true centerpiece of the room.

A few yards beyond the altar, in the approximate center of the temple, is a deep depression in the floor. It’s steep enough to look like a sharp drop from a distance, but as you and Jane move closer, it becomes clear that it’s really a bowl set into the floor.

From the edge, you can look down, and the shape resolves into a flower. The smooth, resin sides of the bowl are carefully fitted together and overlapped, using the slight transparency of the material to create the smoky shape of a lotus blossom, with its unique pointed leaf shapes.

“Oh, my, it’s beautiful,” Jane breathes, holding onto your arm as she leans in to look. “I wonder what it’s for.”

“That is up to Roxy to sort out.” You turn to call her over. “Rox, come look at this inexplicable magical thing we found.”

“We don’t know it’s magic yet,” Jane chides.


She doesn’t respond, and you hurry over to check around the other side of the altar and it’s engraved wall. Predictably enough, Roxy isn’t there, just a stack of paper with the transferred inscriptions and a half-worn down chunk of charcoal.
What about a giant empty temple with nothing but fading signs of life inspired her to wander the fuck off? Gods’ sake, Lalonde.

You intend to go and find her but your attention is grabbed by a surprised shriek that has your heart leaping up into your throat. You pivot and turn, and Jane’s gone too.

For exactly three seconds, you don’t know what the hell to do, just that this island was a mistake, and you should’ve stayed home where things were terrible and insular and lonely but safe and known, even if leaving the company campus felt like a long held breath finally being sighed out, like the pins holding you in place finally being tugged loose so you could move again, none of it was worth it and you could’ve just survived back on the mainland if you tried.

Three seconds, and Jane lets out a quiet, bashful, “Dirk, could you give me a hand?”

Back at the lotus bowl, you see Jane standing at the bottom, leaning up the side, fingers trying and failing to catch the stone rim. She scoots forward, balanced on her toes, and as she reaches up, she slides back down to the bottom.

You put your hands on your hips and stare at her over the edge of your glasses.

Pouting, she pushes off the bowl to stand on precarious feet. “It’s– it’s incredibly smooth, like it was just polished with oil. I can’t get to the top.”

“I can see that.” You get down on your knees and hold out one hand to her, bracing the other against the rim. Not that you’re terribly worried about falling in and getting stuck like her; you have over a foot of height on her that translates to some useful lanky arms. Climbing out wouldn’t be too difficult.

The tricky part is not letting her yank you in, but you manage, heaving Jane up and out as she tries in vain to plant her knees against the bowl. Her skin makes an uncomfortable squeaking noise as it rubs against the glassy side, and she winces at the chafe.

But you pull, grabbing her by the waist and letting her fall onto you as you lean back.

After, she spends a moment like that, breathing hard as she lays half on you. In turn, you take the opportunity to lay there too, getting your wind back.

“Thanks.” She pats your chest with a light hand. “Please don’t tell Roxy I fell in the stupid bowl.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” you answer without hesitation. “Speaking of, we need to go hunt her down.”

Clamoring upright, you gather your bags and start for the entrance. Jane picks up the charcoal rubbings, looking them over with a critical eye before nodding curtly and rolling them up. They get tucked into a loop on her pack as you exit out into the sun.

You knew that you’d slept in pretty severely, but it only sinks in when you look up and find the sun already past its apex, starting to color the sky as it makes it way to the west. There’s a pang in your chest at seeing a day mostly wasted so early in the expedition, even if you’re aware that you needed the rest.

You can always do a little better. Especially out here, where the air feels charged as it sweeps in from the ocean, every fresh, salt-tinged breath new and strange.

While you’re contemplating irrelevant shit, Jane grabs your hand and pulls you along. “Shh, shh shh shh,” she hushes you, even though you weren’t speaking.
You drop low and follow her along the wide base of the temple. Toward the lake, she drags you close behind, a finger held to her lips.

At the far corner, you both kneel down and look over the side.

Below you, Roxy is sitting on a lower tier of ornate stonework that cuts into the water. Her legs are bent, curled around her, away from the edge. Her metal lunchpail, bumpy and stamped with the half-image of either birds or flowers, is open at her side, her sandwich mostly eaten.

Just a few feet away from her is the lorelay. He’s maintaining his distance, hunched almost shyly with one hand curled around the stone. In his other is a plum. He takes careful bites, his eyes trained on Roxy as she slowly picks up her sandwich to eat.

Next to you, Jane squeezes your hand tight enough to be almost painful, her knuckles pressed to her lips quellingly.

You have a hard time watching her. Instead, the lorelay keeps drawing your gaze. Even out of water, the spots on his chest and neck glow, barely visible under the sunlight that peeks through the shadow of the trees. His hands look green with that shiny skin streaking up his arms. The golden fins you saw in the lake are much more translucent now, stuck to his bicep out of water.

When Roxy smiles at him, his face loses some of its green tint, shifting fluidly to a warm yellow.

“I told Janey that food and babes was the way to go. Wasn’t it, sunshine?”

He gives her a blank look, listening to her speak with no recognition in his face. When he replies, it’s completely unintelligible to you, a mix of long vowels and hard stops, the entire noise of it blending together with no discernable words or sentence breaks.

“Right,” Roxy says, nodding, and the lorelay smiles, ducking his head and sinking a few inches down in the water, hand slipping from the ledge. He floats there, taking another bite of plum, and sharply recoiling with a sound like a startled cricket. But more watery, maybe.

“Oh, shit, sorry.” Roxy gestures, careful not to reach too close to him. “In the middle, there’s a heart. The heart’s always a pain, ain’t it?”

He looks more confused, and turns the plum over to take another bite from the fleshy side on the back.

Jane elbows you. “Look at his teeth. They’re like human teeth. Another delineation from mers.”

Apparently she’s not quiet enough, even whispering. The lorelay goes still for a beat before his head whips around to spot the two of you perched above.

Predictably, he bolts again. You can’t really blame him; in his position, finding two strangers leering at him from above, you’d probably do the same.

“Awww,” Roxy whines, following his gaze to spot you and Jane. “‘Course it’s you two, you wouldn’t know subtlety if it-- well, now, see that don’t work, the whole point of subtlety is that it ain’t obvious, huh.”

Further out on the water, the surface ripples and he appears again, still hidden from the bridge of his nose down.

“Goddamn, he’s a pretty one,” Roxy breathes, and waves at him. “See you later!”
Slowly, his arm lifts from the water, and he imitates her, waving back, first uncertainly, then with a little more enthusiasm.

Then, he’s gone again, and the lake stills, only ripples to betray where he had been a moment before.


She and Jane talk about little else on the way back to camp. You, on the other hand, keep an eye on the water.

Chapter End Notes

these end notes have gone woefully unused for kink warnings. /frowns at self.

sorry this one is a bit slow. next chapter, a bit more set up, but holy shit the team might figure out the lake boy's name.
Once again, it’s morning, and you are the last one up.

There is allegedly a period of transition that happened after a long airship journey during which the time dissonance messed people up. But things like that are supposed to happen to other people. This is frankly becoming unconscionable. Dragging your ass out of your tent well past sunrise was not in the vicinity of acceptable behavior.

“Nice bedhead,” Roxy greets you as soon as you step into the light.

You were in such a hurry to get up, you’d just pulled on clothes and left. You let out a tense sigh that Roxy laughs at, and as soon as she’s turned around, you rake your fingers through your hair to tame it. “Itinerary?”

Jane is kneeling by the fire, working some hardcore practical magic. She has some kind of metal tool in her hand that looks like a metal box split between two rods. As you watch, she drops cheese and vegetables and miscellanea from the Acorn pantry in, flips the lid shut, and rests it over the fire. “Sit, Dirk. Have some breakfast.”

“What is it?” You take your usual seat, slouching in the papasan and rubbing tiredness from your face.

“I have no idea! I’m trusting my instincts and winging it.” She leans back on her hands, and stretches her back. “So I’ll handle breakfast and you keep making dinner?”

“And lunches!” Roxy adds. “We need cute box lunches for our excursions.”

“I’ll wake up on time tomorrow and handle it,” you tell her.

A look is shared between Roxy and Jane, a long beat of silence stretching like a cat as they have some kind of discussion with their eyes. It’s something you’ve never been that good at, just reading people and speaking to them without words. Watching them do it is uncomfortable.

Abruptly, they stop, and Roxy bounces to her feet. “Forgot something in my tent,” she says, and slips back to her tent, out of the canopied common area you’ve set up.

As soon as she’s gone, Jane scoots around to face your chair. “Dirk.”

“Why am I getting that feeling? The one when I get called into the personnel manager’s office to talk about my attitude and drawing attention to my unique circumstances?”

Some of the certain is jostled from Jane’s face. “They what?”

Fuck. “Nevermind. Go ahead.”

“We’re going to put a pin in that one, because that definitely sounds like something I should know as the future head of the Crocker Trust, but.” She sits up straighter, like she’s sitting in a meeting room in her best tailored dress and not a mussed robe. “We’re going to be here for a while, Dirk. And you are incredibly important to our team. By golly we wouldn’t even be here without you, and you’re a well-needed voice of clarity when Roxy and I get a bit enthused about things.”
“I can already tell this is going to be bad,” you say.

“Stop that,” she clips back at you. “All I want is for you to remember that we’ve got a huge mess of stuff to do on this island, and you… Well.” She chews her lip for a moment, looking at you with concern. “You are bound and determined to grind away at this when I’m not sure you need to! Nope!” When you open your mouth to respond, she points at you sharply. “No, you listen! I know how you get about your projects. You always get carried away. But this is a research expedition, and you are not the primary researcher here.”

Her hand lands on your knee, pressing firmly. “There’s no reason to wake up, be on for fourteen hours, then do the same thing next day. You’ll burn out in two weeks at most.”

“And even that’s being generous,” you hear Roxy say from where you’d guess she’s eavesdropping from behind her tent flap.

You keep your mouth shut until Jane slowly lowers her hand, staring at you with a determined gleam in her eye. She nods once, satisfied.

It’s not your fault that you find work more rewarding than not-work. This is honestly an overreaction. “So is that on my agenda for today?” you ask. “To… relax?”

A flush spreads over Jane’s face. “Oh, actually… this is a little embarrassing, but how about tomorrow we start your relaxation regime? Because today I want to have a look at what’s in the jungle, and I’d like some backup.”

“Dunno ’bout that,” you say, putting on a bit of drawl as you fold your hands behind your head, leaning back in the chair. “Now that you’ve brought the idea to my attention, I’m all fixated on this relaxing thing. Kind of feel like putting my feet up. Might wanna hunt down some lemons and make some lemonade. Or, that feels like too much work now. Better just find a sunhat with my name on it. Pencil in a nap around noon. Catch a tan.”

Jane snorts. “You couldn’t catch a tan with a net, Mr. Strider.”

“True. Guess I gotta come with then. Protect you from the undoubtedly massive jungle mosquitos. There’s a machete in one of the gear boxes.”

With that decided and your apparent intervention over, Roxy slinks back out of her tent just in time for breakfast to be ready. Now that you’re starting to settle in, Jane has actual plates for everyone to eat off. She calls it, “A bit of necessary culture this far afield.” You know the plateware is going to be the first thing you leave behind to meet your weight limit for the trip back.

As you dig into the flaky thing that Jane dishes out to everyone, Roxy pauses midbite to let out the universally understood sound of having an idea to share while your mouth is full. As Jane finishes her plate, Roxy snatches it up and tips the last of the breakfast concoction out.

“Be right back!” She bounds up and jogs off to the dock with the plate. Setting it down on the edge, she hurries back just as quickly.

“So!” She scrapes the sand off her feet on the edge of the mat before rejoining you and Jane. Sitting down with the rest of her food, she says, “You and Dirk are going to the jungle. I’m handling the temple.”

“Did you figure out what sort of lettering is being used in the inscriptions?” Jane asks.

“I brought like twelve damn lexicons and none of them match up. So we’ll have to ask for some
more once I know what I’m looking for. S’what I’m gonna figure out today hopefully.”

“Ask for some more,” you echo.

Jane nods, sipping her canteen. “While you were handling the heavy lifting with the Acorn, Roxy and I were handling the magical heavy lifting. We set up an emergency ring in the ritual room, that big one down in the basement? So we’ll be able to communicate with the mainland… three times?”

Roxy nods. “The circle on their end will degenerate after about three or four connections from us. So it’s a big emergency thing. Or, y’know. We’ll just use it to get more books out of the arcane library.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” you say, unsure how exactly it works.

“Point is, if I can figure it out?” She grins. “I can make us an Allspeech charm.”

Her smile is clearly infectious, spreading to Jane. “The idea is there is a fairly complex bit of artificing Roxy can do to imbue a piece of jewelry with the Allspeech spell, which will last longer than just casting it, and be cheaper in the long run. Metaphysically speaking.”

“So we can talk to the nereid!” Roxy gestures excitedly to the lake. “And blow this mystery island’s mysteries wide open, right from the fishboy’s mouth!”

“However,” Jane says, “to do that, Roxy needs some jewelry that isn’t already enchanted.”

“Which we don’t have,” Roxy says. “But luckily, I know a super generous handsome man who doesn’t wear enchanted jewelry—”

“Okay, enough.” You know what she means. You’re not big into rings or necklaces, but you have some earrings. You didn’t exactly intend to bring them along on the trip, just forgot to take them out before leaving. “Do you need them… left in salt water or something?”

“Pretty sure just being on you is handling that fine,” Roxy says. “I don’t need ‘em today, but I’ll let you know. Clean ‘em up, etch some totally great runes all over them, and finally have a chat with our babe in the lake. But Allspeech is a fuckin’ misnomer, you gotta know the right speech.”

“Which is why Roxy is going to be focusing on the temple while we find out what else this place has to offer,” Jane says.

“Natch,” Roxy agrees.

There’s an audible disturbance in the water that draws your attention. All three of you turn in time to look over at the dock.

The lorelay hauls himself upward to perch on the edge of the pier, sitting next to the plate.

Beside you, Jane moves to stand. Not taking your eyes off the pier, you catch the back of her robe, stilling her.

Across the way, the lorelay freezes. At this distance, you can see his eyes on you, his body held perfectly still, not like a statue but like a firework sitting and waiting, the fuse already burned down. He’s poised to flip right back into the water again.

Jane settles back down.
The lorelay smiles and picks up the plate to examine it. With his fingers, he picks at the fluffy treat, putting bites in his mouth by hand.

“Do we have binoculars,” Jane whispers fiercely.

“Take your own advice and relax, girl,” Roxy whispers back.

As he eats, you get a look at him out of the water. It’s an affecting sight, the way his dark brown skin cools to green along his spine and around his hips. Without the lift of the lake, his fins stick to his skin, along his arms and around the waist. All of it is shiny like polished stone, glistening in the sun. His legs kick slowly in the water as he sits and eats.

“Look at his hands,” Jane says, pointing briefly. “No claws. That’s… very strange. Most water creatures have them by necessity unless they interfere with their nature. Like kelpies, you know?” She tucks her hand under her chin, as if nervous to draw attention to herself. “So what’s his nature?”

“So far, being skittish and wanting food,” you mutter.

Before long, the lorelay finishes eating and slips easily back into the water. Swimming out a bit, he turns back and lifts his hand, waving.

Roxy waves back. “This is how you make friends. Food bribery.”

“I think he stole my plate,” Jane says as the lorelay disappears into the lake again.

“S’what you get, dragging good china across the goddamn ocean.” Roxy stands and pokes both of you, tapping you against your temple. “Let’s get going already.”

The way the plains turn into jungle is sudden, the tall grass giving abrupt way to a heavy green smell and towering trees.

Both you and Jane still at the edge of the field, feeling like some kind of giants are looming over you.

Jane looks up at you with a small smile. “I thought you were going to lead the way, Mr. Strider.”

You swallow a sigh and nod, taking the machete from your belt and moving in. As you cut a way through the underbrush, Jane follows behind you. She has some complicated cartography magic going on with graphite dust and a steady hand. As she focuses on her spellwork, you push everything out of her path and keep your eyes peeled for anything.

The mosquito thing wasn’t a joke. You expect to find enormous ones, like the bastards that haunted your lake trips back in Texas. It’s your duty to protect her from them.

It’s a slow process, and arduous. The thick cover of branches and leaves high above you helps block out the rising sunlight and heat of the day, but the ground is uneven and difficult. More than once, you climb over some moss-drenched rock or fallen tree, and turn to help Jane follow, steadying her little spellwork.

The way is illuminated by sharp shafts of light that cut through the layers of leaves, sunbeams all
around. There is something quiet about it as you explore. Every once in a while, the light lands directly on a flat piece of ground or a conspicuously placed stump or a particularly spritely fern. Your attention catches, and slides away as you breathe out.

“Dirk,” Jane calls after almost an hour and a half of nothing but watch your step and thanks and ooh, lovely. “Listen.”

You slow down, turning to look at her, waiting. She stands there, in half a shaft of golden light and drifting motes, a piece of parchment spread from her elbow to his spread palm, a fistful of dust in her hand and smeared silver-grey over her fingers.

“I’m listening,” you say, prompting her.

“Exactly.” She carefully extends a finger, careful not to dislodge any more graphite. “It’s quiet. No birds. None of your alleged giant insects. I’ve not seen so much as a lizard.”

That seems unnatural. You both share a moment of contemplation about that before continuing on. Now, you like to think you’re paying a little more attention.

The jungle is big. Not just in expanse, but in the size of everything. Now the trees seem too tall, now the flowers seem to wide. And it only grows as you go deeper. You pass a pitcher plant that is the size of your head and have to stop and stare.

Thirty minutes later, Jane gasps at an enormous ground level flower with open red petals the size of a sofa.

“I don’t know if that’s magical, but it’s kind of creepin’ me out,” you tell her.

“It has to be magical! I… I think.” She puffs out a breath and walks over to a tree to lean on it, resting her arms against one of the branches. “There are no insects, no animals. The flora is-- is getting bigger and bigger, but there are no pollinators. That’s…” She bows her head. “That doesn’t make any sense. We should take samples.”

“Another day, Janey,” you say softly. “You’ve got your hands full and I feel better holding this right now.” The machete glints in the sporadic light.

“Fine. Spoilsport.”

“The minute I put this down to grab a sample vial, something big and mean with lots of teeth is going to jump on us.”

Onward, you turn northwest, and before long break through the treeline and back to the ocean. After so long in the shade, it takes a moment for your eyes to adjust.

“Hold this,” Jane hands you her map. Hand freed, she takes a pouch off her belt and awkwardly dumps the excess shavings into it. Her palm is smeared and she glares at the smudges accusingly.

Ahead, out on the water, are more pillars of green basalt standing out, sentinel around the coastline.

Jane washes off in the water as you find a suitable spot to sit and break out lunch.

She joins you, and takes one of the wrapped sandwiches you offer. “Feel better?” you ask.

“No. It’s all under my nails.” Her nose wrinkles. “I’m going to borrow the tub tonight, I think.”
“No problem.”

“And can I say?” Her elbow nudges against you. “I’m going to get sick of sandwiches before long.”

A smirk curls your lips. “I’ll see what I can do. I’m not an expert in campfire cuisine, but I’m resourceful as all hell.”

“And a good swimmer,” she reminds you. It’d be a non-sequitur if you weren’t sitting, facing the damn pillars.

“Relaxation, huh.”

She shrugs. “I didn’t say today.”

“I’ll do it. But not until Roxy’s got her damn charm thing ready.”

“Deal.”

You both lapse into a comfortable silence, broken only by the roll of waves. A few come a little too close and lap at the heels of your boots.

You always liked salt water. Which, thank god. Under the sleeve of your shirt, you can feel the spokes start to move. It’s a very gradual process, like the ticking of a clock drowned in molasses. It’ll pick up speed. Normally, not so quickly, but.

Jane steals a section of orange from you. “You don’t feel it at all?”

Blinking out of your thoughts, you refocus on her. “Hm?”

There is something sad in her face, and she looks sharply away from you, a flush in her cheeks. “Oh. Nothing. I just…” She shrugs one shoulder. “It’s not… good or fair to be upset about it, but I can’t really help it! It feels like you’re missing out.”

“Magic thing?”

“The aetheric feel of this place is… it’s incredible, Dirk,” she breathes, almost awed. “It feels like… Oh, it’s so hard to explain. It feels like a-- a cat’s purr, but everywhere. I’m sleeping so well here, like I haven’t since before university, it’s so strange and nice.” And glances at you. “And you… don’t get that?”

No, you don’t, and you try not to pull a sourpuss about it. You imagine it might be like achromatopsia or anosmia or something, this layer of the world you just can’t feel. Everyone else you’ve ever met acts like it’s an obvious thing, so much so that it’s hard not to get caught up in bitterness over it. Sometimes, you feel like you are stuck on the other side of a mirror, living in the wrong version of the universe.

Normally, Roxy and Jane are delicate about it. But sometimes they aren’t.

You’re silent too long, and feel how Jane wilts a little. Feel her thinking of platitudes.

She settles on saying nothing, and letting it go. You’re relieved.
In other ways, nobility has its perks.

“You’re perfect, you’re so magically inert, you’re like an arcane protractor,” Roxy says as she clears a space in her tent. It’s been about a week and already her bed is reaching that point of being chronically unmade (even though you are almost sure there’s a spell for that) and half her shit is dragged out of boxes and travel chests to sit on the floor. Everything seems to be in its own section of the tent, but it’s still a goddamn mess.

As you stand aside, she takes a little stone tile from her pocket and sets it in the middle of her floor before taking up her focus and typing away at it. The tile jerks a bit—“Whoops, that’s not the right spelling, hang on”—and eventually grows, expanding to cover the cleared area of floor.

After some work at the temple, most of which Roxy calls “too boring to even speak of,” she sorted out the things she needed from Crocker Magitect. This morning, after Jane headed out for another jaunt through the jungle, Roxy slapped a piece of chalk into your hand and dragged you inside.

Now, with a proper surface to work off, you plant your toe in the approximate center of the embiggened tile and lean forward to press the chalk against the slightly coarse marble. “Go ahead.”

She takes your free hand in both of hers and with a slow, gradual gait drags you. Pivoting on your toe, keeping the chalk steady, you outline a damn fine circle, the line ending exactly where you started it. You blow away the spare white dust and straighten carefully. “Good?”

“Fuckin’ perfect. Now.” She shoos you. “Out! We can only do this a few times, and I don’t want you accidentally messin’ it up.”

The academic jury is out on whether having nobility in the vicinity of magic actually throws it off, and you don’t begrudge Roxy her care. You watch her place a few empty books at set points on her circle before ducking out.

It takes a solid half hour before she emerges from her tent, holding three tomes under her arm and looking exhausted with her hair sweat damp against her forehead. “Three books on Pacific ethereal dialects, as requested,” she says. “Fuck, I need…”

“Wanna sit down?” you ask.

“Yes. But.” She points to the dock, breathing hard. She heads down there, and you follow after grabbing a bottle of crisp cold water from the stone strongbox set up to keep things cool.

Roxy doesn’t hesitate to plop down right at the end, setting her books aside and hiking up her pants to stick her legs in the water. “Oh, I keep forgetting it’s warm water. That’s so weird. I should throw myself in the ocean, damn.”

You sit down with her, and hand over the glass bottle. It’s cold enough to try to cling to your fingers. “Long walk.”

“Yeah,” she sighs, like a five minute walk is tantamount to a the original Marathon run, uncorking the bottle and taking a sip. “Kinda want to upend this thing over my head. That’d give you a bit of a show. Don’t wanna scare you off.”

“Lack of interest doesn’t indicate disgust or fear, Rox.”

“Killjoy. Always a killjoy.” She sips her water again.
And nearly chokes when the lake surface breaks and just a few feet down the pier, the lorelay climbs up.

It’s the closest you’ve been since that first day in the lake. He sits there, his hands pressed flat to the stone, looking ready to launch away again at the first sign of trouble.

“Hey,” Roxy says, coughing slightly to clear her airway. “Wanna warn a girl next time, pal?”

The lorelay turns his big, bright eyes to her, still not comprehending. The green hue is almost luminescent. With the sun high above, it’s hard to say for sure.

He looks back at you, eyes flicking over you.

“Maybe he wants food,” you murmur. You can’t help but notice how your visitor’s focus on you narrows, his whole body leaning in a little.

“Or is that just his excuse to come close and make friendly,” Roxy counters. “He doesn’t look like he’s hurting for food.” She whistles, and the lorelay stiffens. “Hey. Whoa, sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you none.”

All she gets in response is a lilted wet chirp sound. You’ve heard him speak before, though, and wonder how his language works.


Putting a hand on her chest, she says in a clear voice. “Roxy.” Her hand lands on your shoulder. “Dirk.” And she points to the lorelay.

He frowns, the spots on his face lighting up, ripples of green and yellow swishing together in vivid gradients, his brow furrowing.

“Roxy. Dirk,” she says again, indicating each of you in turn, and gestures to him again.

The frown deepens, and you are pretty sure this isn’t going to work one second before the lorelay points to her. “Roxy,” he says, dragging out she second syllable too long.

“Yes!” Roxy says, nodding vehemently, and giving him a thumbs up. “Which means he’s…?” She points both hands at you.


“Yes, yes! Which makes you?” She points to him again.

For a moment, he considers, glancing between the both of you. You watch as comprehension dawns on his face. “Roxy. Dirk.” He puts his hand on his chest, just as Roxy did before. “Jake.”

“Jake?” you ask, unable to keep the incredulness out of your voice.

“Jake. Yes-es,” he says, a little more sibilant than Roxy.

“Okay, now that we got the pleasannries out of the way,” she rushes on, turning in place, swinging her legs out of the water and laying them out, crossed at the ankle. Lacing her fingers and resting them on her knee, she says, “What’s the deal with the frogs?”

The lorelay-- apparently Jake?-- just blinks at her for a moment, then looks at you again. His eyes
shift down, looking at your uncovered arms where you’ve pushed your sleeves up. Your left forearm, the boline wreathed in sage and careful dotted angles seems to have his attention.

“Take off your shirt,” Roxy hisses at you, sotto voce, and reaches for one of her books.

“Fuck off,” you mumble back.

“Just flash a little skin until I can find something useful to say.”

As she flips rapidly through one of her lexicons, the…. Jake continues to look at you with a keen expression. You hold perfectly still and feel your heart rate start to pick up. It’s been a while since you took a salt bath and the dots outlining diamonds and inverted triangles and constellations are shifting, moving along their designated paths slowly.

His fingers curl against the pier, arms tensing, like maybe he wants to move closer.

You want to roll down your sleeves, unused to staring. Or, staring like that. People glaring at you or sneering, you got that all the time.

Jake’s gaze feels different, and you eventually have to look away.

As soon as you do, he’s gone again, breaking the water and disappearing in seconds. Roxy groans, snapping her book shut. “I told you to strip!”

“Christ,” you mutter, and get to your feet, walking back to camp.

With another day of crossreferencing under her belt, Roxy gets to work on the charm. You give her the largest earring you have, a bronze cuff. If she has to inscribe shit on it, you figure she needs all the surface area she can get.

Artificing is hard work. Magical items extend the lifespan of spells and imbue complex attributes to their wearers, but the process of making one is one of the harder magical talents out there. Alchemy, you’ve read, is easy to begin and hard to master. Artificing, in comparison, is just hard.

Roxy sticks to her tent, working. You not only avoid bothering her, but you move your chair further from her tent, just in case.

In the meantime, Jane pulls you away from camp again, this time to follow the circumference of the lake, her cartography magic at work again. Since your previous excursion, Jane’s decided that the island is pretty much safe, albeit in a lonely sense. She hardly needed backup when there was nothing to back her up against.

Likely she just wants company today, and you don’t mind. Getting away from the camp and going somewhere that isn’t the Acorn or the village ruins will keep you sharper.

It’s a nice walk. To your left, the lake is shimmering nicely. To your right, the ocean slides in and out. Water on all sides and just enough clouds in the sky for you to leave your glasses at camp.

The only problem is the wind.

Eventually, the inevitable happens, and you hear Jane swear as her parchment slips out of her
grasp and into the air. “Shit, no, oh no, Dirk!”

The map-in-progress flits right by you, just out of reach as you try to catch it. It twirls elegantly in the air a few times before landing with the grace of a fallen leaf on the lake.

With Jane letting out distressed noises, you go after it. On this side of the lake, there is no beach, just a slight drop from a ledge that wraps about the water. You get on your knees, trying to reach the parchment before it’s ruined.

Beyond the map, the lorelay pokes his head above the water, at first just his eyes and damp hair. He watches for a moment before reaching out to nudge the paper back towards you.

“Thanks,” you mutter and snatch it up the second it drifts into reach, handing it back to Jane.

“Thank goodness,” Jane breathes, shaking the parchment delicately.

Jake drifts closer to you, head lifting from the water. His hand extends, towards your arm, and he burbles something to you in a soft voice.

“Roxy said he likes your tattoos,” Jane points out.

“Good for him,” you say, tense, unsure what to do.

“Well. He did just save three hours of work, and they say it’s good luck to repay the kindness of magical creatures.”

You’re pretty sure the daily food offerings to this strange lake creature would already count towards that, but decide not to argue.

Jake is slow to approach, so much so you barely notice until his fingertips brush your wrist; they’re warm and slick to the touch, and it takes all your willpower not to jerk away.

His eyes find yours, holding for a moment before pulling your arm closer to examine your ink.

And because you’re not expecting him to grab you like that, you fucking overbalance right into the lake.

You drop headfirst in, your vision filling with bubbles from the displaced water and your startled gasp. Below you, you see Jake, his hands covering his mouth. Considering he pulled you the fuck in, yeah, you’d hope he’s a bit embarrassed.

Righting yourself, you break the surface and gasp. “Fuck’s sake,” you say, spitting out lake water.

Once you wipe the water from your eyes, you notice you’re not alone. The lorelay is circling you, his blunt teeth against his lower lip, the same expression of contrition you’d expect from a human on his face. As you kick your legs, keeping afloat, he moves a little closer; your shirt is soaked, and through the white fabric, your tattoos are easily visible.

You don’t expect to be touched. Jake is slow about it, saying something to you in his strange language before his hand wraps around one of your wrists again.

Part of you wants to shove him away and call for Jane’s help. But more of you keeps its fucking cool as Jake skates his finger against your tattoos with a fascinated gaze.

There are certain things that happen to your tattoos when they’re touched. It’s the same reason you keep the girls from getting too friendly with them and you avoid touching intensely arcane shit.
The aetheric aura or whatever it is gets caught in the ink, kept out of your body and dodging that seasickness that it sometimes causes.

The lorelay doesn’t seem to set that off. He puts two fingers against where your Pentacle is, the spokes graduating from steady ticks to a more fluid spinning motion, and you expect that narrow attention to exacerbate the problem.

But it doesn’t. Jake and you both look at the Sixth Pentacle of Mars, and it continues to tick away.

“Huh,” you say, at a loss, unsure if that means anything.

Now very close to you, Jake leans in, squinting at the movement. You prod one of the glowing spots on his arm, and he jerks back with a surprised noise, all his spots flashing yellow. “Hey. Easy, tiger.”

Even though he doesn’t understand, he gets it, and nods, backing off. He backs off mere inches, but it’s fine. More and more, you’re thinking he’s less dangerous and more diabolically curious about fucking everything.

He pats the rock face. You get the idea and start to climb out; Jane takes one of your hands and pulls while Jake shoves you upward. It’s pretty impressive, how he pushes you out of the lake. It’s also distracting given how his hands spread wide over your ass while he does.

Once you’re free, standing dripping on the grass, Jake sinks out of sight again.

“I think we’re making good progress with him,” Jane opines, gathering her things up, carefully cradling the map and assessing the damage. “Mutual curiosity can be a strong foundation.”

“Yeah…” You rub the back of your neck for a moment, waiting for the heat to leave your face before you take off your shirt and wring it out.

“Problem?” Jane asks.

“No. Just… I think he just copped a feel?” you admit. “It’s been a long time since someone’s grabbed my ass, but I’m pretty sure that’s what that was.”

Jane snorts. “Pfft. What ass?”

You let out a soft laugh, pulling your shirt back on. It’s a wrinkled mess but not dripping anymore at least. “Hey, not all of us were gifted with a premium backside cushion, Crocker.”

“Too right,” she says, grinning.

It’s not long after that your expedition has its first breakthrough.

It’s the evening, and you’re finishing up some firecooked kebabs for dinner while Jane works on her notes from the day. The sun is still setting, and it feels a little too early to be this relaxed, but you’re very gradually trying to get used to treating the camp like a temporary home-away-from-home rather than a workplace. Your cohorts’ constant reminders are helping with that.

There is something about the way the campfire slowly smolders into your eyes, afterimages
flicking every time you blink, the way the crack-pop of flames and the distant ocean tide braid together into this almost physical sensation in your head. It’s meditative. It’s like the salt bath. It’s nice.

It’s broken by Roxy finally emerging from her tent for the first time in about six hours. She stomps right past you without a glance or word, over to Jane. Taking Jane’s hand at the wrist, she slaps something into her palm.

Jane gasps, getting to her feet. “Oh my goodness. Okay! Oh, let me go…” She looks up at Roxy. “Is this one for me?”

Roxy nods.

Hooking the earring cuff onto the curve of her ear, Jane hurries down to the pier. By now, you are not at all surprised to have a loiterer nearby. As Jane steps onto the pier, Jake’s head breaks the water, and he hooks his hands on the edge of the stone, looking up with a hopeful expression that shifts to confusion when he sees there is no plate of food for him.

He’s like a stray cat you accidentally fed. You’re lucky there’s not ten more lorelays haunting the lake shore.

Instead, Jane puts her hand against her cuff on her ear, and when she speaks, the noise comes out in a flowing mix of syllables and chirps.

Jake beams, and immediately says something back, recognition bright in his eyes.

Next to you, Roxy throws both her hands into the air, fists clenched, her head falling back. “Yesssss,” she says. “I am the baddest witch this side of the prime meridian!”

Chapter End Notes

i tried to get all my terrible 3AM typos. if there are more.... i'll fix 'em later, ha.

FINALLY getting somewhere. /rubs hands together

95% of this was written to the Adventure Zone OST. highly rec for all your fic writing needs. "Reunion Tour" is such good shit, innit?

(oh and fun bonus since last time: by request, i made [an actual kink bingo card generator](#).
Initially, the idea was to leave the Acorn ready for a worst case scenario.

There was every chance the island would be a hostile environment. Unstable magic, wild things both magical and not, volcano putting off too much toxic air, any had been a possibility. So, for several days, the Acorn hung in the air, moored in place, only five anchor lines away from a fast getaway. There was even an enchanted blade just for that purpose, sitting in a glass case in the cockpit, guaranteed to take out each line with a single slice.

The time for that level of caution has passed now. You’re almost two weeks into your stay on the island, and you make the decision to ground the Acorn for now.

It’s something to do, something to focus on while your friends are fuckdeep in magical research. And you’re doing it all damn morning. Winching the airship down closer to the anchor, locking the ballast to keep it safe for the duration of its stay, roughly shoving the big wedge ‘feet’ under the hull to hold it steady-- there’s a list of shit to do before you can even think of the balloon.

Roxy brings you a canteen while you work. It’s cold in your hand, and you lift an eyebrow at her.

She waggles her fingers at you. “Just a cooling spell, don’t worry.” And she flicks your little work ponytail before heading back to camp.

After the break, you get back to it, starting to take the balloon down. It’s already sagging a bit after so long inflated without a refresh. Juggling between letting out more air and bodily pulling the balloon off-center, you get it down to the grass. The wide space makes it easier to fold and roll the thing up.

At least this island has a weird lack of fauna. You don’t feel too bad about leaving the balloon in the grass for now since nothing’s around to bother it. It takes almost two fucking hours to get it folded up and done, and as far as you’re concerned one the girls can levitate it into the storage space for you. You did your part.

The ship is more stable now and a little easier to climb into. You settle inside, enjoying the shade, and sit in the hull egress hatch while having a snack. From where you sit, you can overlook the camp and lake, the temple beyond.

You have no excuse for anyone sneaking up on you, except it’s barely noon and you’re already fucking tired. But as you sit with your head against the frame of the door, there’s the sound of approach, that swish of someone cutting through the grass.

It’s the lorelay. Jake. He’s out of the lake, standing on those long green legs. His tail loops across him, thrown over his shoulder, the long ribbon fin hanging down his back as he walks, the whole monstrosity wrapped around him like a toga.
It’s up pretty high on the list of strangest things you’ve seen. As you squint at him from behind your glasses, waiting for his visage to resolve into something less weird, he smiles and waves at you.

Hot on his heels is Jane, having a bit of a harder time with the tall grass, clutching her notebook. “Hang on, Jake. Jake! Oh goodness…” She reaches up, touching her ear, and… you’re not sure what verbage to use for suddenly lapsing into another species language through magical means.

Allspeak, you decide. She allspeaks, the sounds out of her mouth weirdly unsynched with her lips, some transformation of vocabulary happening before your eyes.

Jake jerks to a stop, and you watch him almost overbalance, stumbling two steps before he can shift his inertia enough to turn back and water-cricket-chirp in reply.

But his pace does slow. He has a very long gait, but is remarkably and almost comically graceless out of water. That’s to be expected, you guess.

Soon, he’s standing over you. He’s taller than you expected. “Hallow, Dirk,” he says, and a musical burble of words spills from his mouth.

“Uh. Hey,” you say.

Jane catches up, and you see the way she knuckles a stitch in her side, breathing a little hard. She allspeaks to Jake.

Jake’s face falls into a frown of confusing, and he points to you, and replies.

There is a back and forth you don’t follow. You try not to let it bother you, taking a sip of your water and letting your gaze slip away. It’s a weird thing to be used to, people talking around you.

His tail is so green. It’s not scaly like a fish, it’s definitely froglike, an inhumanely smooth expanse of bottle green skin. The fin that runs along his back and tail is darker, interspersed with even darker spines. The spines seem to hold his tail fin up, unlike all his glowy gold fins that hang under their own weight, each one making you think of the amphibious mix of a peacock feather and a lionfish fin. There’s a lot of them around his hips, kind of accenting the transition from brown to green.

It’s way too quiet. You look up and Jane is pointedly examining her notebook with exaggerated focus. Jake still looms, his head canted to the side, watching you.

Then he climbs past you, up into the airship, ducking his head to get inside.

Your first impulse is to follow him and make sure he doesn’t touch anything. It’s waylaid by your second impulse, to stare at Jane over the rim of your glasses.

She sighs, and walks up the stairs too, pausing to take your hand and help you to your feet. “I got him to understand that my earring lets me talk to him. He thought since you wear earrings, you would be able to talk to him too.” She sighs. “He’s a handful.”

“I’m getting that feeling, yeah,” you say, following them both into the cabin.

Jake has released his tail, and it drags behind him as he looks around. You nod to it. “So. He can walk?”

Jane takes the opportunity to sit on one of the bench seats, taking her glasses off and setting them
aside. “Yes, it’s pretty interesting, actually. He didn’t go for many walkabouts until we came since there wasn’t much interesting out of the water. But he *does* have legs and enough motor control to stand on them. And-- and this part is interesting, when he’s in the sun, he uses his tail to keep himself damp. It’s like a camel’s hump, it can hold all this water and keep him damp! Sort of like a reverse waterbreathing spell.”

You nod, and step over the tail as Jake wanders past to look at something else. “Cool.”

“I mentioned you were working on the airship today and he wanted to see it.” She rubs her face, pressing her fingers in against the apples of her cheeks and dragging out some weariness. “Marched right up.”

As you both talk, Jake plucks up Jane’s glasses from the edge of the table and puts them on his own face.

Jane is back on her feet in a flash. “No, no, put those down, I need those, I only have one backup, Jake. Jake. Oh, for gods’ sake.” Her hand flies to her ear, her other hand held out, fingers grasping meaningfully as she allspeaks that to Jake.

Jake freezes up, his body going oddly tense. He leans away from Jane, and his eyes flit past you, towards the door. You don’t know his language, but you know body language, and some things are universal: he’s going to bolt.

You take off your own glasses; they’re not for vision like Jane’s, just tinted to help with bright light and coated in some slightly reflective glaze that is meant to help throw off compulsions and mesmers. Unlike Jane and hers, you don’t *need* yours, and so hold them out by the legs, and wave the glasses at Jake. “Trade you.”

Again, Jake stills, but at least it doesn’t look like the stillness before a cat runs full tilt out of a room. He reaches out, and you pull the glasses back. “No. *Trade.*” You point to Jane’s glasses with your pinky. “Give me those.”

Communication barrier or not, he catches on quickly, nodding. He swaps you, taking your glasses and putting them on his face before just… ducking out of the cabin and back out onto the grass.

Not before waving to you. Okay.

Rather than chase after him, Jane lets out a huge sigh and puts her head on the table. When you place her glasses next to her, she lays her hand over them, and tucks them into her breastpocket.

“He’s just… *so* excited, Dirk,” she says, a slight whine to her voice. “And I can’t even be upset, I know I was much the same when we first arrived here. It’s very exciting, so he’s excited!”

“But a handful,” you supply.

“Or two.” She shuts her eyes. “I should go keep an eye on him. I don’t… think he’s used to, hm. Boundaries? I’ve asked about his family or other nereids, and he never answers. I mean, I asked what *he* calls himself, his species, and he didn’t know!”

“Leave it for now.” You squeeze her shoulder. “We still have time, and you aren’t going to crack this mystery wide open in just a few days. Do something else.”

Jane lets out a soft, considering noise, unconvinced.

“Or.” You grab one of the pillows from bench seat and nudge it against her head. “Up, Crocker.”
She lifts her head, and you slide the pillow into place. As she sinks back down, she lets out a content breath. “It’s nice and cool in here too,” she murmurs.

“I’ll go do some chores around camp. Make sure our guest doesn’t eat all our rations. Take your own advice and relax a bit.”

The way she just hums back at you has you pretty sure she isn’t going to be moving for a while, and you leave her there, quietly slipping out of the cabin.

Once again, Roxy is sequestered in her tent. She has another of your earrings, a little steel hoop out of the set you had spaced along the outer curve of your right ear. Another noble sacrifice to the cause, and Roxy was already tinkering with it.

There’s other things to do.

You only have a handful of drinks with you. Since liquids wrecked havoc on your weight limit and couldn’t be shrunk down with witchcraft, you’d all known you’d be drinking water once you arrived, either purified ocean water or rainwater. But morale demands you have something else on hand.

Roxy has two bottles of wine, one white, one red. Jane has dark cola, to your total lack of surprise; it’s one of her biggest vices. You split the difference between them; one bottle of Aperol and one of good sweet soda. You’re pragmatic.

You are trying to be conservative with the few treats you have, but when you check the ice box, you see two of Jane’s colas have already vanished and one of the bottles of wine is missing the equivalent of a generous glass full.

So, you mix the sweet soda and a two splashes of the Aperol, and silently bemoan the lack of real, actual ice.

Thus armed, you open up the typewriter and pull one of Jane’s notebooks closer to you at the table.

Having one copy of research notes was universally understood to be tempting fate with a risque outfit and blood red lips. Especially with the swift, sudden storms that passed over the island. One of your chores was typing up a copy of the girls’ findings and storing them for safekeeping.

You guess there aren’t ways to magically waterproof books. Seems like an arcane oversight.

It’s the kind of thing that barely feels like work to you, and it itches at you, the urge to do more, anything to pull your weight. But it also has to be done, and balancing that out in your head at least makes the weird guilt in your brain shut up for a while.

Roxy’s notes are still mostly lexicon work and not easily transcribed. Jane’s are more straightforward.
My catalog of Crocker Isle (BGN approval pending) has continued to be heavily lopsided in favor of the local flora. With the latest round of entries, being seven new species of shrubbery and undergrowth, three quite vibrantly pigmented lichen, and four more oversized freestanding flowers, we have broken thirty entries in the catalog. All of them are flora.

All but one. The nereid in the lake remains not only the sole example of land-dwelling fauna on this island, but the only specimen thereof. And I am unsure if I can make a strong argument for it as a land dweller!

Setting “Jake” and its oddities aside, because the nereid alone will undoubtedly be subject to several books of notes on its own, this trend reveals some troubling handicaps for this unique biome.

More flora will be added to the catalog. We’ve capped at 32 only because I ran out of pencils today and had to cut my excursion into the jungle short. There are more to find, both traditional-if-new flora and the specimens I am calling megaflora.

There are no natural pollinators to be found.

I am entertaining the idea of some sort of underground root system, a Crocker Isle (BGN a.p.) innovation that would compensate for this trouble, but already it holds about as much water as a rusty sieve. The flora still exhibit normal pollination tactics of magical flora around the world, the same level of low grade sentience. Beyond that, the groupings of flora are not consistent enough to indicate an unknown subsystem.

Some of it is troubling. Many species are heavily localized to a small area of the jungle. Single colonies surviving, and never mixing with their neighbors.

In an environment with the regular fare of pollinators and fauna, seeds would be spread and clusters would not be so concentrated.

We need to know how things got to this point. For that, I may need to cool my heels a bit and wait for Dr. Lalonde’s findings from the temple. Thankfully, I have other research projects to work on.

You’re working at a steady speed, pausing only to turn pages and take a sip of your drink.

There’s an interruption eventually, a now-familiar sound of someone screwing around in the water by the pier.

The splashing sound comes again, even more conspicuously noisy. You get to the end of your line before looking up.

As expected, Jake’s pretty much waiting for you. Leaning against the side of the pier with your tinted glasses on, he waves as soon as he has your attention. He pushes the glasses up, into his hair, and gives you a blatant wink.

Draining the rest of your glass, you decide you could use a break, and wander down the beach to the dock, your hands tucked into your pockets. It’s a slow stroll; you make him wait for you.

Since you’re barefoot, you step onto the lakebed, walking into the water until it laps at your legs, just under the hem of your shorts. “Did Rox teach you that?” you ask Jake. “The wink? Or was it
a wonk? Hard to tell from a distance.” And because why the fuck not, you wink back.

As if that was his cue, Jake pushes off the pier and over to you. It’s an amusing sight, the way he swims over, staying low in the water until it’s too shallow and he deigns to rise up to his feet.

It takes a lot of willpower not to take a step back to match his advance. He’s taller than you expected. He’s taller than you, in fact, when he stands at full height. You are really not used to anyone having your gangly ass beat, but the lorelay has a few inches on you.

It’s not enough that you’re almost toe to toe; he leans in, holding your eyes. Or, you realize, looking at them. Now you do lean back a little, clearing your throat. “Yeah, not a common color. Part of why I had the glasses, actually.” You nod at them, on top of Jake’s head. “You keepin’ them, or what?”

Oddly, he seems to follow some of that. He takes the glasses and puts them on, and… squints through them before letting out a sigh and handing them back to you. He says something, intent and almost annoyed, moving his hands with his words before trailing off.

You unbutton one of the big pockets on your shorts and slide them in here. “Thanks.”

Jake is still… close, you realize with a start. The past few times, he’s been intent on your tattoos, which you guess you can understand. Today, you’re rocking no sleeves in deference to the heat and all the airship work you had on your plate, every dark line and detail on display.

He’s not looking at them now. Just… kind of at you.

“What?” you ask eventually, his focus rubbing you the wrong way, like suede against the grain.

“Did you want food or something?”

“Food,” Jake repeats slowly, brow furrowing. That one he knows already. He shakes his head and says a few things, and then simply seems frustrated when you don’t understand. With a chirpy noise, he beckons to the pier, walking halfway before looking back.

The time when you worried he would try to drown you has passed. It’s not fear that flags your steps as you go and let Jake coax you to sit on the end of the dock. He sits next to you, cheated in towards you; his tail seems to make sitting like this a little awkward. It hangs off the edge, and moves languidly in the water, the finned tip occasionally breaking the surface to curl in the air.

Jake speaks, and it’s quieter now. Usually there’s something boisterous and gallant in his voice, quick and as excitable as Jane claims. But now, you lean in to hear him, even though you can’t make sense of it.

Cautiously, so you can see, he touches two fingers to your shoulder. You turn your arm, assuming he wants to see your ink. Instead, he traces the skin behind your elbow, then holds up his arm. His flair fins are there.

“Yeah, yeah,” you say, a little lost. “I’m not as pretty as you.”

“Pretty,” he echoes. Another one he’s picked up, probably from Roxy saying it so often. He points to your hand; you follow his gaze, confused, and he lets out a huff before taking you by the wrist and pulling your hand in.

You think he’s comparing? His fingers press against yours, lining up your hands. He tilts them this way and that. And just by dearth of being in this situation, you get the same feel for him. The texture of his skin is odd, less frictive than yours. No fingerprints, as far as you can tell. It’s like he’s wearing very form fitting emerald gloves. It doesn’t make a ton of sense; Jane was right, he
should have claws or stickiness or something going on. There isn’t even any webbing between his fingers, and that strikes you as shortsighted design.

You should probably be taking notes for Jane.

His grip shifts and he takes a firmer hold, saying something before bending over and doing something.

When he straightens, he’s tied something to you. A dark cord of braided fibers circumnavigates the bony notch of your wrist, terminating in a bar-and-ring clasp. But the ring is a big circle of stone, about the size of a dollar coin. It’s glassy stone, the same kind of orangey-gold of the volcanic glass in the temple. Much less brittle, though, with a broken piece of shell hooked through it acting as the bar. It’s all worn smooth to the point it feels soft against your skin.

The shell unhooks easily, slipping back through the ring. Stretching the bracelet out, you trace the braiding with a nail. It doesn’t look like normal fibers. Maybe he made it from something in the lake with tensile strength, like the kelp or straw-like plants against the lakebed.

“It’s… pretty,” you say. Way too pretty. You don’t know how to explain that to him. There’s a lot of complicated ideas to convey, so he knows he should keep it.

You’ve never had to explain that shit to anyone before because everyone just knows. It’s a fucking aetheric aura thing, people just look at you and know it as sure as if you had a metal crown welded to your head. Jane and Roxy said your lorelay pal was obscenely magical himself, so surely he’d know it too. Feel it, whatever is off about you.

You don’t know the frog-mer words for this.

Jake takes the bracelet from your lax fingers, turns your hand over again, and latches it back on. Your fingers feel tingly, your face hot, as you reach for the clasp again.

Jake’s hand presses yours flat, holds it down as he crickets at you. “Pretty.” He pats your hand over the bracelet.

You let out a breath about as steady as an elephant on a teetertotter. Of all the fucking words for him to pick up from Roxy. “Fine. Okay.”

Avoiding his gaze is turning into a coward’s game. When you finally glance up at him, he’s staring at you again, dark lips curled into a smile. This close, you can see the way his eyes flick here and there, taking in all your features as if there’s something interesting to see.

You nearly jerk your leg out of the lake when his tail loops around one ankle. Fuck, being on pins and needles this intensely is messing with you. He pats your arm quellingly.

“Not really used to this shit,” you mutter. “You’re just… really goddamn friendly, aren’t you. You know I’m not the leader, right, that’s Jane. There’s no reason to…” Jake listens, intent but uncomprehending. “Okay.”

You’re saved from making more of an ass of yourself by Roxy; you hear her footsteps and recognize the sound only a moment before she’s there, calling out in a tangle of chirps and flowing vowels.

Jake yelps, yellow glow flushing green in an instant, and with a sharp shift of his weight falls back into the water, cutting the surface like a knife and whipping his tail up before he’s gone. You wince, and grab your ankle instinctually.
Roxy hurries to the edge of the pier, and nearly topples in. You reach up, catch the back of her belt, and tug her back. “Aw, shit, I was only teasin’!” she despairs, looking at the lake as the ripples spiral outward, the only remnant of Jake’s presence. “That boy is jumpy as a treefrog, damn. Didn’t mean to scare him off.”

“Your damn firecracker nature at work, Rox,” you tell her mildly. “Got the charm finished, I see.”

“I did!” She drops down next to you, long legs folding up in front of her. Tugging her earlobe, the loop flashes in the sunlight. “I’m not a gold star artificer, but I can muddle through pretty good. The team back home could make a more efficient one, but it works.”

You lower your leg back down, swishing around idly. The warm water feels good against the sting. You’re not sure what you got caught on when Jake made his latest overdramatic getaway, but it’s already fading. “Nicely done. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled by all the questions you’re gonna pepper his hide with.”

“If Janey doesn’t strangle him before I get my chance,” she says with a smile.

“She’d have to catch him first,” you point out.

“Ha! Poor Janes.” Roxy pats her lap in a quick rhythm, humming. “Sooo. Tomorrow, I’m gonna get back to the temple stuff. Lots of weird shit to figure out there.”

“Right.” You expected as much.

“And…” Her smile fades. “So, I’m. Not an artificer, right? Like, you get that?”

Clearly this is going somewhere. You wait her out. Roxy only ever spins her wheels for so long before she bursts.

It takes less than three seconds for her to sigh explosively, heavily aggrieved. “I can’t make you a charm, Di-Stri. I was tryin’ to sort out the means to do it, but it’s a fuckin’ impossibility with the kit we hauled out here.”

Ah. “That’s fine.”

“It’s not, Dirk,” Roxy shoots back, weirdly outraged. She grabs your arm, turning in to look at you. “I tried real hard to figure out how to do it. Even thought of making you two pieces, one to power the charm, one to give you the spell, but that level of resonance is hard to nail down, and Allspeak spells are not cheap anyway.”

“Rox, fuckin’ relax,” you cut in before she can berate herself more or explain just how goddamn hard it is to make basic shit work for you. “I’m noble, it’s a pain in the ass, I understand. It’s not the first time I didn’t get to play with magic.”

“Yeah… I know. It just…” The bluster leaves her all at once, shoulders dropping. “Didn’t want this to be one’a those times.” She lapses into silence, but it doesn’t last long before she brightens again, her regretful frown flipping into a cheshire grin. “On the other hand, I dunno if you need it, Strider.” Her finger jabs your side. “You and Jakey are gettin’ along fine without it, aren’t’cha?” She jabs you some more. “Won’t be the first time your weird beanpole southern charm bewitched some poor stranger.”

You’re pretty sure it would be, actually, but decide to take the compliment. If you tuck your hand and its new bracelet a bit behind you, out of sight, that’s your own business. “You implyin’ the lorelay’s got a thing for me, Rox?”
“Lorelay,” Roxy teases, chuckling. “And, damn, Dirk, didn’t we all, once upon a time?”

“Naw, Rox, I think that was just you.”

She lets out an exasperated “Pfft,” sound, and bumps her shoulder amiably into yours.

Routine carries you through the rest of the day. Jane and Roxy talk about their plans for the next day while you take care of dinner. The sun sets, bringing with it a cool breeze across the lake.

You finish transcribing Jane’s journal, and upon shutting the book and putting the typewriter away, the weight of the day hangs heavily on your body. After the third time you yawn so widely you nearly lock your damn jaw, Jane suggests everyone turn in, and blows out the campfire as if it were a candle.

But even with the dense weariness in your muscles, you can’t sleep.

It’s almost uncomfortable, the dissonance that holds you just out of unconsciousness, like falling out of bed only to get caught in the damn sheets and tangled up, stuck in place. It feels like a shiver that just won’t give in and break over your skin, just the anticipation before it.

God, you’re tired.

The answer that eventually penetrates your sleepy irritation is magic buildup. You haven’t grounded yourself in a few days, and it could be keeping you up. You didn’t think you were that far along already, but it’s possible.

The tub’s in Roxy’s tent, though, and you’re not about to go wake her up just to take a bath. The ocean itself is a possibility, but it’s a fair walk from here and the idea of submerging in ice cold ocean water is about as appealing as rubbing lemon juice into a papercut.

Salt water has long been your preferred method for grounding and nullifying magic, but it’s far from the only option. It’s not even the most effective; dawn light has it beat by miles. The symbolism of a new beginning, a new cycle, would take all the build up energy clinging to your body and obliterate it.

Unfortunately, using dawn light requires meditating in the nude in view of said dawn, and that tends to lead to public indecency charges. There are special permits available to allow witches to perform those kind of rituals outside in the buff, but they’re not available to nobility.

You are nowhere near dawn, so the best bet’s to grab a stewpot and slip out of your tent on unsteady feet, hoping against hope you don’t accidentally wake the girls.

Running water is the best you could do at this hour. And a pot full of lake water would have to do the job.

Every once in a while, it strikes you that life is tragically fucking unfair.

The lake isn’t large enough for a full tide, but the water laps higher against the pier as you settle in, dropping heavily down. “Fuckin’ aetheric bullshit.” Lowering the pot into the water, you fill it and upend it over your head.
Four pots worth of water later and you’re thoroughly soaked. Flipping your hair out of your eyes, you look at your arms.

The sage barely rustles as you shake drops from your skin. The Pentacle ticks away. Neither are very active... and yet you still feel *charged*.

Consistent running water is what you need. Belatedly, you realize this would work better if you’d grabbed the bath jar and used it. The prospect of going back to grab it is... a lot. Instead, you shut your eyes and breathe.

You’re almost asleep sitting up, the warm water leeching tension out of you in degrees. But something touches your legs. Smooth, warm hands.

You blink out of the cloud you’re in, and find the lorelay floating near you, his fingers curled around you. You’ve never seen Jake at night before, and the difference is stark; without the sun’s constant glare, his golden luminescence is bright enough to reflect off the water, flickering in the ripples of the water. It’s hard to tear your gaze from, and you hope this isn’t going to be a wisp thing; your glasses are back at camp.

“You better not flip kelpie and try to drown me,” you tell him, barely more than a mumble.

Jake murmurs something back, and lifts one of your legs out of the water. His thumb presses, instantly finding the little puncture, and you wince at the sting.

“Fuck’s sake.” You tug against his grip and lower your foot back down. The air’s too damn cold against your wet skin, thanks. “You’re not packin’ any heat in those damn spines, are you? Slow toxin’s not the way I wanna go.”

The senseless cadence of Jake’s voice is unfairly fucking soothing, and your eyes shut again. His hands are warmer than the water where they pet your legs, wide over the skin above your knees.

That long-held shiver finally breaks loose across your body.

The steady stroke of slippery palms over you is really singularly affecting, and you feel like you’re a coin dropping into a fountain, dense and sinking. When Jake grabs your hips and pulls, you fall right into the water, would probably fall straight to the bottom if his arms weren’t secure, cupping right under your ass.

Your back presses firm to the stones behind you, your head leaning drowsily to rest against Jake’s. Through your eyelids, you can see the golden glow. “You... fuckin’ hit me with somethin’, didn’t you,” you half slur, working your hands up to clutch his shoulders.

That low cricket noise feels strange against your chest. It convinces you to open your eyes, though.

Jake’s face is very close to yours, his eyes wide, pupils huge. As confident as his arms are around you, none of it shows in his face, bewildered and flushed warm yellow. He shifts you, chirping something soft and reassuring as he tugs your legs up to loosely hook around his hips, one arm cupping your ass to hold you. His other arm grips the edge of the pier above your head.

The camp is not visible from here. The moon’s covered by a cloud. Everything feels muffled and distant. And you feel tucked away and hidden.

Some of the peacock fins cling to your pale skin, so transparent they seem like nodes of light stuck to you. Under Jake’s watchful gaze, you touch them, trusting him not to drop you as you explore. Using a nail to delicately lift one, you examine it. It’s not sticky like you assumed, just thick and
soft, molding to the shape of your fingertips with a lush, strange texture. As you rub it between your fingers, it brightens.


You can feel it when the tense restraint in Jake snaps like a cord, his body pressing you fully against the rock, mouth against your neck. A shocked groan knocks loose from your chest, and you renew your grip on his shoulders, as if he’d let you fall.

You are so tired and so pent up, everything is a hazy dream, weightlessness and heat thrumming through your blood and warmth soaking into your bones. It’s like a current, and you can’t pull out of it, just nudge Jake’s head until he returns his attention to your face.

Falling forward, you press your mouth to his, and feel him for still. He hum-chirps at you, and presses back, curiosity writ in the way he moves. You think he doesn’t know how this works, and are willing to teach him. He’s a skilled fucking student, letting you lead and parroting your movements back at you. As soon as you touch your tongue to his teeth, caught up in how weirdly human his mouth feels, the reins are pulled out of your unresisting grasp and he pushes your head back against the wall, licking into you.

For someone who’s probably never kissed anyone before, he’s gets the theory really damn fast. That, or you’re too tired to criticize, but that’d be a first for you.

It all tips out of control from there (assuming it was ever in control). Jake’s fingers flex against your ass, close to skin on skin through the water-soaked fabric of your boxers, and you hitch against him without meaning to. He frots back, driven forward with a few powerful strokes of his tail. You can feel it brushing against your heels, the strength in his muscles impressive even through how distracted you suddenly are. He’s impressive, christ.

If this is a dream, it’s a pretty fucking great one, you decide, moaning into his mouth. Eventually it feels like drowning and you tear your mouth away to gasp. “Shit-- Jake, oh fuck…”

He lets go of the pier to dig his fingers into your hair, pulling you in. Your lips press to a scattering of glowing spots on his shoulder, and you nudge your tongue against his skin, feeling it like a rush up your spine.

Against the torrent of attention, you come, sensation cresting and leaving you undone and lax in Jake’s arms, aftershocks rippling through you. One breath and the next, you’re just so…

There’s lips against your temple. A long sigh. An answering chirp.

You’re on the edge of sleep again when you’re bodily lifted and set up onto the pier. The air is cold and way less appealing than the water. “The hell,” you manage, rubbing your face.

Jake braces his hands on either side of you, hauling himself up almost completely out of the lake. Arms tense, he leans in to kiss you, a swift peck before he overbalances and sinks back down.

Eventually the disturbance in the water eases, the light beneath fading, and you’re left there, panting and sated and dazed.

“Right,” you breathe, and lay back on the dock, arm thrown over your eyes, resolving to haul yourself back to bed.

Just as soon as your legs start working again.
**chapter content:** aphrodisiac, impaired consent.

i think that’s all for this one???? starting off easy-peasy.
One morning, Jane’s earring goes missing.

To say she’s upset is an understatement. Jane spends the morning tearing through her room, then Roxy, and then yours despite the fact the girls don’t tend to go into your tent. Roxy hovers with a lot of sarcastic, “Well, where’s the last place you saw it,” remarks that are just a little too sharp to be jokes. She hides it well, but you can tell Roxy’s annoyed that the careful triumph of wayward artificing was lost within a week.

“Can’t Jane borrow yours,” you ask from the entryway, watching them search Jane’s room for the third time.

“Uh, no,” Roxy says, then takes a look at you and subsides a little. “Talismans attune to their wearer. Like, really well made, sturdy ones, you can totally purify them and give ‘em to someone new, but these are juryrigged charms at best.”

“I know I put it on my bedside table. I do it every night! Right next to my glasses,” Jane says, on her hands and knees, peeling up a section of bamboo mat near her bed to check the grass underneath.

Roxy sighs and pats Jane’s hair. “I know, Janey. Look, if it doesn’t turn up, Dirk will donate another earring and I’ll make another one.”

“I’m not the sort of person who just misplaces things,” Jane protests, sitting back on her heels and rubbing her face. “Fine. I’ll look again later. Let’s… let’s get to work.”

The rest of the day is a little tense. A minor setback that pops the exuberant atmosphere around the camp.

It passes like a cloud before the sun the next morning, when the earring reappears right back on her table in a little puddle of water.

Roxy crows with laughter when Jane shares this, slapping her thigh. “Holy shit, that’s adorable. Why’d you think he nabbed it? ‘Cause it’s a shiny thing? Maybe he collects shit.”

Jane rinses the earring off with a few splashes from her canteen and hooks the cuff back onto her ear. “If that was the case, I doubt he’d return it. He’s aware that they give us the Allspeak charm. I would posit Jake wanted to try the charm out and didn’t know it’d be attuned to me.”

“Amazing,” Roxy says. She has an extra plate of food in her hands, but instead of going down to the pier, she stands at the edge of the canopy and cups one hand around her mouth to shout in allspeak down to the lake.

It’s not a surprise at all when Jake hauls his long body out of the water. It’s a short walk, and the sun isn’t high yet, so his tail just trails behind him. It does interesting things to his posture, the way he leans so far forward as he pulls his own weight along. On a human, it’d look hunched and strange. On him, it just emphasizes the tall peak of his spine fins as they arch up above him and bounce slightly in the air with his long strides.

Jake grins at Roxy as he gets close and takes the plate of mainland fruit and toast from her,
looking at it curiously. She says a few things to him, and his spots go yellow-green as he nods.

The knife in your hand stills, plum half-cut, as Jake folds his body up on the other side of the firepit and he sits on the mat. His tail wraps around his entire body, the end fin flicking catlike in the air. He picks up a pink-red apple and just rolls it between his hands.

When his eyes finally flick to yours, it’s like a physical strike, and your breath catches in your chest.

Two nights ago… something happened. Or, you think it did? You’re agonizingly uncertain, your head filled with disjointed memories of sensation and phosphorescence, and-- a lot of stuff that makes it hard to look directly at Jake and just as hard to look away. But the images and sensations are fleeting, like the dissolving effects of a dream, and…

He just quirks his head at you and waves a few of his fingers that aren’t preoccupied with the culinary tribute you all have gotten used to giving him.

You sink further back in the bucket of your chair and try not to be a fucking weirdo about a wet dream, jesus dickin christ.

Unfortunately for you and the perpetual bullshit of your life, Jane elects to go see to her catalog of the jungle today rather than work with Jake. “I’ve found some more of the basalt ruins. I’m going to try and take some rubbings for Roxy.”

“You know how I love th’ rubs, Janes,” Roxy says, grinning at her lascivious nonsense. “Speaking of, I’m off too. Things to translate, ancient secrets to discover, and other-- other stuff to do.”

“So it’s going well?” Jane asks.

“Yeah, of course.” She waggles her fingers in farewell. “Don’t wait up for me, I’ve got all the science and arcana to do.”

You get a lightning strike of a kiss on the temple from Roxy before she leaves for the southern path and a softer peck on the hair from Jane as she heads out, though not before waving to Jake and presumably saying goodbye.

The awkwardness of being left alone without a hell of a lot to do with the magical creature you’re developing a thing for is incredible.

Jake eats placidly, an utterly perfect guest. When you go to grab the shovel, intending to smother the fire, he hops to his feet and chirps at you. Holding his palms over the fire, he just shakes water from his hands, pouring water from some unseen place until all that’s left is the dying sizzle of water on the coals.

It’s the first time you’ve seen him do magic. He flashes you a smile, expectant.

“Thanks,” you mumble. “Kinda ruined those coals, but that’s fine.”

Jake’s smile fades and his tail lashes.

“Well, anyway,” you say. You can’t get over how tall he is. He’s just a big frog man amalgamation who gives you the almost unique sensation of looking up at someone when he bothers to stand up straight. It gets under your skin and you don’t want to be caught itching, fuck knows. “Hey, did… did we…” He leans in a little, as if you hear you better, and you realize how fucking pointless this is with a rush of pure, real frustration. “Shit, you aren’t going to understand anyway. Nevermind.”
You probably just need to get laid. Shame that’s not really an option out here.

You pull on your shoes and elect to go find something to do with the day.

You’re not terribly shocked when Jake loops his tail around himself and trails you through the grass.

The aimless meander you had carefully planned your day around is knocked off course by Jake. He’s a very distracting shadow, curious and distracting and attentive to everything you do. As you pick through your loose checkup routine, he’s an audience, and it brings an awkward flush to your neck as you try to focus despite his hovering.

When you kneel down to get under the airship to check on the ballast and the anchor lines, you’re shaded from the sun by the lorelay’s proximity. It’s impossible to forget he’s there, watching you.

After your rounds and finding everything in order, you wipe sweat from your brow and narrow your eyes at him, waiting for him to fucking do something other than stare at you. Try to steal your glasses again or demand a look around the ship or just shove you against the side of it and put his tongue in your mouth, anything.

He stares back at you, his fingers joined loosely together in front of him, something hesitant in his bearing, in the way he rocks from foot to foot.

“I’m not doing anything interesting,” you mutter. “Don’t much see what you’re getting out of ogling me all day.”

When you reach up to brush your hair out of your eyes, Jake’s eyes follow it, a grin spreading over his face. The bracelet glints in the sun and the warmth that floods your face is more intense than the afternoon heat.

He catches your wrist before you can surreptitiously shove your hand in your pocket, and tugs, making coaxing cricket noises and saying your name entreatingly.

“What?”

Letting go, he waves across the field, towards the northern edge of the lake, where the jungle spills out close to the cliff face. “Dirk. Come, pleassse,” he says, words a little weirdly spaced but clearly spoken. More picked up from the girls, you guess.

You sigh and nod. “Okay, fine. Lead on.”

The northern side of the lake is a little harder to traverse than the rest of it. The flat plateau that circles most of the lake is broken up by invasive tree roots and hanging branches and vines. A few even lean far out over the water; the natural springboard is tempting, actually. If your guide wasn’t an increasingly kleptomanic lake creature, you’d take off your shoes and go for a dive.

Instead, you follow him along, climbing over anything in your way to keep up. Ahead, you can hear the waterfall that comes down from a higher slope and feeds into the lake. Definitely worth remembering.

Before you reach it, Jake stops at a tree, and points at it. When you’re unsure what he wants, he
lets out this huff, and walks closer, reaching up to grab hold of a fruit dangling from the tree and twisting it loose.

What he hands you is a cluster of five angular fruits, all bunched around a single severed stalk. You take them gingerly and look them over. They’re a little like starfruit, but rich red instead of yellow.

Taking the knife off your belt, you cut one open. Inside is a spongy, firm outer wall made of neat sections surrounding a much darker, almost maroon pod. It’s not familiar at all and you frown at it.

Leaning in to look, Jake chirps inquiringly at you. You point to the outer part. “Yes?” Then, to the inner pod. “Or, yes?”

Jake nods quickly. “Yesss, yes.” Which you take to mean both parts are probably edible? Hopefully.

The spongey part is thick with a lot of juice that bursts over your tongue as you chew it. It’s tart, but tastes more like fresh water than anything. The pod has a much more dramatic flavor, breaking to chalky pieces against your teeth and turning into a thick cream against your tongue. It’s a weird floral taste, but almost fermented, leaving a slight chemical aftertaste. You can’t help but be reminded of fruit alcohols, rum especially.

“Holy shit,” you say, swallowing. “Provided this doesn’t kill me, it’s pretty fucking good.”

Jake grins, apparently picking up on the awe in your tone, and catches your hand again, pulling you along.

You get handed more fruit. A dark purple, dense fruit that turns out to be some obvious cousin to the persimmon, albeit with bigger, irritatingly inedible seeds inside. A handful of lemon-yellow berries that are incredibly chewy and leave stains on your hands. A red, starchy banana that is more savory than anything, but really filling.

The tree closest to the waterfall has great big pods dangling from its branches. Jake walks laps around the tree, eyes on the ground, nudging some of the fallen pods and wrinkling his nose in disapproval. You can smell them, though, and it catches on the edges of your memory, so close to being familiar.

You watch as Jake tries to reach one of the pods; most have green rinds, but Jake is clearly trying to grab one that looks aged, red-brown and wrinkled. It’s just beyond the grasp of his fingers.

“She should I find a stick or something?” You’re getting used to talking to him despite the language barrier. Every time you do, it catches his attention.

This time, he looks between you and the pod a few times before saying something intently and marching over to you.

He shrugs his tail off his shoulders, letting it fall heavy on the grass, and bends over to lift you clean off the fucking ground.

The gasp-yelp you let out is really fucking undignified, and you recoil so much, you expect to bring the both of you down to the ground, but Jake holds steady, cricketing at you as he affirms his grip, hands clutching tight to the top of your calves, right under your ass.

“What the hell,” you manage, bracing on his shoulders in the hopes he won’t drop you.

Chirp-chirp, goes Jake, somehow managing to sound a little smug as he carries you over to the
tree. He jerks his head upward, and just holds you there like you don’t weigh anything. It’s a singularly new experience, that’s for damn sure.

“Just a heads up,” you tell him as you reluctantly let go of his shoulders and reach for the reddish pod. “You wanna do this to me, that’s fine, but if you do it to the girls, they can and probably will hex the shit out of you.”

But you grab the pod and twist it loose. Patting Jake’s shoulder, you wait to be put down.

His head is tipped back to look at you, and you’re close enough to see the slow shift of color in his face, the gold that seeps into his spots one by one. There’s a curve to his lips, and you swear you can feel his thumb press in a little, a tiny bit of pressure that makes warmth stir in your belly.

He puts you down, and you stagger back two feet, leaning on the tree. You keep your eyes on the pod in your hands, clearing your throat. “Don’t know what that was about but this thing better be worth it,” you say before cutting the pod open.

Inside, you find a mush of soft-looking pale clumps that don’t look that appetizing but smell great. You put your knife away and cradle the pod over your arm, pulling one of the clumps out.

The soft fruit is thick and almost buttery on your tongue, and you inelegantly pull it off from the hard seed-thing in the middle, spitting the dark pit back onto your palm. The rest rolls around your mouth as you frown; it’s so fucking familiar.

It’s chocolate, you realize. Or, cacao or whatever it’s called before it’s chocolate. The taste is there, faint but immediately recognizable once you know what it is. You eat another one to be sure. “Wow,” you breathe. “Chocolate. Island proto-chocolate.” It tastes really good, and you already want to get another pod off the tree. “This is incredible. If I were a young debutante, I’d be seriously wooed right now.”

Jake’s smile is wide and happy, and you look away, back down at the cacao pod.

After you glut yourself on another four cacao fruits, you take off your jacket and use it as a makeshift basket to hold as much fruit as you can carry. Between the two of you, you bring plenty back to the camp. As long as you don’t come down with food poisoning in the next few hours, you’ll add them to your food stores. It’ll help in the long run.

Making a nuisance of himself while you make lunch for the both of you, Jake tries and fails to sit in the papasan, knocking the chair and himself over. The look of utter betrayal he shoots the chair has you hiding your laughter.

It rains briefly, and Jake stands out in the sudden, thick downpour, letting it dampen his skin, spots lighting up cheerfully as it does.

Once the clouds pass, you set off to the old village ruins for lack of anything else to do. Jake follows you again.

The ruins are still and calm, completely empty. You search through them, trying to find any sign of the people who lived here before, only to come up empty handed. There’s no indication of habitation outside the ruins themselves. It seems strange to you.

While you pick your way through, Jake finds places to stand, out of your way but observant, and always moving with you as you go. Sometimes, he speaks, a warm tumble of unfamiliar sounds filling the silence between you. It’s nice. Companionable.

It’s a really nice day, and you try not to let the feeling sour as you anticipate the other shoe to
When you head back to camp, you keep glancing at Jake, and wish you could tell him you had a good time. But the distance is there, impassable, and you swallow it down with more than a little bitterness.

The good mood carries you through the day into the evening. There’s a lightness that’s taken hold of you, like effervescence in your bones. The girls had wanted you to relax and from what you’ve read on the subject, this might be what it feels like. You might have to do some empirical observation work of your own to be certain. Maybe a long form study.

Jake eventually starts to look a bit dry and gives you a reassuring chirp before he leaves for the lake. Given he spent most of the day out of the water, you assume he needs a good soak.

It gives you time to get the fire going again and stew started. Break out Roxy’s record player and set it up. As the sun goes down, you work through another glass of soda and liquor, stirring the cast iron pot, listening to the brassy tunes Roxy snuck onto the Acorn. It’s been days since you cared about the contraband she brought aboard.

It’s set to be a nice dinner, maybe with some surprise fruit desserts from your haul.

The sun sets, the sliver of moon cutting into the sky. Jake lopes his way back up, hair wet, skin glistening with a healthier sheen, and nearly sticks his face into the stewpot, nostrils flaring. You nudge him back before he burns himself. “What, now we’re feeding you dinner too?” You point to the bit of mat closest to the grass. “Sit and wait.”

He folds himself up again, but you catch him stealing one of the last pieces of bread from the corner of his eye. You let it slide since he carried about half the fruit back to camp for you.

Your intention is to wait for the girls before serving up dinner.

But neither of them show, even as night truly settles around the camp. You have music and dessert and the most involved meal you can make this far from an actual kitchen, and you are missing your magicians.

The sky has bled out its color and gone truly dark and starry. You pace around the canopy, lighting the lamps with a long match. When you’re done, you look out towards the southern path, then north towards the jungle.

“This is horseshit,” you inform Jake severely.

He looks up from the bowl of stew you relented and gave him. He’s navigating spoon use like a champ. All his little peacock fins are bright, shifting from lurid green to gold and back through the gradient as he eats. The look he gives you is sympathetic, as is the slow tone he replies in, more comforting incomprehensible burbling.

He also holds out his bowl with a hopeful look.

You let out a long sigh from your nose. “Fine. But you’re going to have to help if you’re going to keep eating our rations.” Holding up you hands, you make a wiggly gesture. “There’s fish in the lake, right? Fish?” You try to mimic gills, your fingers fanned against your neck, then point to the
Jake’s lips quirk up, and he gives you that cute headtilt again before nodding. “Fisssh.” He plucks at his tail, flushing the fin, and does the same wiggly hand gesture again, then a thumbs up. “Yesss. Eassy.”

“This place is gonna turn into a veritable trip to the Sunday bazaar at this rate,” you murmur approvingly. So far, you’ve done a decent job of not getting poisoned on this weird island. It’s hard not to consider all it has to offer a nice bonus.

You ladle out more stew for him and finally a bowl for yourself, unwilling to wait any longer.

And thanks to the Arcane Law of Linear Causality, you’re blowing the steam away from your first spoonful as Roxy returns to camp.

“Where’ve you been,” you ask before you can stop yourself.

“Yikes, Mom, chill. I said I’d be gone a while, didn’t I?” She tucks her hair behind her ears and sniffs the stew. “This smells awesome.”

“By now the vegetables have probably disintegrated,” you tell her, handing over a bowl and the ladle.

“Dang, what, did you get caught out in the rain or something?” Roxy steals your chair, then hops right back out of it. “Why’s the papachair wet?” Jake studiously looks down at his bowl, biting his lip. She notices immediately and pokes his shoulder. “Jake the pretty frog boy, ruiner of linens.” She lapses into Allspeak, and the conversation slides out of your grasp.

While they catch up, Jane finally returns from the jungle. As she steps into the light, you double take at her. “The hell happened?”

Jane’s face is smudged with vibrant, chalky smears of blue and violet. Dust clings to her dark hair, making hers look even more dramatic than Roxy’s pink ‘do. Her clothes are similarly colored, and she looks palpably exhausted.

“Let’s call it a run-in with the local flora and please, please leave it at that for now.”

“You look like you got mugged by a swarm of pixies,” Roxy says, clearly thrilled.

Jane sits down on the bamboo mat, and takes the bowl you dish out for her gratefully. “There are perils to my work. Not all of us have an enormous empty temple to explore. I’m doing my best to find all the basalt ruins and eventually their origin.”


“He can be so cagey about things. Thrilled to ask a million questions about us, but it’s like the gods forbade him from answering any.” Despite her complaints, she settles her bowl on her lap, reaching a hand up to her ear and slipping into Allspeak. Before long, Roxy finishes up her dinner and does the same, a little triangle of magical dialogue forming around the campfire.

You finish your drink and excuse yourself, deciding to take a walk.

There’s just enough moonlight to light your way as you pass beyond the reach of the flickering firelight. Normally, the idea of having a late night stroll through a strange, foreign place would be the kind of idea that gets a man killed, but you’ve long gotten used to the quiet desolation of Frog Island.
You retrace the steps from the day, back over to the scattering of fruit trees that Jake showed you. The dark persimmons are easy to reach, and you help yourself, using your knife to quarter one.

You are used to standing apart from much of the world. It’s not so much that you’re holding it against Jane and Roxy. You’re a goddamn adult and, despite how close you are to them both, at the end of the day, you’re a coworker and professional. Begrudging them their projects would be childish, especially since they took you along with them on this expedition.

You’re not upset. Just… tired. Resigned. Trying not to feel like a petulant kid not invited to the sleepover.

After cleaning the pit of the persimmon with your teeth, you launch it at the lake, gratified when it skips three times before plopping under the water.

Further along, past the trees, you stand and admire the waterfalls for a while. They fall from somewhere further up the mountain, below the spout of the volcano. The biggest one is a heavy crash of water pounding down onto the rocks below and streaming into the lake. There are others, though, and you consider them, thinking distinctly of the powers of running water and the growing restlessness in your skin. Wonder if they’d be warm. That’d feel incredible.

The soothing white noise of the waterfalls are broken by a wolf whistle. You turn back towards the field, expecting Roxy on your heels. There’s another one, even louder, and you turn to the lake.

Jake. Of course. He’s hanging onto the rockface, body slightly lifted out of the lake, fingers against his mouth. Once he has your attention, he waves. “Hello, Dirk.”

“Figured you would be bonding with the girls,” you tell him as you walk to the ledge and crouch down. “You spent all day with me. I’m not interesting enough for you to keep shadowing me.”

He ignores your talking with the same benign detachment you pull on him. Slipping back into the lake, he pushes off, backing away from the rockface and beckoning you with both hands. “Come, Dirk.”

“Come where?”

Jake opens his mouth, and shuts it, frowning. Lowering his face into the water, he blows out puff of air, annoyed bubbles breaking the surface before he lifts himself again. “Come.” And he make a flat plane with his hand, sweeps it underwater, and out again. He pats his back, then beckons you again. “Dirk, here.”

“Bossy,” you remark, and sit on the edge above the water. Taking off your boots and socks, you lower your legs, and find they just barely skim the surface. Jake swims closer, holding out both his hands and grasping the air with his fingers.

It feels familiar.

You shake your head, and pull your shirt off, setting it with your boots. Bracing yourself, you mutter, “You better not go feral on me now.”

His hands are there to guide you in, weirdly solicitous, cupping your elbows and drawing you away from the shore. “I can swim,” you remind him tartly.

He mimes with his fingers, speaking intently to you. You watch his hands, in and out of the water, and get it. Diving. You nod, and Jake grins, turning and patting his back.
Climbing onto the lorelay’s back and letting him take you somewhere sounds really fucking unwise. You don’t have personal experience in these things, but you do know this is almost exactly how kelpies get you, seducing idiots onto their backs and drowning them.

But the problem is it’s Jake, and he wants to take you somewhere, and there is a small part of you that wants to share something, something between the two of you, something the witches aren’t privy to.

It’s not worth the potential for sudden watery death.

Knowing that doesn’t keep you from cautiously touching his shoulders. “I can’t hold my breath forever,” you say, trying not to let the fear into your voice.

Jake looks over his shoulder at you and chirps, taking your wrist and pulling you in. His spine fin bends against you, and your arm fits around his shoulder. Holding you firmly, he taps your knuckles against his chest. “Easssy.”

“Fine.” You drift closer, until you’re against his back, and hold on. If your weight against his fins bothers him, he doesn’t show it, just bobs up and down in the water before leaning forward.

You take a breath, and are submerged.

The last time you were in the lake, it was under the sharp light of day, and the world was a murky dreamland around you.

This time, the only light you have is the gold glow Jake puts off. Everything else is dark as pitch. Even the light radiating from him seems immediately swallowed. If he can see under here, it’s a miracle because you can’t see a damn thing.

You stop looking, instead pressing your face against his shoulder, holding on and feeling the slipstream rush through the water, the powerful strokes of his tail, and focusing on that.

Right on the edge of needing a breath, you break surface. Taking a gasping breath, you open your eyes.

It’s… even more fucking pitch black. There is the slightest glimmer of Jake’s luminescence catching on wet surfaces, but none of it resolves into actual vision.

You can stand, though, and drop off his back, getting slowly to your feet. Even if you can’t see, there’s a feeling of enclosure here. And there are no stars above you.

There is a small glass phial in your pocket. There is, in fact, always one such phial in your pocket. It’s too maddeningly useful not to have it on hand.

You take it out and shake it violently, feeling the contents click and crack, the delicate enclosed sphere inside breaking open. The contents mix together, and the magelight activates, starburst blue light filling the space around you.

As it illuminates the area, you find yourself in a watery alcove. Half the floor is dark lakewater, the only visible entrance. The rest is stone, and you pull yourself free of the water, up into the cave.

It’s not a huge space. Maybe twice the size of your tent back at camp, with a low uneven ceiling and the telltale drip of water against the wet stone. You walk carefully, aware of how rough it feels under your feet.
Lifting your light higher, you can see what’s here.

The cave is full of stuff. It takes a moment for your eyes to adjust, but the vague shadowy shapes turn into a collection of detritus and old things. From the middle of the alcove, you can recognize the remnants of warped wooden furniture, corroded metal and glass lamps, ruined paintings in rotten frames. A waterlogged tapestry takes up half the available floor, reds and blacks and browns bled together, the woven image just a smudge.

There’s a bookcase. You walk closer and pick up one of the books. It’s a drenched, solid mass of wood pulp, the pages sealed together, the covers unreadable.

You swallow past a tight feeling in your throat and return the book to its brethren, careful not to disturb it further.

It smells like a library after a hurricane, and looks worse. Your fingertips trace the shape of things. The ornate carvings worked into old bedposts and chairs are rough-hewn. The grain of the wood is splitting from age and water damage.

It doesn’t take long before you realize nothing is salvageable here. Which, you think, wasn’t the point anyway.

With no small amount of reticence, you turn back.

Jake’s not facing you, like you expected. He sits on the edge of the water, his feet submerged. His color’s faded to a dreary green, and his shoulders are sloped low, head bowed. He looks a universe away from the boisterous presumptuous creature you spent most of your day with, the contrast enough to be painful.

Jane had said. She’d asked Jake about others like him.

The answer hasn’t really hit you until now.

You sit next you him, your leg pressing against his. He looks askance at you, then back down at the water.

“You’re alone, aren’t you,” you ask quietly.

Even if the words don’t make sense to him, your tone clearly does. He bends further forward, eyes squeezed shut, a juttering, terrible breath rushing out of him. When he inhales again, it sounds like a quiet sob.

You put your arms around him, and he leans back into you, shoulders shaking, his face a rictus of sorrow as he lets out little keening cries.

His tail curls around you, and you reach down to pull the great fucking heavy thing up, into your lap; you avoid the pointed spines, knowing they’re some manner of bad deal. One palm rubs up and down the thick side of his green, smooth skin.

The last fin of his tail loops around your leg, and more of his weight sinks into your side.

“It’s fine,” you whisper, worthless but desperate to comfort him. “Hey, you’re fine. You’re not alone now. It’s okay.”

Jake shivers with a warbling keen, and you pull him closer.
When you get back, it’s late. The moon is at its apex, and a chill is starting to cut through the air, coming in from the ocean.

Jake boosts you out of the water, onto the dock. You shudder, and fold your arms around yourself. The lake’s much warmer than the air, and the temptation to jump right back in is strong, to hell with shit like a decent night’s sleep.

For once, Jake doesn’t stay long. You look back at him, holding his bright gaze for a long moment. He’s the one who relents, ducking his head and letting out a watery chirp you easily translate into *goodnight* before pushing off.

You watch him swim away, the way his fins glow before they sink too far and fade into the dark shroud of the lake.

At camp, the girls are still awake. Roxy’s wine bottle is open between them, and Jane’s hair is damp; she must’ve taken a bath, washed all the pollen off her. They’re both working by lamplight, bent over opposite sides of the table and writing in their journals.

Roxy spots your approach and grins. “Look what the catfish dragged in! How was your little date?”

“Shut up,” you say. “Listen. I know why the ruins seem picked clean.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a reminder, I'm @callmearturus on Tumblr. I have a #twycc tag where I'm collecting all the posts related to this AU. That includes a lot of incredible art, like oh my god. There's so much. Five arts just since last chapter!

I wanna highlight this one, just for people who might have problems picturing our frogboi. It's probably the closest I've seen to my own mental image of him.
there's a stirring feeling of worry in you whenever you let yourself think about it. So, you try not to.

Also: swimwear. You didn’t bring swimwear.

That does not stop Roxy from stripping down to her brassiere and underwear, and taking a running leap into the lake, sending up a tidal wave of a splash.

You are not sure what inspired her. Jake, Roxy, and Jane were talking fairly calmly over breakfast one moment, and the next thing you know, there’s a witch hurtling into the lake with a lorelay bounding along on her heels.

“The hell,” you say mildly from your chair. Your leg propped on your knee is blocking the view, so you sit up and shield your eyes with a hand, peering after them.

“Jake asked what a cannonball was,” Jane explains, covering her face with a hand.

From the lake, Roxy yells both your names while Jake pulls her up out of the water.

“I didn’t bring anything to swim in,” Jane whispers fiercely to you.

Normally you make an effort to be on Jane’s side, but not today. “Neither did I. I just have a makeshift drying rack of waterlogged clothes. It’s fine, Crocker. C’mon,” you say, and leisurely make your way down to the pier.

Roxy has absolutely no compunctions about being in almost nothing. When you reach them, she’s too busy climbing onto Jake’s legs, her feet on his thighs, holding his hands tightly. “Don’t drop me, Jakester, I swear to god.” She laughs, bright and high-pitched. “Oh shit, I can’t allspeak like
this. I hope he knows how to count to three by now.

“Three?” Jake repeats.

“Oh, great. Yeah, three. One, two,” and the three is lost in Roxy’s shriek as she launches off, crashing into the water with an even bigger splash. After a moment, she resurfaces, spitting up a mouthful of water. “Owwww, ow ow, bellyflopped. Backflopped. Whatever. All my ribs broke, I’m dying.” She floats on her back, whining loudly.

Jake turns to you and makes grabby hands, grinning.

“I’ll pass. You’ve ruined enough of my clothes,” you say, and gesture to one of the last sets of clothes you have that doesn’t need to hang dry. Most of your shit is strung over the support lines around the tents and canopy, it’s ridiculous.

And because he’s a son of a bitch, Jake shoves you unceremoniously into the lake.

When you right yourself enough to kick off the lakebed and pop back up, Roxy is applauding, and Jake is tapping his fingers together in that way he thinks is cute enough to absolve him of all the shit he does.

“God fuckin’ dammit,” you mutter, swimming in close and waving your hand up at Jake. “Come on.”

He pulls you up, still grinning.

Upon getting your footing, you find Jane standing nearby, her fists planted on her hips. “Well, that took no time at all.”

“I was attacked,” you inform her. You’re soaked now, your clothes clinging to your body uncomfortably. Fuck it. You pull them off, ignoring Jane’s sharp gasp, Roxy’s wolfwhistle, and Jake’s immediate secondary wolfwhistle. “Rox, stop teaching him that shit!”

“I’m educating him on imperative, important forms of human communication, you fuckin’ square.”

There was a plan for the day, you’re sure. It’s postponed now as even Jane fiddles with the buttons of her shirt, twisting half away from everyone as she joins the naked jamboree. The way she fidgets draws Jake’s gaze, his brow furrowed. You step into his line of sight and shake your head at him. Not everyone can have his lack of compunctions about nudity.

To your relief, he doesn’t press, and soon Jane’s clothes are neatly folded on the dock as she hops in wearing just her camisole and slip. “I forgot how warm the lake is! This is lovely,” she says.

As the designated valet for this venture, you eventually get sent back to the tent to gather important supplies. Water, one of Jane’s dark colas, and the starfruit with the rich paste inside. You sit at the edge, watching Jane and Roxy swim idly around.

Jake circles around Roxy, the two of them talking in intent tones. She’s seems contemplative about what she’s hearing.

Stilling, Jake drifts in close, swiftly enough that Roxy leans back a bit in turn before relaxing. She nods to him.

With two fingers, he touches her lips, a moment of lingering contact before he abruptly flings himself underwater, swimming a lap around the dock before resurfacing a few feet away.
“Wow,” Roxy says, reaching up and curling a hand around her throat. “Weird.”

“Weird, how?” Jane asks, leaning in to squint at her.

Jake looks faintly anxious, chirping with his mouth just below the water, bubbly and fragmented. He glances up at you, as if for support.

“What are we doing,” you ask loudly.

“Research!” Roxy says, and disappears under the water. Jake follows, and with the sun bright and shining down on the water, you can see them moving around, swimming together, Jake carving loops around Roxy as she goes.

And goes, and goes, and you realize she’s been under there a long fucking time. As you brace yourself to dive in after her, Jane holds up a hand silently.

It’s another full minute before Roxy resurfaces, grinning. “It’s fading now, but that totally worked.”

“What did, can someone throw the nobility a bone here?” you ask again.

She waves at Jake as he reappears. “Magic! He’s not just innately magical as shit, he can do magic! He just hasn’t had anyone to try it on before.”

“Remember to write notes on what it felt like, how it was different, et cetera,” Jane says, then slowly spins to look up at you. “Waterbreathing magic. Jake said he thought he might be able to do it, and Roxy volunteered.”

“It was nice. Maybe better than using a charm, but I couldn’t tell you how.”

“Next time, say something before putting yourself in potential danger, please,” you say.

Snorting, Roxy waves a dismissive hand at you and returns to her floating. “Relax, Dirk. We’ve got this under control.”

That weird diversion into crossspecies magic slides away as quickly as it happened. Everyone eats and drifts around the pier like lazy ice cubes, in no hurry to climb out of the water. It becomes obvious that the plans for the day have been postponed in favor of floating sleepily around.

The sun is rising into what looks close to the afternoon, the temperature ticking up with it.

There is weather out here. Sudden downpours that come down like cats and dogs and the whole damn menagerie, and then are gone the next moment. You’re dreading the first real storm that hits you. It’s inevitable, and you worry about the camp and the Acorn. Presumably the witches can do something to help, but it’s a thought that haunts you.

But more often than not, it’s tropical sunlight and ocean breezes. You’re becoming a fan.

As you sit, you tap your fingers against your shoulders, wondering if your luck is going to run out soon. That was something worth bringing too: aloe vera.

Jake climbs up next to you while you prod at your own skin, frowning. “Hullo,” he greets, smiling.

“Hey.” You’re distracted and sun drowsy, just giving him a nod.
“Oop, he’s gone to talk to Dirk. Might as well pack it in,” Roxy says.

Which is inaccurate, but… you do have all his attention now. He sways in, peering at your skin with you, reaching up to tap his green smooth fingertips against your freckles. They are definitely starting to darken from all the sun, standing out against you pale complexion.

You’re considering going up to sit under the canopy, just to be safe, when Jake lays both hands on your arm and… rubs. You hold still, more out of shock than obedience, as he sweeps his palms and the heels of his hands against you. His hands don’t chafe, even as he works against your dry skin, massaging the patches around your shoulders that are starting to go pink. When he digs his fingers into your neck, you tense up.

He stops, and chirps at you, almost admonishingly.

“Jane,” you mutter, looking at her from the corner of your eye. “The hell is he doing?”

She’s watching avidly, with that keen gleam in her eyes that means mental notes are being drafted in her mind. “I… don’t know. Jake?” She touches her earring, and all speaks to him.

He burbles something back, continuing his weird ministrations.

Jane’s face goes weird for a moment, her lips quivering before she presses her knuckles against her mouth. “Oh. That’s, well. That’s almost sweet, really.”

“Jane.”

She clears her throat, lowering her hand, much more composed. “It seems, Mr. Strider, that you’re not doing a great job taking care of yourself. You’re drying up and not minding the sun. Someone could be concerned about your wellbeing and…” Her mouth nearly splits into a grin, but she bites it down. “And is sharing with you.”

“Sharing what,” you ask impatiently. It’s a weird dissonance, how he's simultaneously ignoring you and paying pinprick close attention to you. After a moment, he even gets up to circle around to your other side, sitting again and starting again on your other arm.

“It’s almost an oil, I think?” She swims closer and gingerly taps the glistening skin of Jake’s tail. It reflexively flicks in the water, curling away, but Jane holds up her fingers. “I still need to convince him to let me do a physical so we can get answers about things like this, but if we assume he has amphibian biology, he breathes through his skin, and has to protect it from any damage. It’s very sensitive.”

As if to demonstrate, Jane pokes Jake’s swishing tail with a nail. Immediately, he looks up with an affronted look on his face, chirping sharply. Jane holds up her hands apologetically. “Anyway. He has this, hm. Residue? And the water turns it into a thick oily substance that protects him.” She smirks. “And you too now.”

Jake’s tail pulls up, bending against its own weight before slapping across your lap, out of Jane’s reach. You stare down at it, unsure what the fuck to do. When you carefully put a hand along the thick skin, it flexes for a moment before resettling.

You swallow against the tight feeling in your throat. “That’s all plenty fascinating, Jane, but could you tell him to stop feeling me up?” you grit out. Your face is turning red for reasons that have fuck all to do with the sun. Jake pushes against your back, and you bend forward, folded arms on his tail, unsure what else to do but to avoid the sharp points of his tail spines. They look like they mean business, and you’re sure Jane’s said something about them before…? The open plane of your back is beset by more slick touches as Jake cheerfully keeps working, cricket-humming to
“Don’t you fuckin’ dare, Janes,” Roxy cuts in. “Suck it up, Dirk, this is basically science.”

“How is this science?” It’s difficult to keep your eyes open. As weird as this fucking situation is-- or, if you take a moment to be honest with yourself for a second, how weird it is that the girls are watching this like their future laureates depend on it. Despite that, Jake has big hands that knead your skin with warm, slick pressure, almost rocking his fingers against your muscles, plucking up and smoothing down. It feels sinfully fucking good, and your eyes keep losing focus as you soak it up. More than once, your throat clicks as you swallow down the start of a groan.

This is really not the time and place, christ.

“‘You mean besides witnessing the feat of Dietrich Strider turning into putty?’” Roxy asks. “In all seriousness, this is super sociological shit. Grooming behaviors are so fuckin’ commonplace, it’s probably how his people bond!” As soon as she says it, her expression darkens, teasing enthusiasm dimming. “I-- I mean.”

Jake’s hands slow for just a moment, before continuing down to your lower back. You cannot hold in the small groan this time as hard pressure works into the knots there. “Rox.”

Thankfully you coming to fucking pieces is secondary to Roxy’s faux pas. She sinks into the water and blows out bubbles; maybe she’s learning as many habits from Jake as vice versa. “Shit, I forgot. Sorry,” she says with a look of genuine guilt. “Just… it’s a nice day, Dirk. He ain’t hurting you, so let him work some magic, okay?”

The small reminder of what you learned about Jake hangs in the air between all of you, choking some of the good humor right out of the air. The discovery that Jake was completely alone here is a bit of clarity. No fucking wonder he’s so eager to spend time with you, to have long meandering conversations with the girls, to become a semi-permanent fixture of your demi-permanent camp. There’s a real chance the three of you are the first people he’s ever met.

It’s a sobering thought, one that made you feel a bit like shit for your quiet jealousy over the allspeak thing. With that piece of the puzzle in place, you try to chill out, biting down on the embarrassed protests to let Jake work you over, solicitous and kind in his own creature way. Even the teasing from the girls subsides as they talk about their projects. You sit, eyes finally shutting, listening as Jake frames your spine with his knuckles and pushes.

You’re almost dozing when he takes your chin in his hand. Swishing his hand in the water for a moment, he rubs his fingers together until they’re glistening again. Holding as still as you can, you let him smudge your face, his thumb firm against the apples of your cheeks, the line of your brow, your jaw. When he touches your ears, lingering on your remaining piercings, you shudder, and he finally lets go.

You can feel how red you are and it takes real effort to keep your voice steady as you ask, “Happy now?”

Jake grins and sits back. His tail fin slaps your side. “Happy now.”

Thanks to the long meandering morning spent swimming, it’s late by the time you haul yourselves back up to camp. You half-expect for Jane to call the day a wash and spend the rest of it lazing.
around.

As soon as you’ve changed into the driest clothes you have, recovered from where you draped them over the tent support lines, Jane is ready, handing out full canteens. “Come on then, let’s go.”

“Where to?” Roxy asks, lacing up her boots and taking a canteen.

“I found a curious thing in the jungle. I was hoping you could help me sort out what it’s for.”

It’s been over a week since Jane’s wanted backup on her excursions. You’ve offered, time and again, only for her to insist you stay behind and relax. Which you’ve been doing an admirable job of, you think. Still, neither of the girls have been giving you their journals for transcribing or asked you along, and while you don’t begrudge them their independence or think them incapable, it feels better to be doing something.

Jane explains to Jake that you’re leaving for the day, and Jake looks downcast for a moment before nodding, and giving her a hug. He trails off toward the lake while the three of you set out across the field.

This second time around, you sort out what it is about the jungle that’s so unsettling; it makes you feel very small. The oversized trees, the dinner plate-sized flowers, even the quiet, all adds up to something so enormous, it’s like stepping into a landscape-bound picture book.

Your steps are careful as you follow Jane, as if an oversized beast would descend on you if you made your presence too readily known.

Jane doesn’t refer to her map as she leads you along, just taking breaks to look around with a soft downturn to her mouth before deciding on the best direction. It’s a world away from your first trip out here.

“Here,” Jane says, finally breaking the spell of silence.

There is another ruin built of green-black basalt, uncannily similar to the pillars and the temple. The ground is fit with wide stone blocks, uneven and grouted with invading greenery that’s attempting to overtake it. In the center is a pillar, rough worn and teeming with an overgrown flowering vine that stretches up towards the top.

Sitting upon the pillar is a bowl, overlapping resin in the shape of a blooming lotus flower.

“Oh, hey, I know these,” Roxy says, walking right up to it without hesitation. “The locals made loads of these. You ever see a lotus bowl, you’re supposed to put lake water in it.”

“Is that so?” Jane asks, following her. “You’re certain? Because this has some resonance, I can feel it, and I’m reluctant to mess with it.”

Paying no mind to Jane, Roxy puts her hands on the pillar, leaning in close as if trying to listen to it. “Yeah, pretty sure. These bowls are sort of focii for the magic of the island, I think. There’s supposed to be a ton of mechanisms around that need to be fed.” She climbs upward, finding a toppled basalt brick near the pillar and climbing up onto it, one hand gripping the ledge holding the bowl while she pulls her canteen from her belt. “Way it worked back in the day, it was a holy duty to feed the water of the kaleidos into the bowls so, like, the blessing of the old god would spread to all parts of the island, spreading the color of life and blah di fucking blah.”

“Okay,” you say, as Jane stares at Roxy, mouth parted, shocked. “You’ve made some headway at the temple.”
“Shyeah, I have. It’s got one of these in there too, but it’s… for something else. So!” She pats her hand against the basalt. “Let’s take a look-see--”

“No, wait,” Jane snaps, marching up to Roxy, head tilted way back to glare up at her. It’s not a terribly intimidating look, and Jane seems to recognize that after a moment and shuffles back, instead folding her arms over her chest. “Back it up, buster, and give it to me again.”

“Wow, language,” Roxy says, snickering.

“What is the water of kaleidos, what is this about an old god, what’s the color of life, Roxy, if you so please!”

Roxy’s lip juts out as she pouts. “I’m about to show you…”

“What you are showing me is that you’ve been sitting on an awful lot of very useful, interesting discoveries, Dr. Lalonde.”

Eyebrows lifting sharply, Roxy puts a hand on her hip, still leaning on the pillar and clutching her canteen. “Oh? What’s this? Dr. Crocker, am I withholding research? Am I keeping my findings a little closer than you would like? Am I, I dunno, am I keeping my field journal tucked under my pillow and preventing our esteemed and gentlemanly associate from typing up a copy?” She leans down a bit to stare Jane in the face. “Is that what we’re discussing, Doc?”

“‘Scuse me,” you say loudly, and jesus fucking christ, this seems to be happening a lot, these situations that leave you out of the damn loop and just asking, “the fuck is going on?”

“The catalog is still in process and I don’t want to have it backed up until--”

“Oh my god, you are so full of shit!”

“Then why haven’t you given Dirk your journals, Roxy?”

“Uh, because lexicon work ain’t easily transcribed to a standard typewriter?”

“Poppycock, that’s not--”

Roxy rolls her eyes heavily and uncaps her canteen. “Leap of faith, Janesy, here we go!”

The canteen upends into the resin lotus bowl atop the pillar. Immediately, the worn glassy material begins to glow, a rich pink color washing through it before catching and refracting, a prism blooming in reds and golds and greens and aquamarine, as if the bowl were suddenly filled with a turbulent liquid rainbow.

The pillar itself hums. It’s vibration more than noise, and along the sides, old decaying runes begin to shine the color of volcanic glass, their shapes worn and broken from years of neglect. The color sinks down, the bowl draining to empty and the golden light sinking down into the ground.

There is three seconds of calm.

Then, you feel like you’re caught in an undertow without the wave, a downward pull that nearly body slams you down to the ground, the air knocked the fuck out of you. Something rushes by you, wind without breeze, motion through an unsympathetic vessel. You feel it catch against you for the briefest second only to slip from you, the sensation of being drenched and dried in the same one-two beat span.

You get unsteadily to your feet, and look around.
Everything is green. You thought it was green before, with the trees and grass and overgrown basalt and shit, but you were wrong, because this is green. It’s the vivacity of the liquid rainbow spilled over everything around you, so green it makes your eyes hurt.

Slowly, like a breath held then exhaled, it fades back to something familiar. Maybe a little more lush than before.

Roxy groans, rolling over onto her back. “Don’t say it, Jane, oh my god.”

Tart as a lemon, Jane flings up a hand to gesticulate from her own position on the ground and says, “What, Roxy? Could you be more specific?”

“Fuck,” Roxy says with feeling, sitting up, palm pressed against her head. “That was… a lot of power. Anyone get the number of the trolley that just ran us the fuck over?”

“Look,” you say, settling on your ass, arms draped over your knees as you get your bearings. Both the witches look much worse than you feel, but that doesn’t mean you’re not a little unsettled by the wave of whatever the hell that was. “As a personal rule, I do my best to leave you to with all the magical shit. I mean, listening to you talk about it is sort of what I imagine trying to explain music to the deaf is like. Even with the best explanation, there is a lack of lived experience. That said.”

Jane is the last to get upright, and she leans on the grass, taking a few steadying breaths. “No, that’s perfectly fair.”

“But also runs on the erroneous supposition that either of us know what the fuck that was,” Roxy adds.

“It was… I was so surprised, I don’t know if I got a good feel of it?” She looks frustrated with herself, looking at Roxy for corroboration.

“It was… sponsored magic? But sponsored by what?”

“Something awfully powerful,” Jane points out. “The volcano, maybe?”

“Yeah.” Roxy stands slowly, her hands held out and ready to catch herself. “So we did the little ritual, and some of the greenest magic I’ve ever felt busted out.”

“Those parts I understood,” you say, getting up too and offering your hand to Jane.

Taking hold, Jane pulls herself to her feet and dusts off her skirt. “I’m afraid we don’t know much more than-- oh, Dirk!”

She points, and you follow her finger.

Your arm, the warding tattoos inked into your skin, are more lively than you’ve ever seen. The spokes of the Pentacle are a blur of movement, spinning like a carriage wheel, and the bundles of herbs have grown, pushing against the dotted lines cordoning them off. The cup is overflowing, drenching the melting honeycomb.

The second you see it, the second you’re aware of it, you want to dig your nails into your skin and claw right into it. It itches, the movement of the ink telegraphed by pinpricks of irritation, tingly left in the wake.

“That’s so cool,” Roxy breathes.
“Shit.” You press your hand against the shifting lines, squeezing. “Anyone got any sandpaper?”

Jane takes your hand, holding it in a tight grip, and smiles wanly at you. “How about we get you back to camp, Mr. Strider? I think we’ve got plenty to think about, more than enough for today.”

Roxy slides in against your other side, taking your other hand and patting it briskly. “Yeah. C’mon, Dirk. We’ll get you back before you go all chicken pox on yourself here.”

It’s a good thing, because you are aching to do it. You loosen your fingers in hopes one of them will release you so you can get at the anxious movement writ into your arms, scratch until the urge is sated. But nothing is going to make it stop except cleansing the captured magic out of the wards.

You have a basalt monument that turns a bit of lake water into a massive infusion of power, and all you can think of is throwing yourself into the goddamn ocean.

A dozen times on the return trip, you try to get free of your friendly wardens.

They don’t let go, and you’re in turns grateful and so pissed at them you want to just jerk out of their grip.

By the time you make it back to camp, it’s… manageable, like getting used to having a knife in your chest. But over the hour-long walk, you have time to contemplate another idea altogether.

There’s core elements of magic. Air, earth, fire, water. Each of them has the potential to ground your wards. The air at dawn, the ash from a fresh fire, salt and other earthly nullifiers, and running water. Salt water baths work, but it’s not a perfect method, an earth method diluted with the conveyance of water. But coating your entire body with salt would be difficult to say the least.

But the waterfalls. Running water is a pure method, the movement and erosion washing you clean.

You grab a towel and assure the girls you’ve got this handled, and set out for the waterfalls along the northern edge of the lake.

They pour off the edge of the mountain and against the rocky ground, water feeding down into the lake. The largest, central one is a torrent of white foam and noise; it’s more likely to beat you down than help you at all. But there are others framing it, diverted and falling off center.

Setting your towel down a safe distance away, you reach out to test one of the auxiliary waterfalls. The spray is warm, even warmer than the lake.

This is absolutely happening. After getting hit with a force of magic like a kick from a horse, you’ve earned the hot freshwater shower.

Your clothes left in a pile by your towel, you walk cautiously over the smooth rocks, wet and worn down by this exact rush of water. At first, the heat is a little too much to handle, and you sway in and out of the path as your body adjusts. Shuffling in, the water pounds into your back, and you let out a groan at the feeling. You haven’t had this in such a long time.

Ducking fully under the water, you’re caught in the deluge, your hair splattered to your skull, as surrounded in water as you’d be if you leapt into the lake. Holding your breath, you withstand it
as long as you can, before leaning back out and taking a gulp of air.

You check your arms. Like a water wheel in reverse, the spokes are slowing in the current. Relieved, you move back under, and take another pounding of hot water. It feels incredible.

There is a little over a month left on this excursion, and you’re ready to forsake baths until you leave.

When you’re grounded and steady again, you remain under the waterfall a while longer, just enjoying it. Stretching your arms up, back, rolling your shoulders, and letting the heat permeate. Between this and the morning, you think you’re doing a good job at relaxing. It’s a strange sensation, to feel the aches in your back just unravel themselves.

It’s with great reluctance you finally step free and out of range of the water. Dripping onto the rocks, you almost stagger over to your towel, so loose-limbed it verges on post-coital. Damn.

The heat and tension release has you so slow on the uptake, you don’t notice you’re being watched until about five minutes later, your towel around your waist and eyes lazily scanning around.

Your lorelay is sitting on a rock nearby, a stony ledge reaching out over the lake. His legs stretch out, crossed at the ankle, and his tail curls around his elevated seat as he rests back on his braced arms, all graceful green curves and luciferin burning in the dark. If he were made of marble, he’d fit in with the Renaissance statuary. Lorelay Upon The Rock, Leering Like A Creep, But So Handsome It’s Hard To Be Mad.

You straighten, hand working the knot around your waist more securely. You have no idea how long he’s been there. It’s a compelling question that you don’t want to examine. You cock your head at him, shooting him something with teeth. “What, miss me?”

Somehow you’re not ready for him to immediately slip off his rock and stroll over to you. It’s like a cold rod of steel in your spine, and you take a half-step back, unsure what to expect.

The arch look Jake gives you is… confusing. A grin, one lifted eyebrow, it… looks like the kind of signal you’ve gotten rarely at the right kind of dark speakeasies. With that reeling through your head, you stand still as Jake paces around you. You’re circled, his tail a low wall, and don’t know what the right move here is. You suck in a breath as you resist the urge to turn with him.

With a watery cricket noise, he slips his fingers through yours, lifting your hand. He presses the round disc of your bracelet to his cheek, and you can watch the green drain from his spots, leaving just gold.

Your mouth is very dry. He keeps a hold of your wrist, thumb to fingertip, a simple but firm grip. He presses his lips against yours, and like the wick of a lantern catching, everything illuminates. You jerk back, gasping, because the scattered remains of a dream are snapping back into focus, sharp-edged and burning from the new light. You’ve done this exact thing before, you’ve marveled at the familiar touch of his lips, how the spots on his cheeks glow through your eyelids, the curious feeling of tilting your head back to meet someone’s kiss. You’ve done this, and more besides, and the memories come back, dust blown off and polished to a mirror shine.

And with them comes a whole fucking lot of understanding. The heat that floods your face is a fucking forest fire as you review the past few days and Jake’s careful but persistent solicitousness, and holy shit.
“Holy shit,” you breathe, and Jake chirps back, cupping your face and dragging you back in for another kiss. You’re reeling, and are easily led. Jake’s tongue is hot in your mouth and melds with the renewed recollections of that moonless night, and you open up, too distracted to hesitate.

The pushiness of his mouth against yours ignites a memory, and his hand sneaking around your hip to curl around your ass ignites another. It’s a lucid dream folded over the moment, and you know distantly that there are probably reasons this isn’t the best idea you’ve had. But.

Your body is so loose from the waterfall shower and from Jake’s own attentions earlier today, and his attentions now, leisurely exploring your mouth and walking you back to the eroded-smooth rock face behind you. Having your back to an unyielding surface is just another fragment clicking into place.

Last time, you were in boxers at least. This time, Jake lets out a throaty clicking hum and plucks at the knot you’ve made in the towel. You instinctively fling a hand down to catch it and miss, Jake catching your wrist instead.

He grabs both of them and pushes them to the wall, and just has a fucking gander at you, stepping back to appreciate the view, apparently. A flush breaks over your chest, spreading up your neck, and also downward. Shutting your eyes and pressing your head back against the wall, you curse as the muscles in your pelvis tense and you start to get hard just from being manhandled and stared at.

You could really do with being put out of your rising misery (ha), but Jake’s keen gaze has dialed back a bit, and you realize he’s just looking you over now. It’s not clinical, but it’s definitively not the bedroom eyes he was rocking before. He’s doing that head tilt-brow knit combination.

Because you were raised with some good old southern politesse, you have tried not to stare at Jake too closely, but it’s impossible not to notice your anatomies don’t quite match up. He has a lot of his peacock fins accenting the line of his hips, but whatever he’s packing is hidden at the moment. It’s not unheard of-- you’re pretty sure mers work similarly. But Jake doesn’t have the point of comparison.

He releases your wrists, hands drifting lightly down your sides. You twitch as his smooth fingertips run over your ribs, and the startled chirp he gives is a little gratifying. You’re not alone in this, at least.

Borrowing a bit of his boldness, you take his hands and put them on your hips, leaning your head to rest against his shoulder. “Listen,” you say, “I don’t know how this works for you, but try to be real gentle, alright?”

An answering noise in your ear. You let go of him, moving your hands to hold his shoulders. So released, he starts touching you, so fucking slowly it’s almost too much to stand.

Soft, barely slick fingertips explore, finding the shape of your balls first. You swear and hitch as he applies just a little pressure, pressing your face harder against his neck. It’s good, but pales next to his hand wrapping around your dick properly.

Thank god for his weird intuition, and translating your strangled noise as a good thing, enough to get both his hands in there.

It makes for the most tentative handjob you’ve ever had, but it works for you. You’ve been wound up all day, something you can resoundingly blame on him and his slick massage.

How the fuck didn’t you figure this out sooner?
But between the massage and the tension relief of the hot water, you are devastatingly easy. His strange, smooth hands are big and easy to rock into, and Jake lets you, quickly getting the picture and working with you. He nearly croons in your ear, a low, rich sound as he rubs and strokes you. “Fast learner,” you gasp right before you rise up on your toes and spill over him, groaning.

He strokes you through it, and then keeps it up, squeezing your balls and petting your dick. It becomes overwhelming before long, and you reach down to still his hands, face hidden against his shoulder. “Can’t… can’t give you more right now, man. Doesn’t work like that.”

The steady support of his arm around your waist, the way he takes some of your weight is… It’s a lot to deal with. Your fingers clench on his arms as he supports you, mouth against your ear. His hand strokes up and down your back, and it tangles with the drenched relief of the hot water, morphing into something enormous that butts against your ribs in time with your breath.

You can’t handle it for long, and push him away. The hurt noise he makes is like a physical pang, but you have plans. Shoving him back, you follow him until you have him on of the rocks, near where your discarded clothes are. “Right. Get comfortable, lorelay, ’cause it’s time for a little human thing we call turnabout.” You fetch your towel and fold it into a cushy strip, dropping it on the ground and then kneeling on it. Patting his legs with a crisp bravado you don’t quite feel yet, you say, “Let’s see what you have going on. I’m a lot of things, but not a selfish bedpartner. So to speak.”

Jake stares down at you, biting his lip, but he’s glowing like a field of lightning bugs. Taking care not to startle him, you tug his knees. He gets the idea and spreads out for you, letting out a low, rough hum.

He’s not totally smooth here. His rich green skin hides along fold of skin along his pelvis. It has some visual connotations you’re not used to but you think you can figure it out given some trial and error.

Before you can plan too far ahead, Jake takes a deep breath that seems to fill his entire body, and as he sighs it out, the narrow slit parts. There’s something inside it, so the term is sheath, you think distantly as you sit back on your heels and watch that something come out to greet you.

It’s shy, apparently, and you shoot Jake a warning glance before touching the slight protrusion of his sheath, the frictionless smooth skin. He lets out a strained chirp, his sheath immediately parting further. Coaxing him along, you rub the soft skin between the slit and his inner calves.

A gratifyingly short time later, and you’re face to face with a dick-analogue. It reaches out of him, a sweet curve of almost translucent flesh. It’s got the basic phallic shape going on, but the similarities end there; instead, it’s pale green with darker stripes or ridges of his darker skin, but you can see it has bioluminescence of its own, the familiar gold light straining through delicate flesh. There’s some serious length to it, too, compensated by its narrower profile.

You cannot keep the grin off your face. As much as you like to play things close to the vest, you are genuinely looking at a never before seen magical dick.

Maybe they’ll give a noble the laureate for this.

Jake says something intently, face smudged with yellow flush, looking as nervous as you probably should.

But. You have something of an advantage here. Something Jake’s never had the chance at.

You keep your gaze on his face as you take a careful loose grip of his dick. It’s long, and you can
feel his heartbeat acutely against your palm. It's a little heady.

Jake’s legs tense, and your hand… is slick. You pull it back to see gold smeared on you. “Huh. That’s pretty cool. Permeable skin?” You run his dick though the circle of your fingers, and he almost lifts off the fucking rock, babbling. “Easy. Easy, I’ve got you.” You shuffle closer while Jake stares at you in unabashed wonder.

His fingers slide into your hair, and you still, looking up at him. Big, pretty eyes, lips parted around fast breaths.

This is going to be great, you think.

“Shit, I wish you understood me… If I go into anaphylaxis, you better take me back to camp.”

Jake pats your hair. It’s reassurance enough.

Determined to impress him like he’s been impressing you since the moment you met, you direct his dick into your mouth. It’s blood hot and wet, the slightest pressure bringing up slickness like an oversaturated sponge. It takes mere seconds for your mouth to fill, your tongue moving through thin come before you swallow to keep it from seeping past your lips.

Jake moans openly, fists clenching in your hair. You pat him with a free hand and shuffle closer to get more of him in your mouth.

It’s kind of a total fucking mess. It’s so wet, you can’t avoid being sloppy, and come drips out of the imperfect seal of your lips. When you try to wipe it away, you find glowing slick clinging to your fingers. Pulling back, you wipe your mouth and, yep, it’s bioluminescent. Licking your mouth, you consider it. The taste is… mostly water. Or, it’s water with something dissolved in it, the slight thickness of sugar or salt.

Jake chirps and tugs you by your hair, not forcing you back down but making a clear request. “Yeah,” you say thickly, and wrap both your hands around him. “Fuck, yeah.” And you fall back into it like you’re dying of thirst. You stop trying to be neat, because it’s not even a remote possibility, and drag him against the curl of your tongue, squeezing with your fingers, the slick leaking through them and running rivulets down your arms, to your elbows and dripping to the ground.

You suck him, and nearly choke as Jake bucks into your mouth and it fills immediately. Swallow, swallow, and do it again, you keep going, your eyes lidding as you sink into the rhythm.

You’ve already come, but there’s heat in your gut. You remember distantly the prick of Jake’s spines, the tide of drowsy arousal that had put you out of your fucking mind, and swallow more.

It feels like you could do this forever. It just keeps coming, the only sign of progression in the way Jake’s dick seems to plump as you work him, the come leaking faster. His hips rock in and out, tiny movements helping you along. It’s so damn easy.

After… a while, longer than you can keep track of, Jake runs his fingers along your scalp, burbling at you, low and pleased. With just a slight pressure, he pushes you back, off him, and puts his knee against your shoulder when you instinctively try to get back on his dick.

“What?” Your face is a fucking wreck. You wipe your mouth, your chin, and shake off your hands before wiping your neck. Holy shit, it’s everywhere. There is no way you’re not a goddamn sight, christ.
Jake is breathing deep and steady, and smiling at you. He takes you by your elbows and urges you up; you stumble to your feet.

As you watch, his dick retracts itself, as tidy as you please, only a drip of come betraying his sheath. The way he’d stroked you on and on after you’d come is a clue. Maybe he doesn’t climax like that? So, could he have you blow him endlessly? It’s difficult not to be curious.

But you also know you need to clean up. Stepping away, you duck under the shower again, let it rewash you all over again. There’s heat in your chest, and heat against your skin.

You feel good. Good enough it holds off the little panicked, rational voice in your head. At least for the moment.

You grab your towel and dry off the best you can while Jake watches you, smiling. When you lower the towel, he leans in and pecks your mouth.

“Yeah. Same.” You duck turn away to hide your smile.

There’s an awkward moment when… you should get dressed and walk back to camp, probably. You’ve been gone way too long, even for you and your deep abiding love of showers. The girls might get worried, and that’s the last thing you want on top of everything else they have to deal with.

That is set aside when Jake sits down on the grass and reaches for you, fingers grasping the air. You step into range and put up no resistance as he draws you down with him. A hand against your cheek lays your head against his shoulder, and he curls around you, petting your arms and humming, limbs tangling.

He’s wet and dense and warm, and you are… tired, unable to keep your eyes open. You’ve already spent too much time out here. A little longer isn’t going to break any hearts.

His thumb brushes against the line of your cheekbone, and you come down like a marionette, lines snipped. Laying against him, body heavy and relaxed, you laugh. “This is un-fucking-believable. Got some amphibious freshwater merman with a glowy dick and an insurmountable language barrier, but at least you want to cuddle after I suck you off. That’s better fare than my last few boyfriends.”

Jake’s arms tighten around you, and you chuckle against his collarbone and let yourself doze.

In the morning, you’re a little more even keel about this what happened.

Sitting across from Jane as everyone eats breakfast, you can’t stem the wandering guilt in your chest, souring your starfruit and fire-cooked pancake. The girls are sharing idle chitchat, the tension of yesterday apparently put aside for the ritual of your morning meal.

Jake is holding out his plate for another pancake. He’s glowing green-yellow and acting like he didn’t kind of fuck your mouth yesterday. Like you are not…

What are you doing? What does it mean to get hot and intimate with one of Jane’s research subjects and let him bring you food and gifts? It’s a viper pit you don’t want to deal with right now.
“So,” you say when there’s a lull in conversation. “I might have a scientific observation for you.”

Jane regards you with a sunny smile. “That so, Mr. Strider? You have more findings to present to the review committee?”

“More delicious fruit?” Roxy asks hopefully.

“Not this time, no,” you say. “About our guest here.” You nod to Jake, who’s working his way through his second pancake with gusto. “His glow spots, I think they could have some weird properties. I’ve had a few brushes with them, and there’s a… Mindbendingly good buzz. “A lingering effect afterward? It’s giving me some intense insomnia, and it might be good to know if there’s some cumulative effect we should be aware of.”

To your intense relief, Jane nods along, her eyes on Jake. “Since we’re spending so much time with him-- I have been so distracted, my attentions split all over. I haven’t taken the time to get to know what’s going on with him yet.” Her field bag is sitting within reach. Setting her plate aside, she roots through it, coming up with a cotton swab and a glass vial. “I’ll ask him if I can take a sample.”

Jake rests his plate on his thigh and continues to eat with one hand, extending his other arm to Jane.

“Oh, thanks. I--” Jane stops, her mouth dropping open, eyes popping wide. “Uhm, excuse me?”

Roxy freezes, canteen halfway to her mouth. “Whoa, what?”

He looks up at them both, letting out a confused chirp, muffled by a mouthful of food.

“You understood that!” Jane exclaims. “You actually, how did you--!”

Gradually, as comprehension dawns, Jake’s spots blanch to dingy, pale green as he goes stone still.

He fucking understands.

Roxy burts into motion, waving her hands wildly. “Holy shit, hooooooly shit. Oh my god, you fuckin’ stole Janey’s earring!”

His mouth works, half-sounds caught on his lips as he starts to shake his head.

“And-- And I assumed you tried it on and it didn’t work but, oh my gods and fucking devils, you are so magical, you are the most magical, it’d be fuckin’ nothing to reverse engineer a piddly human talismanning! Have you-- Jake, babe, have you understood us that long?”

Jake’s eyes slide to you, and whip away again so fast, as if just looking at you burns him.

“I…” He says. He doesn’t chirp and whistle or cricket-hum, he speaks, in a soft, soft voice, overwhelmed and curling in on himself. “I-- I didn’t know what to say. Listening was just… easier?”

“Yeah,” you say, staring at him. “I bet.”

Jake looks at you again, skittish as a mouse, and winces, staring down at his hands in his lap.

Next to him, Roxy snorts, and climbs to her feet. “Wow. Wooooow, wow.”
Yeah, you can’t help but agree as Jake surreptitiously peeks at you through his lashes. Wow.

Chapter End Notes

relevant content warnings: voyuerism, xenobiology, aphrodisiacs... I think that's it?
/rubs hands together vigorously. finally we're getting somewhere.
Jake sits on the edge of a table in Jane’s tent, looking as cloudy as you’ve ever seen him. His hands grip the table tightly, his tail twitching and shifted in agitation. He’s glancing up at you periodically while you crack open a new journal and start with some bookkeeping, setting up the biology report you’re about to transcribe for Jane.

It’s a good pen you have. Lightweight, some kind of nicely made wood instead of a heavier material. No wonder Jane guards it so jealously from Roxy, given how much of her time is occupied in notation. It spins around your fingers nicely. You draw a perfect pentacle on the corner of the page, getting a feel for it. It’s important to know how quick the ink flows before taking dictation.

“Are you upset with me?” Jake asks.

Roxy’s already headed out to the temple, following up on something important. Her brand of anger is always a private one; she rarely stuck around to actually take it out on someone, preferring to throw herself into her work and grind her frustration to dust.

Jane is ostensibly gathering some supplies from the Acorn. She’s another who didn’t like to share her ire, but it was writ in every stomp of her feet as she stormed off. Roxy would come back from her excursion back to her bubbly, level-headed self. Jane would need longer to work off her steam.

The bathtub’s in Roxy’s tent again. Moving it back to Jane’s so she could have a long soak might help. You decide to ask Roxy about it later; it’s much easier to haul that thing around with magic than muscle.

“You’re upset with me,” Jake says. “I can’t say that’s not solidly your prerogative. Only a true buffoon with no sense of decorum would suggest otherwise. It was a dodgy bit of business I pulled over your lovely peepers, but I never meant to do you so wrong. It just… got away from me.” He points his toes, stretching his legs out and staring at them. “The performance anxiety is a tremendous, you know! Meeting people for the first time, just wonderful people, and not knowing what the sweet beguiling hell to say to any of them! Can you blame a gent for wanting a little time to work up to the idea, to find the right words to say?”

You flip through the book, counting the blank pages. About ninety. Good size, plenty of space.

“Will you say something?”

“Sorry,” you say, not bothering to look up. “Must be difficult, feeling like you can’t communicate.”

“Yes, so let’s just keep on with that, then? Is that how we mean to go on?” The quick lash of anger subsides quickly. “Please, Dirk. I just… Didn’t know what to say.”

You couldn’t have guessed how nice his voice was. The way his words almost melded into each other with soft edges, the obvious novelty of speech coloring every syllable. It was charming, his weird verbosity butting heads with how unused to it he was.

Still, the upset lingers. “And listened to me just run my fucking mouth with garbage, right. Hope
you had a good laugh.”

“Did I ever?” Jake shoots back. “Cripes’ sake, Dirk, I wouldn’t. I didn’t! You’re inventing this whole scenario where I was getting my jollies from having you on, but you were…” His voice softens. “You were lovely to listen to. Why the blue blazes would I mar that, letting my own unpracticed cadence muck up yours?”

“So I’d know? So I wouldn’t…” Remembering the sheer amount of unfiltered horseshit you said thinking Jake wouldn’t understand is mortifying to think about. Sighing tersely, you go on. “I actually felt-- it wasn’t great, being the only person who couldn’t talk to you, alright? And all along, you understood. So yeah. I’m upset.” Fucking deal with it, you think meanly.

Jake chirps softly. “I thought we were communicating well. I tried my best to show you. Didn’t I show you?”

His quiet tone drops to nearly a whisper, a sound so pleading and gentle your chest hurts when you hear it. It’s so coaxing, you can’t keep your gaze averted any longer and finally glance up at him.

As soon as you do, his lips curl up, as if your attention is just worth smiling about, his teeth prominent in a cute way, his eyes soft, spots flushing under your gaze.

It feels like an out of body experience, having someone look at you with so much goddamn fondness in their face. No one should look at you like that. It doesn’t make sense. It has your heart rate galloping off, fast and heady. Somehow you’ve fooled this strange creature into liking you. The urge to apologize and warn him off is intense.

He should know you’re not… made of this. For private glances and sappy sweetness. You should not look at Jake and watch his face transform from anxiousness to something warm.

You do, and wonder if this magnetic pull is what a mesmer feels like.

If it is, the spell is broken when Jane returns at last, a black leather medical bag in hand. For a moment, she just stands in the entryway, imposing despite her size, eyes narrow over the rim of her spectacles as she stares at Jake.

He hunches in on himself, tail swishing faster. “I truly am sorry I put you all through such a gymnastic routine on account of my social blunder, Jane. There was nothing cricket about it.”

You wave vaguely at Jake. “Okay, I can’t… not ask, it’s driving me up the damn wall. Why do you talk like that?”

Jake blinks at you. “Talk like what?”

Jane lets out a slow breath and strides over, setting her bag down on the edge of the table, unlatching the little silver clasps. “If I’m to wager a guess, it’s probably due to the artifact’s components. I’m even less of a hand at talismans than Roxy, but I know their creation requires rather verbose examples of the languages they’re meant to work with. Roxy already had to write out essentially a book of the temple’s engravings as part of that, so to save her time, I donated one of my own books to be the English component.”

“An Apollo Suchet mystery!” Jake says excitedly, nodding. “It was very interesting, certainly helped me understand some of the stranger things you all talk about. I liked how his focus was hidden inside that fetching little walking stick of his. Though it was a little odd, how the revelation that one of the jockeys was noble was enough evidence against him to have him arrested. I didn’t follow that bit at all, if’m honest.”
You glance at Jane, who’s frozen with her hand in the bag. She doesn’t look at you, but her ears are red.

“Ah,” you say mildly, voice flat. “That one.”

She jolts into motion, setting out sample jars and heavy glass dishes out on the table. “It’s a rather dated story, but it’s a very good mystery. But the point is that the foundation of his speech would be that book. So if there is some… flair, well.”

“Right.” You shrug, and fiddle with your pen some more. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Jane says, obviously relieved. In truth, you think she’s more upset being caught with a shitty book than you are about her having it. She plucks out a long cloth tape. “We’ll start with measurements.”

The job of dictation comes easily to Jane, and the role of notetaker is just as comfortable to you. Her voice is precise as she lists off numbers and observations for you to take down, tail length and width, height, chest, even the span of Jake’s hand. You take it down as neat as you can, already intending to type it all up later for better legibility.

The tent is quiet outside the clear bell of Jane’s voice and the drag of pen against page, the sometimes crisp turn of pages. She paints a scientifically precise portrait of Jake with her words, detailing the “tentatively named Homo nereidus of the kingdom mythica” relentlessly.

When you have seven pages of what amounts essentially to blueprints of Jake, you rest your hand, taking a drink as Jane pokes and prods at Jake. He’s biting his lip, plainly discomforted by her objective eye, but keeps quiet. Maybe in an attempt to repay Jane for his little omissive lies.

She takes samples from his skin, both the oil clinging to the green and the faintly glowing substance that swabs from his spots. With a little bottle covered with a film, she jabs one of his tail spines, collecting the clear toxin that drips out while you and Jake share a look over her head.

After a blood sample, she frowns, turning his arm over with one gloved hand. Her thumb brushes a scattering of pale green spots. “That’s strange. Is there a reason your pigment changes?”

Jake’s spots flush a deeper green as he shrugs. “I couldn’t say?”

You clear your throat. “I think it’s emotional state, Crocker.”

She lets go of his quickly. “Oh. Well… Write that down, Mr. Strider,” she orders briskly, turning back to her supplies. Jake gives the back of her head a sorrowful look, color deepening further as he lowers his gaze to his hands.

There’s a long silence as Jane stacks up her samples neatly. It threatens to fall into something truly awkward before Jake clears his throat, a little croak-catch noise that— that almost reminds you of a frog’s ribbit, which is way too fucking endearing. “Something else in that book of yours. When the detective had to interrogate that troll about the stolen horse, he said it was important to keep it all above board. He answered the troll’s questions in return, didn’t he?”

Jane meets Jake’s eyes, surprised. “Oh. Yes?”

“Well. If I’m a magical being… would it be on the level to ask for a dash of reciprocation. I…”

He bites his lip again, hard, then speaks like grinding out stones. “You all are the first people I’ve ever met. I’m lacking in the arena of scientific inquiry, but—”
Some of the cool disdain in Jane just slips from her grasp, a smile breaking over her face for the first time since Jake’s deception came to light. “Oh. Well, I think I can do that, sure. I have been peppering you with questions.”

Yellow seeps back into Jake’s features as she grins. “That would be-- You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to return your pepper with-- with salt and cinnamon and all those other seasonal mysteries.” His legs swing a bit, excited. “What is the idea behind those things you wear on your face? I only got a brief look at them before Dirk took them off me, but they did a whizbang job!”

A little laugh escapes Jane’s lips. “You… Jake, are you nearsighted?” When Jake only tilts his head, she slips her glasses off and hands them over. “Here.”

He puts them on immediately, and looks at you, beaming. “These certainly resolve Mr. Strider into a clearer vision than before.” When he hands them back, it’s with a lingering, almost longing glance.

“I do have a spare…” Jane says.

“Not really going to work underwater, the way he swims,” you point out, but the gears already begin to click in your head. There might be a solution to that…

“That’s fair. I lose things all the time,” Jake admits.

“We’ll see what we can do later,” Jane assures him. “So… Have you ventured out of your lake, to the ocean?”

Immediately, Jake shakes his head. “No, not at all. The ocean hurts very much, actually. The one time I gave it a go, I was laid up for a week! I don’t fancy giving it another shot.”

“I imagined the salt water might do that,” Jane says, and glances at you. You nod and make note of that confirmed suspicion. “You can breathe underwater and out of water?”

“Yes? Yes, it’s all perfectly copacetic, I just have to keep damp.” He pats his skin, where it’s green and glistening in the lamp light. “If I don’t, then it starts to… become difficult to breathe.”

“Roxy said you were something like a mudskipper,” Jane says. “I can’t say she’s entirely wrong.”

“And what would you be, if I can be so bold?” He waves a hand better you and Jane. “I’m not sure I understand yet?”

Jane shoots you a wry look and asks, “You mean… Dirk being a man, and--”

“No, no, the concept of gender was quite clear in that curious mystery book of yours. I don’t know if I put much stock in the idea, but it’s clearly of some import to your species,” Jake explains. “I meant how his magic feels different from yours.”

It’s a completely sideways way of asking that, and immediately Jane tenses up, uncomfortable. She’s always has difficulty about that. There has never been a doubt in your mind that she supports you and wants the best for you. The realities of nobility, though, are so solidly outside her grasp, it’s sometimes difficult to talk about around her.

It’s an open secret of your relationship, how the idea of being noble is a blank space of understanding for Jane, how it almost frightens her. But at the end of the day, she’s never faltered at your side. You wouldn’t have this job without her.

So you put the pen down and speak up finally. “We call it being noble. It was called some other
shit before that, but using any of those terms entitle me to punch you in the throat.” Jane winces, but nods. “I can’t do magic, and human-made magic sometimes goes pear-shaped on me. Apparently I’m missing an entire sense, as I can’t detect aetheric flow or whatever. It’s along the lines of having an allergy, except people think it’s contagious and would prefer I didn’t exist near them.”

“That’s--” Jane starts, and immediately quells herself. “Nobility is a rare condition, so it’s largely misunderstood, and by its very nature very hard to study. There’s a lot of superstitions about nobility.”

The good humor in Jake’s face is draining by degrees, leaving something… unhappy. “In the mystery, when the stolen horse had gone rabid, Detective Apollo said it proved the noble was involved.”

You want to say a lot of shit to that. Instead, you take a long drink of water.

“Like I said, there’s a lot of misunderstanding. So, if you’re seeing Roxy and I as aetherically brighter than Dirk, that’d be why.”

“Not brighter.” Jake looks directly at you, eyes narrowed and considering. “Just different. Like a secret.”

Now both of them are staring at you, as if trying to solve a puzzle. Their combined regard is a heavy weight, and you break eye contact, focusing on keeping your face blank as they look you over.

“Well,” Jane eventually says, clipped and falsely bright. “It’s no secret that human magic and nonhuman magic are very different. Your senses must be tuned differently.”

The conversation moves on, thank fuck, and you settle back into being the passive observer as Jake and Jane engage in scholarly curiosity about each other. Jake asks about Roxy’s pink hair and human food and Jane’s pitchfork focus. In return, Jane steels herself for one of the big questions.

“There’s only one of you,” she asks, voice softening to something careful and kind. “Do you know why that is?”

Jake shakes his head with a plaintive chirp.

“Then… were you born? Made? Hatched? Do you know how to make more of you?”

He’s silent so long, it seems he’s not going to answer. Suddenly patient, Jane waits him out, not even moving as he turns the question over in his head.

“I only know that…” he says, “When I was young, I was different. Smaller. Simpler. Then I got bigger and started to learn things. And then I was like this, and all the little things I knew gummed together into big ideas.” He blinks once, slowly, before going on. “It was about then I realized something was wrong, and I was alone. It was enough to make a gent want to go back to being small and silly, just to un-know that.”

He gives Jane a weak smile, looking down at his hands.

Jane steps forward, leans up on her toes, and puts her arms around him. A pop of yellow floods him as he puts his arms tentatively around her, meeting your eyes with a confused look. When the embrace lingers, he calms and rests his head against hers.
The muscles in Jane’s arms flex as she seems to squeeze him. “You’re not alone now. And I promise we’re going to do everything we can to keep it that way. Okay?”

“Everything you can,” he echos. It doesn’t seem to comfort him as much as it should.

Letting go, she steps back and looks down at herself. She makes a face; the residue of his skin has caught on her blouse. “Anyway. If you’d let me, I might be able to help. You… to be frank, you don’t seem to know how some parts of your biology work. If you let me do a full exam, I can crossreference against other similar creatures and we can figure how just how… things are meant to work for you.”

Jake’s eyes flick to you, and quickly away again. “I think… it’d be foolish to turn down such an offer. I can tell you, being the apparent last of your kind is the absolute fucking pits, so-- yes, but it’s a… tricky thing to air out. Could we…” He looks at you again, briefly, and clears his throat.

Jane nods. “We can do that, sure. Dirk? Could you… I think I might finish up the exam myself, if that’s alright.” Behind her, Jake ducks his head, fingers tapping restlessly against the table.

You can’t say that you’ve already seen it and there’s no point in kicking you out. That, you know down to your bones, would be a very bad idea. And besides, Jake looks so goddamn out of his comfort zone, you’d be an asshole not to go along with this.

Passing the journal over to Jane, you nod and leave them to it.

Outside, you settle into the papasan with a refilled canteen. It’s quiet and peaceful out here. There are a few clouds on the horizon, moving in. It’s good busywork to wander around under the canopy, putting things away in case of a storm. Even hammering in the stakes a little more firmly, just in case.

You’re checking the tension on the support lines when Jake darts out of Jane’s tent, glowly sickly green. He has his arms wrapped around himself and doesn’t even look up at you as he barrels past, down to the lake.

With one springing leap, he dives in, cleanly breaking the water and disappearing.

Jane rejoins you, peeling off her gloves with a tight expression.

“Problem?” you ask.

“No,” she says slowly. “Just… Sort of exactly what you’d expect when your first examination comes well into your adult years.”

“Supremely fucking uncomfortable?”

“Oh, yes. Though very illuminating. He has… interesting…” She coughs, and looks up at the sky. You very carefully don’t let any of your amusement show on your face. “I think… rather than head out to the jungle, I’ll stay here. Type up that report. Could you draw some diagrams? You’re a much better artist than I am.”

It’s a decent way to spend an afternoon, in diligent company. The two of you split a pot of tea and settle at opposite sides of the work table. You work with charcoal and ink, creating the best approximation of Jake’s anatomy you can, diagrams of his impressive size and the long length of his tail, some detail pictures of his fins and the pattern of his skin.

Jane peeks at your work as she changes pages in the typewriter, grinning. “You could’ve been an artist.”
“Maybe.” In another world, perhaps. In a world where higher learning institutions didn’t have magical aptitude tests to keep people like you out. You don’t tell her that. There’s no reason to spoil the mood.

The rainstorm finally rolls in with the early morning hours. Breakfast is later than usual. When you join the girls under the canopy, they’re both still in their sleepwear, Jane in blue pinstripes and Roxy in a billowy dress that’s wrinkled and mussed.

From the camp, it’s easy to see the grey sky doubled, mirrored on the lake, the image shimmering and rippling as the rain hits the water. Overhead, the sound of each drop hitting the canopy builds into a pleasant fuzz of noise. It’s loud enough you’d have to speak up to be heard over it, and this morning, that seems like sacrilege.

Jane makes tea before anything else. Roxy leans against your arm as all three of you sit, watching the rain.

“Wanted to get to the temple early today,” Roxy mumbles. “But now, I’m thinking I want a day off. I deserve a rainy day off, don’cha think.”

You yawn in agreement.

“The resonance monument we found in the jungle,” Jane says, words spilling slow like syrup. “It won’t be activated by rain water?”

“Naw. Gotta be fresh from the lake. There’s something magic about it. Why?”

“I got to check out the area. It seemed to be some sort of growth spell for the area. I’ve been so concerned with the way the island seems to be… fading. Losing its energy.” She pauses to sip her tea. “No natural pollinators, but oversized flora. Monuments that require human intervention to empower the area around them.”

“And a bunch of abandoned ruins,” you add.

That hangs in the air between you all.

“Roxy, what happened to them?” Jane asks. “The people who lived here before?”

“Still working on it. But I’m with you. Who ever heard of an island that needed intervention to survive, though? A system like that doesn’t make a ton of sense.”

Jane looks at you, gaze dropping to your arm. Your tattoos are only just beginning to shift; they were grounded only a day or two ago.

“The magic of this place is catching in your wards,” Jane points out. “That’s only supposed to work with human-made magic.”

Roxy lifts her head and traces the boline on your forearm with a nail. “Huh. Yeah. So… the island is so magical, it’s ridiculous, but it’s… That makes no damn sense.”

“Because it should be the volcano, yes,” Jane says. “And I think the volcano is where the magical epicenter is, of course, but all these ruins and devices built from volcanic rock…”
“Ambient magic sponsoring the crafted magic, yeah.”

“Okay,” you say. “What’s that actually mean?”

“Hell if I know,” Roxy mutters, her head slumping onto your shoulder again.

“It brings up a worrying problem for the island,” Jane says, staring out at the lake again. “Jake doesn’t know anything about these ruins. But someone is clearly meant to be using them. It’s like having a massive water barrel that you’re supposed to draw from to water your garden.”

“But no one is watering it,” you finish.

“Right. Which is bad for the garden.”

Roxy’s nails tap against the bone along the side of your wrist. “And… figure that water barrel is just… filling up, right?”

In unison, all of you look at the volcano north of the lake, set deep in the jungle.

“Right,” Jane says. “Today, we’ll take a free day, but I’d really like to get a look at the big pillars surrounding the island soon. And Roxy--”

“Yeah, I’ll figure out what all the ruins can do, where the power comes from. Most of the stuff I’ve read just talks about the island god guiding the locals in building this stuff.” Her lips press together. “Might be something to that.”

“What, like… Jake?”


Jane shoots her a confused look. “Your guy?”

“My guy. My… big frog guy?” She gestures at the frog atop the temple. “Our other big frog guy.” Climbing to her feet, she pats your shoulder, silent thanks for acting like her pillow, you assume. “Oh, and Janesy-Jane, loan me a brassiere.”

“What? Why?”

“Long story, too tired to tell it. Just loan me one!”

“Roxy, I don’t… think mine will fit you?”

“Well, babe, that’s what a good reduction spell’s for. Not everyone can be a voluptuous vixen of science like you.”

“I’ll loan you one if you never ever call me that again.”

You shake your head and leave them to it, grabbing some fruit from the chest and retreating back to your tent.

It’s a foregone conclusion that you’re going to lay back down and merrily fuck up your sleep
cycle by taking a good long nap. The air is heavy enough to feel like a thick shroud tossed over you, dragging you down, and the sound against the roof is unrelenting and just as soothing.

Normally, by this time of day, the tent is filled with the muted light of the sun through the canvas. Today, it’s dim, just on the edge of being too dark to see. You don’t bother to light a lamp. Waste of matches since you’re just puttering around, waiting for your body to tip from drowsiness into true sleepiness. It’s happening by inches as you fold up your clothes and put them away. They’ve been drying in the sun, recovering from all the times you wound up in the damn lake.

As you finish, there’s a whisper of noise behind you, canvas shifting. It’s barely audible through the rain. You turn, expecting the girls, here to drag you into some lazy day scheme.

Instead, it’s Jake doing his best to fit through the loose frame of the tent ‘door,’ his arm lifted to hold the canvas aside. As soon as you lay eyes on him, he freezes, as if caught out.

You have him at a disadvantage. You could keep him in the doghouse longer. The shit he pulled was inconsiderate at best.

A yawn seizes control of your face. You cover your mouth with a hand, and shake loose of it when it lets you go.

“Hey,” you say, aiming for casual. “In or out, come on.”

Smiling faintly, Jake comes inside. As he steps out of range of the door, his hand lets the doorflap shut. It catches on the end of his tail, and he jumps, whirling on it. His tail swishes the rest of the way in, almost offended.

You tuck your thumbs into the band of your sleep clothes, the loose drawstring pants knotted around your hips. “You missed breakfast. Want me to whip something up for you?”

“No, that’s fine. It seems you’re all staying inside today.”

You nod. “Rain counts as running water, which makes it hard to do magic. So the witches probably can’t do much in this weather anyway.”

Jake nods vaguely, more concerned with looking around. He hasn’t been in here, you realize. It takes an extreme force of will to not start cleaning up. Thankfully, you didn’t actually bring enough crap with you to make that much of a mess here.

“This is how humans live, then?” His voice is soft, in deference to the calm of the room.

“In a temporary sense, yeah.” You stand still in the middle of your room while Jake works his way cautiously around. His feet make odd little sounds against the mat, a tacky padding sound. His fingers tap against each other as he looks at everything, touching nothing.

“Temporary,” he murmurs. “I don’t much like that word.”

Yeah. That. You remember that. “Jane thinks the island needs help. I don’t think there’s a big chance we’re going to just abandon it.”

“Chance.” He stops, and looks over at you. “I don’t much like any of this. Do you know that before you all came, I understood being lonely. I was as intimate with loneliness as you could care to imagine.” His face falls into an expression of deep despair. “Now, there’s all these new things to wrap my noggin around. Being scared is a new one.”

Shit. You feel that one in your fucking ribs like a knife. “Jake.”
“You won’t tell me it either. That you won’t leave.” His eyes shut, and his voice descends into a low, cricket-hum.

“I’m not in charge here. That’s not how things work where we’re from.”

“Don’t much like where you’re from, honestly. It sounds awful.”

You bark a laugh, and Jake brightens, opening his eyes again. “Yeah. Well.” You shrug, and it catches in your spine. Arching, you stretch, body going tense for five long seconds before you come loose, arms hanging. “What happened with Jane yesterday? You fucking bolted like you had a hellhound on your heels.”

“Showing someone all your sensitive bits is a mortifying prospect, you know!” He steps closer, and soons starts circling around you, as he did back at the waterfall. His tail drags behind him, and you’re sort of stuck in the loop. You could step over, but might get jabbed by a toxin spine. Maybe it’s some posturing thing, you have no idea. You fold your arms over your chest, tucking your feet closer together. Immediately, Jake steps closer, the loop closing tighter.

You meet his eyes, and watch him grin, pleased either with himself or with you. “What are you going to do all cooped up in here?” he asks.

“Probably take a nap.” You put a hand on his chest, pushing.

His hand curls over your wrist, holding you still. All his attention shifts to your arm, his thumb pressing against the dark lines there. “You have these fetching marks all over. The others don’t. Which is more common?”

“The not,” you answer, trying to split your attention between his face and his hands on you. He touches the Algiz rune delicately, then drags the pad of his finger up the slope of your arm, shifting to hold you at the elbow and turn your arm to see. “They’re… because I’m noble, they’re a safe haven ward. Keeps magic away from me.”

One fingertip finds the pointed tip of the crow skull. You twitch hard, and Jake lets go, eyes a little wide. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” you manage, voice tight. The remnants of his warm touch are lingering; you rub your arms. “People don’t usually touch them.” That’s not true. He’s not going to get it. Revise. “Me.”

There’s something dark that unfolds over Jake’s face. “Why’s that?”

“Because I’m noble. Do you not… feel that, or see it, or whatever? Seems like everyone else fucking does.”

“You feel different from the others, certainly, but I don’t see what the big hullabaloo about it is! Or why—” His voice clicked, and he chirps, low and sharp. “Why it ties you up like this.”

You can hear your heartbeat in your ears, speeding out of your control. There’s bile in your words, soured from being held so long. It never works letting them out, and you stopped bothering so long ago. Now, though, they come out drenched in an acidic tone. “Where I come from, Jake, people look at me and see I’m broken. They see me as some kind of plague vector. People like me used to be locked up for the safety of their fucking communities, alright? Do you get it yet?”

This close, you can’t help but see the way Jake’s eyes widen, the vivid green of his eyes shrinking to a narrow ring around obsidian black pupils. His hands move, like he wants to grab you, but stop halfway to your shoulders, fingers curling into fists. “Speaking is hard. Keeping all your little
funny words in my head, putting them in the right order. I’m not good at this, but.” He takes hold of your arms, thumbs pressing against the ink just under your shoulders. “You were the first person I ever saw. Do you get that yet, you obstinate numpty? You were…” He breathes out hard. “I’m glad you were the first person I saw.”

It’s getting borderline painful to meet his eyes, but you cannot pull away. It has to be a mesmer holding you. Has to be. “If that’s the reason why–”

The look on Jake’s face is, briefly, as thunderous as the storm swell outside. “You aren’t listening to me, and it’s so frustrating! Am I doing it wrong? I don’t know how to say these things and yet you won’t believe me otherwise.” He leans in, forehead against yours, eyes open and deep as the mirrored sky on the water. “Cut a friggin’ slice of sympathy here, Dirk, and meet me halfway!”

“Halfway to what?” you ask, and anything else is muffled as Jake kisses you with an agonized sound.

He’s naked, and it pisses you off that there is nothing to grab hold of. His hands fist in the back of your shirt, and you card your fingers up into his hair, gripping just as hard until he yelps, and both of you freeze.

Outside, the rain is picking up into a storm, wind crushing against the tent walls, the distant boil of thunder turning into full crashes of noise, all folded over the top of the thickening patter of rain.

Jake rubs his nose against your face, spots pricking up gold. “Quieter.”

“Yeah,” you whisper back.

“As much as I want to hear every tune you can play on those vocal chords, I could make you silent. Would that help?”

You frown at him. “How?”

Jake smiles, presses a finger to his lips, and then to your lips.

The touch tingles on contact, and dissipates, shivery sensation moving outward to encompass your mouth, and then moving inside. The feeling spreads in jolts of cool energy over your palate, sinking into your gums and tongue. You can’t resist the shocked noise that comes from a uniquely fucking weird feeling like that.

But no actual sound leaves you. The energy slips down your throat like water and nestles against your larynx.

It’s terrifying. It’s incredible. You can feel it in you, on your skin, permeating. For your entire life, you’ve reacted to cast magic like an allergy, and now the spell seeps into you and a lot of descriptions in a lot of texts suddenly make sense.

People get to feel this all the time.

Wow, you breathe, and are silent.

He kisses you again, warm tongue against your cool lips. Hands curl around your hips and you’re eased back, down. You’d suggest the actual bed, but you can’t suggest much of anything now, and elect to let Jake press you to the floor. The bamboo mat isn’t too bad against your back.

It’s fast; you’re still just yards away from the others, and you’re just fucking asking to be caught out. Jake unties your drawstring and gets his hand around you as he mouths your neck. You gasp
silently and drag your fingers up and down his sheath; he chirps, muffled against your neck, his slit dripping wetly. His dick stays cozy inside, but your can feel the twitch of his hips as you try to find the shape of it and rub hard.

Glowing slick soaks the front of your pants and catches on your fingers. Biting your lip, you grab Jake’s hand with both of yours, coating his palm with it. He looks down, lips parted around sharp breaths. “Oh. Oh, that’s-- you’re so clever, Dirk. Here.”

The warm, wet touch has you coming in minutes, head pressing against the mat, back arching. Silent, completely wrapped up in the feeling.

As you go lax under him, Jake presses his sheath against you and just rocks, hard pressure until he shivers and leaks out more slick, movements slowing.

Fuck. You rub your face with the back of your hand.

It takes nudging him and tapping your mouth for him to undo the spell. He breaks the seal with a kiss, the gossamer threads of the charm unraveling as his tongue traces your lips.

You can hear your own breathing again, and it’s.

“Dirk?” Jake whispers, nuzzling your cheek.

For a few long minutes, you lay still, arm thrown over your eyes, waiting for the weird tangle of emotions to leave you the fuck alone.

It passes. It always passes eventually. You lower your arm, laid out on the floor with Jake watching you with concern, his wide-splayed hand petting up and down your chest.


Thanks to fluid combination, your pants are fairly ruined. You’ll have to wash them later, preferably when Jane and Roxy aren’t at camp. Pushing them off, you kick them under your bed for now.

Jake lets out a cricket hum, and you smirk as you climb onto your bed. As usual, the sheets are tangled because you never bother to make them. While you handle them, Jake leans against the headboard, looming.

“Where do you sleep?” you ask him.

“Sometimes in one of the caves. Sometimes against the lakebed. It’s quiet down there.” His fingers tap against the headboard. “I can leave if you want.”

You’re not an idiot; you know what Jake is asking here. It’s not something asked of you often. But Jake seems to want a lot of things from you that no one else has. It’s an oddity as integral to him as his glowy spots or his anxious tail movements.

Knowing that doesn’t make you any better at this. “I’m not sure how interesting sleeping humans are.”

“All things are interesting,” Jake reminds you, and steps closer with blatant anticipation.

“You’re going to get the sheets wet.”

“I can fix that, actually. Drawing water out of things is solidly within my arcane wheelhouse.”
You don’t have any other objections, so you climb into bed and slide over to the far side, close to
the canvas wall. As soon as you lay down, a tension takes hold of you, like a piano wire. One
hand clenching in your pillow, you wait.

It must be obvious, because Jake sits on the edge of the bed first. For a moment, his fingers just
touch you lightly with no attempts to move close. You shut your eyes and breathe.

The skin along the back of your arm is so soft, even the lightest brush makes you want to jump.
One of Jake’s hands settles over your forearm, curling, the breadth of his fingers and palm wide
enough to encompass so much space. It keeps you still, as if he anticipated your skittishness, as he
examines the lines in the most delicate parts of your arm with his other hand.

Being held in place and touched is a heady, confusing feeling. Your brow furrows as Jake
explores, trying to remember the shapes he’s tracing, picturing them in your mind’s eye.

There are sacred geometries filling out the plane of soft skin, coming to a point at the knuckle of
your elbow, where it was circled by the alchemic symbol for salt, the flat line perfectly bisecting
the hard knot. Below, a starfield of constellations spread down to your wrist. His fingers press to
each one in turn.

“Salt and stars,” he murmurs.

“You recognize them?” you ask quietly.

“Some… I think it’s from my bastardization of the Allspeak charm.” His hands lifts, and yours
tightens in the sheets. He traces the mark at the top of your arm, the crown floating above the the
chalice. “This one, I don’t know.”

“Probably because it’s more… personal. Most of my sleeves are symbology and rites. That one
I…”

“What’s it for?”

His fingertips slip against the rim of the chalice, like trying to play a wine glass. You sigh out
through your nose. “One of my first tattoos. When I was younger, I tried to get into an art school.
Saved up my money, figured if I paid for all my classes upfront, they’d just take the coin and shut
up. But I couldn’t get pass the placement test because there was a magical component they
wouldn’t let me get around.”

Jake’s fingers still on your arm.

You swallow against the tightness in your throat. “I punched the dean in the throat and had to run
for it. Skipped town. Spent some of my tuition on that tattoo. It’s… tarot? They’re these cards
seers like to use. The King of Cups is supposed to have emotional balance and fortitude and shit.”

His hands sweep over you, like gentling an animal. “Dirk.”

You don’t want to hear it. You don’t think you can hear it right now. “You’re keeping me up,”
you tell him, a weak protest.

With no further preamble, Jake climbs into the bed behind you. Predictably, it’s a goddamn
production, with his long limbs and that fucking tail all wanting to fit alongside you. The space
between you evaporates as he wiggles in, arms folding around you and tipping you back to rest
against his chest.
As you shift, trying to arrange your legs around his, his tail slides between your thighs, thick enough to make you spread further apart. It curls around one leg, holding you arrested and still. The spines tickle your skin, and you shift away; getting dosed up on that toxin is going to make sleep fucking impossible.

Jake hums and grabs his tail, reaching down your body to twist it around, spines moved out of the way, and folds back around you. His body rolls forward, pressing your belly to the mattress. He’s heavy and warm and dense, laying against your back, the dampness of his body seeping heat into you.

It’s a cocoon of dark brown and green skin, and his spots dim as he nuzzles in against your neck. He’s not crushing you, but it’s hard to breathe for entirely different reasons. Mostly in the way his hand finds yours and carefully opens your fist. He works his thumb against the tendons of your fingers, pressing in and dragging out the lingering ache.

This, you think, is what a drought of sleep feels like. It must. You feel so heavy and safe, so much of your body tucked away from the rest of the world. It’s like you can’t be found, you’re so hidden, ensconced, almost small.

It’s another brand new feeling you’ve never experienced before, and as inexorable, taking your resistance from your lax grip.

Jake rubs his nose against your hairline, near your ear. Very softly, he asks, “Are you still upset with me?”

You sigh, and feel yourself backsliding further, closer to sleep. “No,” you mumble, eyes shut. “Prob’ly not.”

You can feel the expanse of his grin as he kisses your ear before settling down behind you, a handsy, warm wall between you and the storm.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t think any content warnings are needed for this one.........

And well shit, I’ve gone off-outline. This chapter was supposed to have about three more scenes, but the tent scene went super fucking long and did a lot of stuff I didn’t anticipate in the outline. So, I’ll restructure and tweak it. No big deal. I’m just sad I didn’t get to..... ANYWAY.

I didn’t do a lot of comment replies last chapter just due to being busy, but everyone, I’m overjoyed by the response to that chapter and to Jake English Being Jake English. I’ve now AUed Jake a few times and even though he’s literally a magic frogboi in this one, I’m trying to skew a little closer to his canon traits this time to explore them.

I am also trying to lean much harder into his, uh, speech quirk. Which is a lot of stressful fun to write, let me tell you. Riding that line of ridiculousness and his particular brand of minced oaths and malapropisms and just weird metaphors, it’s a Lot. /fingers crossed. Hope it works.

Til next time.
A few hours before dawn, you stir awake as Jake untangles himself and climbs out of bed.

It’s not accurate to say that over the past few days you’ve gotten used to someone sharing your bed. The idea is too big and strange to settle so quickly into your life, even if… in some ways, it’s welcome. You sleep hard and deep with someone at your back, wrapped up tight and held still. It’s difficult to nail down, but you’re reminded of airships and their ballasts, the heavy weight that keeps them steady in the air.

Normally, Jake makes a game of it, spending the evening about camp, a perfect guest for supper before heading off to the lake. An hour later, when the tent lamps have been doused, you inevitably heard the rustle of the canvas and that distinct damp tmp-tmp of lorelay feet on bamboo mats.

The first few nights, there were a few soft inquiring chirps for you to drowsily reply to before he’d join you. Then, the only warning you received was the blankets shifting before a heavy body pressed in and cavalierly rearranged yours to suit.

It’s nice. And often, you wake to find yourself alone again.

Today, though, it’s still dark, and you feel Jake’s tail unwinding from around you, slipping away and letting your legs fall closed. Turning, you lift your head, blinking blearily at him. “Hrm? What’s happenin’?”

“Nearly morning. Just headed back to the lake. Go back to sleep,” Jake tells you quietly.

Rolling onto your back, you look up at him, your arm falling lax over his lap. “Yeah, alright.” You shift around and frown. “Keep gettin’ the bed wet, you ass…”

“I always fix it!” Hopping upright, Jake rests his palms against the linens. A bright gold glow floods his spots, and you feel the sheets around you begin to dry, heat suffusing outward from his hands, like sundried cloth. He holds up his palms, beaded with water, and grins. “See?”

“Cool,” you mumble. “Helps keep you wet?”

“Not nearly enough. Even if this weren’t some sort of clandestine liaison between us, I couldn’t stay much longer before having to go throw myself in the water. Getting a touch hard to breathe.”

You finish turning over, propping yourself up on your arm. “I’ve got a canteen. You can just--”

“I usually dump it over myself in the middle of the night, it helps immensely.” He sits beside you, grinning. “Did you not notice it was always empty come morning? I assumed you knew and were refilling it for me.”

“In hindsight, that sure makes a lot of sense,” you say before yawning. “Fine. See you at breakfast.” Leaning up, you kiss him.

The effect is immediate. Jake’s grin widens into a shiny crescent of teeth and all his spots pop bright, the sudden flood of light making you shield your eyes. “Fuck, what.”
He bends down and kisses your temple, your forehead, the back of your hand, your nose. “I’m--I’m just pleased, you old curmudgeon. I think that was the first you’ve planted one on me while you weren’t mildly sauced in the brainpan.”

“And who’s fault’s that?” you shoot back.

“No need to bandy about such accusations.” One last peck against your lips. “Go back to sleep, Dirk.”

You have no objections and slump back down. Another two hours will do you good.

At night, you sleep so deeply you think you’re never going to move again. Sloth has never once been your vice before this excursion, but it’s as though you’re being led by the hand into another place, dimly lit and heavy and comfortable in a way you have never felt before in your life. Its invasive, working into you like hot water or acupuncture or fishhooks.

In the morning, you feel you have to do something, as desperate for forward momentum as a clock needing a good windup.

Like usual, you have breakfast with everyone, and like usual everyone parts ways before long. Even Jake goes for a swim.

And you do too, in the opposite direction.

If you got coin for every time Jane said she intended to have you swim out to the ocean pillars, you could retire at thirty. But there always seems to be something else on her mind, and amorphous plans melt away before you get around to them.

There’s no reason you can’t handle this yourself. You might not have any university learning, but you have lived in close proximity to magical research for so long, you know a thing or two about empirical observation.

Standing on the beach, facing the endless blue horizon, the line where sky meets dark water, you stretch out your arms and legs, toes in the sand. The sun is blazing hot, so much you bet you can feel more freckles happening as the moments tick by. Soon, you’ll wind up a minefield of brown flecks marring a perfectly sunburnt plain, and not a lot else.

It’s enough to get you in the water. After so long swimming in the lake, the oceanic chill is like a punch in the chest. Thank fuck no one is around to see you wade out, squirming and jumping back every time the cold becomes too much. The sea is not a friendly thing.

You adjust eventually, and the cold eases. Taking the waterbreathing taffy you pinched from the supplies, you chew and let the components mix and activate.

Now, you have perspective. The tang of the spell is weird as it works into your teeth and gums, granules of air clinging to the corners of your mouth like you tried to swallow sand. It’s a world away from the cool wash of Jake’s spellwork. In hindsight, you probably could have asked for his help.

Best not. You don’t want to get addicted to his friendly brand of magic with the hourglass draining on your time here, you think bitterly as you snap your goggles on and dive.
A great basalt pillar standing out in the ocean creates a sort of optical illusion. From the shore, it looked like a decent swim out to reach it. Once you’re in the water, the distances unfolds and expands into something greater as the pillar grows in height and breadth before you.

By the time you get your hands on the pillar, you have to take a rest; gripping the column, you cling tight to a helpful groove carved into the rock and float, taking steady breaths.

Above you, the pillar seems to tap against the canopy of the sky.

You push your goggles up into your hair, taking a closer look.

The pillar is enormous. If you tried to hug the thing, your arms would maybe reach a tenth of the circumference. It’s the leg of a colossus in the shallows of a pool.

The scope of these basalt ruins are starting to seem impossible. Even without the sturdy magical mechanisms worked in, the enormous constructions of ornate stone are… unfathomable without some serious magic. It’s not something that comes easily to you, the understanding of magical expenditures.

Floating in the water, holding onto a monument a fucking league from the land with others like it in sight, you start to get it.

When the feeling of being an insignificant speck in a vast unknowable depth passes, you turn your attention away from the existential crisis and examine the pillar itself.

It reminds you strongly of the jungle monument that blasted radiant magic. But scaled the hell up, obviously. There’s the same type of engravings worked through the entire thing, from the very top and down to the water and presumably beyond. It also has the same resin glass, you’re surprised to find. Not a bowl for offerings this time, and nothing within arms reach, but as you lean back and squint at the body of the pillar, you can see the glint of something that’s definitely not basalt.

About twenty feet over your head, a deep groove’s carved out of the pillar, a channel that reaches into the center. In that uncovered middle, you can see glass discuses set firmly within, locked between basalt and spaced evenly up. There’s about a dozen of them shining in the afternoon light.

They seem inert for the moment. They also seem really far out of reach for lake water offerings, so you can’t imagine that’s the point.

There’s also about a dozen of these enormous pillars spaced around the island.

You think that’s probably relevant.

For the sake of being thorough, you need to get a look at the rest of the pillar. Goggles back on, you take a moment to remember how to reverse-breath with the taffy before bracing your hands and pushing yourself down into the water.

It’s a long way down, at the very least farther than the light can readily sink into. With one hand on the pillar, you are reassured as you venture further into the ocean, but that doesn’t help when you can’t see shit.

That is what magelights are for. You shake one awake and keep going.

In the same way swimming out took longer than you expected, swimming down is the same. Your feet touch the sandy floor, and you’re starting to really fucking feel the cold, this far down.
The chill doesn’t bother you. Your attention is caught by a shadow along the ocean floor. As you hold the magelight aloft, it’s blue-white light fights against the water to illuminate what looks like a trench. It expands out in two directions from the pillar.

You barely need the confirmation, but you follow the trench for a while before kicking up to the surface. It’s again a long trip to the top, and you’re relieved when your head breaks into the air again.

As expected, the trench is heading to the next pillar.

It makes you feel real goddamn small indeed.

It’s suppertime at camp. Around the canopy, the lamps are lit, orange firelight from their wicks and from the faint licking flame under the pan you’re working. Tonight’s dinner is fish that Jake brought you that you in turn cleaned and chunked and tossed onto the heat with a bit of oil and citrus fruit slices and some purple taro-potato root you found in the fruit grove. Jake’s suspicious of how you’re ruuning the fresh fish he caught special for you, but you know his curiosity about human cuisine is too strong to resist.

You haven’t touched your rations in the last three days, trying to figure out alternatives. It’s a low-stress chore for you, and while Jane is without a doubt a better baker than you, cooking is more your area of expertise. Roxy, for her part, handles pouring drinks. Between the four of you, you’ve got everything covered.

Jake half-watches you, keeping an eye on dinner and an eye on the book in his hands. He’s been reading voraciously: Jane’s detective novels, Roxy’s pulp books and grimoires, and today a human anatomy book that has him flashing interested hues every few pages.

The night’s looking good until you open your mouth with bad news.

Jane doesn’t look flushed with the excitement of scientific discovery when you explain what you found in the ocean. As you describe every part you can remember, her face becomes more and more grim, like an eclipse happening before your eyes.

“So, that’s… bad,” you venture as she rubs the crease in her brow.

“It explains some things,” she begins quietly. Her fork makes a tink noise against her bowl. “I’m trying to figure out… Alright, so, you understand the concept of pentagrams, right? And ritual circles?”

“They’re used to enforce balance in the aether and to control magic. Spells cast with a ritual ring are always more powerful and precise than those without. High level magic demands it. You can also use them to hold magical beings captive if the ring is strong enough,” you list off dutifully. Magic circles are as integral to magic as bell, book, and candle. Even you understand them.

“Top marks, Mr. Strider,” Jane says. “Well, they also have some mundane utility. If a witch has a hard time sleeping, they’ll often lay a pentagram on the floor under their bed or on the wall near where they sleep. The enclosure of energy is very calming and helps fight insomnia.”

“And Jane and I have been sleeping like fuckin’ logs since we got here,” Roxy throws in. “If there is what’s essent’ly a massive seal around this island, that sure explains it.”
But Jane looks distinctly unhappy about this, chewing her lip with a faraway expression on her face.

You’re not an idiot. You can put some ideas together. “So whatever is out there is working as an enclosure, and… it’s built like the other basalt mechanisms.”

“But is it built like the other basalt mechanisms?” Jane mumbles, a shiver of fear in her voice.

“Whatever it is, it ain’t about to switch on out of nowhere,” Roxy says, rubbing Jane’s shoulder reassuringly.

“We don’t know that,” Jane hisses.

“We do!” Roxy shoots back. “Listen, Janes, I know it’s real fuckin’ scary to hear we are sitting in a massive seal like a friggin’ beartrap, but that spring won’t sprong on its own.” She waves a hand away, towards the giant frog statue that looks over the entire island. “The way this place works is through intervention. Everything here’s real delicate, and the people considered it like a super sacred duty to upkeep it.”

“‘Upkeep,’” Jane echoes, still staring off in the middle distance. “‘Upkeep is interesting. If my basalt monument rejuvenated the jungle around it, and-- and the entire island needs that, well, maybe the basalt ring will rejuvenate the entire island!”

“Eh.” Roxy shrugs. “I sorta doubt it. Not all the basalt monuments do that, y’know. And from what Dirk described, they aren’t built the same.”

“What else do they do,” you ask Roxy, because this is new information out of nowhere.

“Oh man, I couldn’t list ‘em all.” She takes a deep swig of water from her canteen. “It was the priesthood’s job to use them for various functions, to keep the top spinnin’.”

You see the sharp angry flinch Jane lets loose, a whip quick sideways glare at Roxy that she covers fast. Her eyes lower to her bowl, cheeks flushing pink. “Okay,” she says with a flat voice. “There are no bowls to leave water in for the pillars, so they must be activated another way. Say, Jake, is there any kind of stone mechanism in the lake?”

Jake is slow to respond, eyes flicking over the last passage on the page he’s reading before he tears his gaze away. “Sorry, what?”

Jane inhales sharply. “In the lake. Are there any basalt totems or devices? The greenish-black rock?”

“Oh.” He shrugs and immediately returns to his book, thumping to the next page. “No.”

“There wouldn’t be,” Roxy adds, words spaced out and exaggerated. “The whole point is that the lake’s a conduit of the old god. You can’t submerge a magical thing into the catalyst that makes it go!”

“I don’t know if you realize, Dr. Lalonde, that you have the rest of us at a distinct disadvantage,” Jane snaps back. “You refuse to share your findings, and for what? Some fickle fancy of yours? Because surely,” her voice grows louder, “if you found something concrete and relevant to our studies, you would share it with your colleagues.”

What little good humor Roxy had dissolves into a blank, frigid stare. “And what are you implying there, Dr. Crocker?”
“What’s happening?” Jake whispers at you, terse and suddenly snapped out of his reading. He looks uncomfortable around the raising volumes, tail flicking anxiously. His fingers curl tight around the textbook. You really don’t want him to hightail it to the lake with it; magic drying powers or not, he’s going to ruin it, and he’s barely back in Jane’s good graces as it is.

“I’m just wondering what’s going on. You’ve spent over a month studying that temple, and you come back spouting all these non-sequiturs about this place, and you won’t let us see your notes!”

“I don’t have notes!” Roxy snaps back. “It’s-- it’s all up here, fuck, okay?” She taps her temple and wraps her arms around herself, fingers digging into her arms. The dark lacquer on her nails is chipped, enough to draw your attention, to make you really look at how frazzled she seems. The humid climate’s sunk into her pink hair, random strands bouncing out of her habitual coif, messy and a literal translation of the energy coming off her. “I don’t get involved in your biology crap, do I?”

“What do you mean you don’t have notes,” Jane shrieks, nearly sticking her fork in her hair as she grabs her fringe. “That’s not possible, Roxy, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Wanna talk, Jane? How about we sit here and talk about the fact you lied about talking to the home office today!”

That brings a deafening quiet down like a palette of bricks.

After over a month on the island, everyone decided it was time to burn another of the rituals the girls set up to facilitate communication with the mainland. Jane was going to sit down and have a talk to catch Crocker Magitech up with the expedition. As much as you were enjoying the distance, you thought it was a good idea and would help smooth down the inevitable ruffled feathers your impromptu trip caused.

That she didn’t actually do it is news to you.

Jane’s expression is sucker punch blank, eyes wide and hung on Roxy.

The fire goes out of Roxy. “I just. I checked when I got back. You didn’t spend one of the rituals.”

You keep your voice as soft as you can as you ask, “Is there a reason why?”

She blinks slowly, gaze lowering slowly to her hands, her mostly-empty bowl.

“I didn’t want to,” she says quietly. “I set up all the components and was about to set off the ritual, but I just. I don’t want to talk to them yet.” There’s a tremor in her voice. “Maybe things aren’t perfect and we all keep these silly little things from each other,” her eyes flick to Jake and to Roxy. Not you. You swallow against the knot in your throat. “But this place is ours for now, and I-- I don’t want to give that up yet. I don’t want to share. And besides, what am I going to say? If I told them about this big wonderful place and all these mysteries we’re trying to solve, th-- the thing they’re going to want to know is what it’s worth?”

You can’t keep your eyes from sliding to Jake. It’d be a fucking fib to say the same thought hasn’t crossed your mind. Just what is all of this is worth to the trust. What’s he worth.

Jane puts her bowl aside and stands. “And you know, for once, I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to look at this place and think about coin. I don’t…” She flicks her thumb over her eyes. “For three and a half weeks, I don’t want to hear it, that’s all.” With a shaking breath, she says, “Excuse me,” and hurries off to her tent, just barely not running.
All three of you watch her go, left in the uneasy silence in her wake. You want… to fill it somehow. To find noise. If you overhear Jane crying or something, you’re going to lose your shit, and you don’t know if going to her is the correct thing right now. But it’s fair to say you haven’t known the correct thing to do since you stepped off the Acorn.

Roxy leans her face in both hands, letting out groan. “I’m such an ass.”

Jake, looking lost, reaches out and rubs the back of his hand against her arm, giving you a bewildered stare.

“We should probably do something,” you offer carefully, hoping it’s not too obvious that you are completely out of your depth.

“You know,” Roxy says, muffled into her palms, “I was going to bust out my other wine bottle. Toast to us hitting the halfway point on this fucking expedition. Share some of the wackier anecdotes I got about the natives who lived here.” She sniffs loudly and lifts her head to smile at Jake. “Bet you’re curious too, huh?”

At an obvious loss, Jake chirps and keeps rubbing her arm.

Roxy takes his hand, squeezing. “Maybe tomorrow then.” Gently pushing him back, she stands. “I’m gonna…”

“Yeah,” you say. “Me too.”

As she walks past you to her tent, she leans down on your shoulder. For once, you turn up to meet her. Her lips press against your cheekbone. You don’t kiss her back, but make the sound back at her. When she pulls back, she’s smiling faintly, and it follows her back to her tent.

At some point, while you’re cleaning up the bowls, Jake vanishes.

Given the high tension around camp and the way it’s easing into a strange melancholia, your lorelay making himself scarce is not at all surprising. He doesn’t seem to know how to deal with uncomfortable situations and uses the lake to avoid anything he doesn’t like. You wish he’d stick around if only to combat the loneliness you’re left with in everyone’s wakes, but there is something… reassuring about it.

It’s fucking counterintuitive, but the rough edges to Jake are nice. He’s charming and friendly and so keen on you it cuts you open, but he’s also sort of selfish sometimes and so oblivious you’re damn sure he’s playing it up for his own devices. He’s magical and beautiful and a singular being on this adventure, but he’s also a person.

If you let yourself think about it, knowing that really helps you deal with the fact you’re kind of sleeping with one of the expedition’s research subjects.

Speaking of secrets, christ. You can’t get upset at the girls for keeping things close when you’ve got your own secret to keep.

As much as you’d like help tidying up for the night, you don’t so much as look out at the lake to check for Jake. It doesn’t take long anyway, and you blow out the lamps before turning in yourself.
Even with all the interpersonal morass clouding your head, you feel good. Your prolonged swim in the ocean has you feeling wrung out like a sponge, every inch of your skin washed clean of the skittering unease of gathered magic. When you undress and sprawl out over your bed, you take a deep breath and feel the vice in your chest loosen a little.

Distantly, through the cover of your closed eyes, you wonder about that magic ring thing, wonder if there’s a way it could be affecting you too, your sleep coming so sweet and easy.

When you’re woken up later, you can tell you’ve slept longer than usual. Often, when Jake slips into bed with you, it’s before you hit a REM cycle. This time, the night is much deeper, and it’s harder for you to come out of slumber. Eyes still closed, you shift against the bed, humming vaguely.

You try to roll onto your side to let Jake in behind you, but a hand catches you, his grip on your knee folding you back. “J’ke,” you manage, barely more than a catch of sound against the top of your mouth.

“Quiet,” he whispers, his knee against the mattress dipping it. You put your hands on him to brace yourself, and feel him push right back, climbing fully up onto the bed. He pushes the linens aside with a soft chirp-hum and works his way over you, body urging your legs apart to accommodate him.

That rouses you enough to open your eyes, blurry and a half step away from falling back asleep. It’s dark but for the pale lorelay illumination balanced on his arms over you. You’re well bracketed in, his hands planted by your shoulders, all his peacock fins hanging down, radiating luciferin and warm light.

You stretch your legs out, curl your arms up so you can grab his wrists. “Hey.”

The expression gripping his features is strange. It’s not the bedroom eyes you know he’s got hidden in the handsome cut of his face. His lips are parted around his sharp breaths as he arches, bending down over you. The ring of his irises is thin, eyes wide and almost startled.

You put a hand on his chest, rubbing over a scattering of spots there. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

He leans down against the weak resistance of your palm to kiss you, one hand catching in your hair in a tight grip to hold you still as he opens your lips and dives deep. A muffled noise makes it out of you before he folds down on his elbows, settling his broad body over you until you’re covered. He’s a molten core of heat against you, and it sinks into you like it has every night since he started sleeping with you.

The calming weight and warmth of him ain’t calming right now.

You’re stupid from sleep inertia and unsure what to do but grip his biceps and try to catch up. You’re missing something, but you’re missing a lot of things right now, and having Jake lick his way deep into your mouth isn’t doing much to help matters. Old coals stoked back to flame, you come awake into a drowsy kind of arousal, unsure of what’s happening or why it’s happening at, like, two in the morning? But fast coming around.

A loud moan must escape you, because Jake rears back and puts a hand over your mouth. “Quiet.”

You shove his hand away. “I’m trying, asshole.” It’s seriously not your fucking fault you’re being well and truly manhandled and that kind of turns your crank, alright.
Jake puffs out a breath, eyes still and trained on your face. “I don’t want to lasso your voice box again. I want to hear, but…”

You swallow and nod. “Well, uh. The witches sleep real deep with all the magical shit going on here, so…”

A hand grips your calf, and Jake leans down against you, flushed gold and motions intent. “Yes? How deep, d’you think?”

Wow, okay, fuck. You push up onto your elbows; Jake makes a disapproving noise as you do, briefly tries to nudge you back down, but you headbutt him gently. Looking down between your bodies, you can see his sheath starting to part. And you have absolutely thought about this before. As much enjoyment as you’ve had getting that dick in your mouth, you have some better ideas too.

You look back up at Jake’s face, and he cricket hums, deep and low in his chest, pressing his face to yours to urge you back down.

“You want to keep me quiet?” You start to move, quick before he can catch you, legs bending up, shifting over onto your side. “We just gotta do this another way.”

He’s reluctant to let you go, but you’re insistent, and soon his hands are on your hips, guiding you onto your front. Gathering a pillow in your arms, you assume the fucking position, knees spaced out, shoulders low, chin against the pillow. “Get it?” you ask, voice shaking slightly.

“Oh,” Jake says, and he sound so goddamn surprised, you twist to look back at him. He’s got his thumbs pressing in a bit to your ass cheeks, and looks so fucking bewildered it’s incredible. “The book didn’t mention this.”


“Human anatomy,” Jake mumbles, fucking petting the slight curve on offer to him. Shit, his hands are huge, it’s distracting. Big fingers, shit, shit, shit. You feel a curl of heat stir in you at the thought. “A few romances Jane had, but they weren’t as helpful? The two Roxy had were much more interesting.”

If you find out that Roxy’s ferried saucy gay pulp novels across the ocean, you… you aren’t going to do shit, because look where you are. Not a position to complain. “I’m glad you found some inspiring literature, but I’m the only person in this tent that’s done this before, so.”

That. Makes a flash of green overtake Jake’s color for a moment, fading quickly back to yellow swiftly. Before you can remark on that, Jake’s hand slips away for a second, coming back slick and glowing, and you flush so hot, you have to turn back around, resting your head in your pillow.

Jake shoving his fingers against himself to get slick enough to finger you is a… a lot to handle at this time of night, fuck.

The noises Jake makes are not even approaching English as he starts prodding his fingers against your ass. You shudder, a zipline of ardent interest and a bit of embarrassment running down the slope of your spine into your hot face as he spreads slickness around. Up on offer like this, you’ll be able to muffle yourself so the girls can’t hear but also, thank god, so maybe Jake won’t hear how fucking into this you are.

You can tell from touch alone when he gathers more of his slick in his fingers, and presses one into you. He’s not careful about it at all, not like you anticipated, and your hands dig harshly into
the pillow. You could tell him to take it easy but… A sizeable part of you really likes this. And you can take it.

The commentary behind you continues in pure lorelay-speak, the ebb and flow of strange words filling your ears as Jake works you open. It’s dizzying and strange. Your sleep-addled brain spins through vague ideas and concepts, of all the leverage you’ve handed Jake and how he’s taking it all and more without hesitation, pulling you along for the ride.

You’re so caught up in your own fucking head that when Jake’s long, wet dick starts to push into you, the choked groan makes it out of your mouth. And Jake takes hold of your hair, pushes you down on the pillow to shut you up.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, okay, fuck. You’re so turned on, you have to turn your head to gasp for air, your entire body clenching down and making Jake groan. There’s a wet slap behind you, you assume of his own hand covering his mouth.

It’s nearly too much to focus on the fact that his long, very not-human dick is working its way into you. You breathe through the jumbled mess enough to pay the fuck attention. You’re the first person to blow that weird, pretty dick, and you’ll be damned if you don’t expand on your rigorous mental notes.

Mostly that, holy shit, it’s dripping wet. You involuntarily squeeze and feel how much he’s leaking into you, and down your legs, liquid hot and so obscene you shake at the sensation. His hands pet up and down your back and hips, chirping softly, seeming at a loss of what else to do as he just works his way in. It’s a long dick, and you’re starting to suspect you’re going to wake somebody up with how noisy you are taking it, muffling be damned. His hips circle, slides further in, and you can feel the urge to just shake apart and moan being shoved out of your mouth.

Sucking in a breath, you hide your face, reaching blindly back to grip his legs, feeling the way his muscles move under your fingers.

You’re losing track of how fucked deep he is, a little out of control. Or, fine, a lot out of control. There is no control here with you pinned under Jake, his hand holding you in place like a goddamn animal, your hands just trying to find purchase to grasp at. There is nothing you can do but take it and soak in the sensation. You can feel is intimately as his dick starts to fill and expand from the stimulation, your eyes rolling as you stretch further around him. As he rocks in, you can feel one drip of watery come escape and slide up your back. You cannot fathom the state you must be in now, hitching and groaning against him.

Finally, he’s flush against your ass, all the way in, and it’s so drenched in wet heat you can feel it, your eyes open but unseeing, toes curling, mind fucking obliterated by how overwhelmed you are.

His dick is still essentially filling out inside you when you stumble into orgasm. It feels like something stolen from you, and you’re too shaken to do anything about it but let out a staggered sob of a breath and rake your fingers into the bed.

Two big hands curl around your ribs as you catch your breath. He holds you carefully and circles his hips, slipping an inch in, an inch out, over and over, restless and unceasing.

There isn’t any friction for you, you’re so wet now, and Jake doesn’t hesitate to keep fucking you. It has you quieted at last, just sighing and moaning faintly as he uses you as long as he pleases. By now, you know he doesn’t climax like you and will just… keep going until he’s finished.

You refold your arms under your pillow, cheek pressed against it, and let your back drop into a curve, helping him get deeper in you.
There’s something almost soothing about it. There’s no oversensitivity catching against you off since you’re worked so open and he glides so easily in you. You twitch every time his soft ridges nudge you in the right way but it’s not urgent. Just rocking, fluid motion.

An eon later, he slows, rubbing his slick hands everywhere he can reach, breathing steady and even. Leaning back, he slips out of you, and you can fucking hear the damp sound as his come drips off your soft dick onto the bed.

You push yourself up on shaking, exhausted arms to look down. Suspicions confirmed, the bed is fucking ruined. It looks like some kind of dangerous alchemical spill, bright and casting light up at your own wet thighs, and stomach, and hips, and sides.

You bury your face in the pillow, taking a cottony strained breath. If you’d been awake, you would have known this would happen. Lifting up, you ask, “Can your magic clean this up or what?”

Jake chirps and nuzzles the small of your back, apparently unconcerned with the glowy come getting on his cheek.

Slowly, muscles aching in a way you can’t help but feel gratified by, you get up onto your knees, holding the headboard for balance. Jake’s arms encircle your hips, cheek continuing to rub against your skin.

There is a lingering buzz left over from everything, just enough to bring heat to your face. You breathe for a moment, making Jake take your weight as you gather yourself. He doesn’t seem to mind, just holds you closer, hands skating over your skin. He catches one finger on your bellybutton and hooks his chin over your shoulder, watching as he traces it. His splayed hand presses in against your navel, against the sore muscles there, and you sigh.


He whines in your ear. “I don’t want to move all that, it came from me! Blergh.”

Laughter bubbles up in you, loose and tired and satisfied. “Not my problem, man. You’re the one behind all this.”

“I didn’t exactly foresee this eventuality.”

“No shit.” You elbow him. “Didn’t think much beyond wanting to get your dick wet. Well, congratulations.”

Jake makes another grossed out noise, a burbling unhappy sound. Despite his protests, he helps you out of bed, standing aside while he works. With a petulant expression, he kneels down, puts one hand in the mess and one on the floor. Some kind of transference happens, the bed drying at remarkable speed and the luminescent dampness seeping under the floor, into the crushed grass and dirt below.

When he’s done, he stands and shakes out his hand, chirping plaintively. He turns to you, lip in a pout, clearly seeking sympathy.

You finish cleaning off with a towel, throwing it over the one chair in your room. “C’mon. I’m fucking tired.”

Climbing back into the now-clean bed, you get comfortable before holding up the blanket. Jake swiftly climbs in with you, bodily pulling you against his chest and nosing at your hair.
You lay a hand over his, and shut your eyes. God, you’re worn out.

It’d take nothing to slip back to sleep, but Jake keeps moving around, wriggling closer, nuzzling you, letting out these almost subvocal noises you feel against your back. You hum vaguely at him.

“I wanted to ask you something, believe it or not,” Jake tells you in a hushed voice. “I’m not always harboring the most honorable of intentions, but this time I did intend to…” He squeezes you. “Dirk.”

“Mmm,” you reply sleepily.

“What’s your home like?” Jake asks into your shoulder. “I’ve been reading everything I can get my hands on and I’m just a little confounded by this world you come from. That you’re so eager to scurry back to.”

There’s a bitterness seeping into his voice. You hum again, and try to wake enough to articulate anything back at him from the very edge of sleep. “S’not eagerness. Jus’ not up to me.”

“Who, then? Jane?”


It’s a long time before he speaks up again, enough that you’re really beginning to go lax, melting into the kind of rest that only comes after getting fucked really well. Still, you can feel him speak, lips moving against your skin. “If that’s the case… can I come with you?”

You don’t know much, barely got two thoughts to rub together right now, but you know that’s a terrible idea. Sighing, you say, “No. You’d hate it.”

Another ponderous moment wanders by like a tortoise. He kisses your neck softly as he thinks. “Then… what do you like so much about it?”

“Never claimed I did,” you mumble. This close, you can feel him start to ask something else, and cut in, “Ask me in the mornin’, Jake.”

There’s a long held breath behind you before a hard exhale that stirs your hair. “Alright. Go to sleep, then, you lazy thing.”

You don’t have enough in you to fire back, and obediently fall to slumber.

Chapter End Notes

**content notes:** more xeno, a massive amount of glowcome, some of the usual subbiness from dirk, nothing wild.

I’m gonna stop warning for xeno because like? Obvs.

Sorry this took so long and sorry it is not significantly longer. That sex scene was supposed to be 500 words tops so I could move on to other stuff but. That didn't happen.

I've had a lot of hours at work since one of my bosses went on vacation, which meant less time to write. I prob wrote 4K words today alone to catch up, goddamn. Blargh.
Anyway. This fucking fic is pulling a hardcore ASAFAF. Things that are supposed to take one chapter are instead taking three. This fucking thing keeps getting longer. At least next chapter there is *going* to be something fun to write, finally. Not that this isn't fun, but, like. XXX Fun.

*/jazzhands*
In the morning, Jane asks you, “Can you build a garden?”

Her eyes are still a little red behind her glasses, but otherwise she’s calm, the upset from before washed away like a sandcastle at tide with only small remnants left. There’s is a shield writ in how she stands, arms folded, chin lifted. The last thing you want to do is dent it.

So you instead ask the other obvious question: “A garden? Can you elaborate?”

“An enclosure used to aid in the cultivation of flora, often for consumption,” she replies with a grin. “I brought a dictionary with me, if you require an empirical source.”

“Don’t listen to what the masses say, Crocker, you’re hilarious.” You drop yourself down in the papasan with a fruit in hand, flicking out your knife to cut slices. “Why do you want a garden? We’ll be leaving.”

“But Jake won’t be,” she says, standing over you, hands on her hips. “And I… thought it might be a nice gesture for him. If you’ll build it, I’ll talk to Roxy about transmuting some of our remaining produce back into seeds.”

“You can do that?”

“It’s advanced transmutation, but yes. It’s the aetheric equivalent of putting sand back into the top of an hourglass. It can be done.” She smiles, bright and pleased. “I know it won’t be as good as having us here with him, but I thought it’d be a nice gift? Since he’s so often up here to eat anyway.” She looks around. “The fact he hasn’t dragged his waterlogged butt up here yet is a little weird, actually.”

It is. There’s an uncomfortable stillness to the camp without him loitering around. You look out at the lake, as if you might catch sight of him with just a casual glance, but the only movement is the normal flicker of sunlight off the waves and ripples.

Jane narrows her eyes at you. “You don’t want to help.”

It’s a very Jane way of phrasing it, and you sigh. “I’m not sure how… a consolation prize will work.”

“It’s not--”

“It absolutely is,” you tell her. Tipping your head back, you stare up at the canopy. “How is this going to work? We’re just gonna… pack up and leave, right? Then what. What about the island.”

She audibly sighs. You shut your eyes to resist the urge to look at her. “I don’t know. We’ve… very thoroughly swanned off on our own in a way that I’m going to have to answer for eventually. We could soften that by turning in full reports about this place and what we think it’s capable of, but.”

She sits, the chair creaking slightly under her. “What are they going to do with this place? I’ve grown up with an eye for turning a profit in the name of the Trust, but I’m not sure how this island fits into that.”
“Greenhouse site for magical flora,” you say quietly. “Archeological dig location. Fucking resort island for the rich and sleep deprived.”

“Which would be like setting off an explosion flask in this already delicate environ. And all of those would require prolonged settlements,” Jane says.

Which, she doesn’t say, would be bad for Jake. And both of you know it.

The idea of this place filled with researchers and profit-seekers turns your stomach. As excited as Jake is to have people at last, you know down to your bones that a crowd of transplanted mainlanders would be bad for him. Even with just the three of you, he so often gets overwhelmed, retreating to the lake to essentially hide from you all until he’s feeling better.

There’s something about the idea of leading people back to the island and… essentially driving Jake back into his lake that makes you feel sick to your stomach. It’s unacceptable.

But you’re not in charge here.

“You’re making that face,” Jane murmurs. “When you’re trying hard not to have an emotion but it’s leaking out like water out of a paper bag.”

Goddammit. You keep your eyes shut. “I just think,” you says slowly, “that a full consortium of Crocker Magitech employees is one hell of a fate to inflict on the guy who just discovered other people were a thing a month ago.”

“Then what do we do, Dirk?”

Inhaling deeply, you blow out a long, steady breath through your nose. You don’t know. You have no idea. This excursion has gone in directions you never could have anticipated, and some tiny voice in your head wants to rant a blue streak about how none of this was fair to Jake and the idea of letting this brand new world of yours hurt him was unacceptable. But.

You shrug. “I’m not in charge here.”

“Dirk,” Jane says, sounding irritated.

“I’ll follow your lead.”

“I know.” She stands. “I know you will.”

Jake doesn’t come up to camp at all that day. It doesn’t help you to weather the strained atmosphere that’s stretched over everything like its own canopy, the fact that you’re doing so alone.

It’s a dangerous thing to get used to, the idea of not being alone.

At some point, you think you see him at the edge of the dock, his chin resting on his folded arms. When you squint to get a better look, he’s gone, a disturbance in the water the only sign he was there.

Hard to hold it against him. But it stings, to be left to your own devices as if it’s your fault that
you’re hurtling towards this inevitable separation. It’s an ingrained part of your life, how you’re… in a sense used to shit like this. Things have never gone well for you, and it’s not your fault that Jake still has that delicate naivete that comes from having not yet been disappointed by the world.

And as soon as that thought coalesces, you feel like a fucking asshole.

You drag your hands down your face wearily, and look out at the lake again.

Unbidden, a much less dickish thought takes over; Jake has his habit of spying on the camp from the lake before he decides to join you or not. That’s been obvious for weeks now. You wonder how he sees at that distance, though. Since Jane’s examination, it’s been in the back of your mind that Jake is not only the last of the frogmers (assuming there were others once), but he’s also the last of the frogmers with myopia.

So. Maybe if you take a moment to stop being a woeful piece of shit, you’d realize that you’re not the only one being dealt a bad hand here.

At least this one, you could actually do something about. It’s a weak gesture in the face of the impending isolation Jake faces, but that’s not reason to ignore the option.

Resigned to a day on your own, you get to work.

You clear off the work table under the canopy, setting the mostly-unused typewriter on the ground to open the space. There’s a small toolkit in the Acorn, which will be invaluable.

Then, you need to figure out how to make the damn thing. You’re not overburdened with materials for tinkering like this. Jane’s spare set of glasses are the most obvious component.

The problem is the same as before: you can’t just hand Jake a pair of Jane’s glasses, given the way he throws himself like a javelin through the water. He’d lose them within a day, and since his vision isn’t great, they’d sink down somewhere and just be gone forever.

There’s a spare set of goggles hanging in the cockpit of the Acorn. You liberate it, and take everything back to the work table, lighting up a hurricane lamp and resting it right next to your seat, letting it banish the dark shadows the high sun casts off everything.

Having a project to work on helps soothe your frayed nerves immensely. It’s been a fair amount of time since you had particular, careful work to do with your hands. Something that requires your focus rather than being some rote task you can sleepwalk through. The measured physicality settles in the careful bones of your fingers, the tendons down to your wrist.

The vice in your chest loosens a little as you remove the lenses from Jane’s wire frames, fill the drilled holes, and start to create an aperture to fit them in. It’s hard to make a perfect seal, but yet another lift from the airship takes care of that. The sealant paste meant to fix cracks and breaks in the cockpit is a useful tool. It’s a tacky mixture in its tube, but once pushed out, past the spout engraved with a basic drying rune, it strengthens into something that can withstand the windsheer of an airborne ship. That should be enough to handle the water pressure of the lake.

You line the aperture with the paste, then hold a lens in place patiently until it sets before doing the same with the next. Doing so, it’s impossible not to let your eyes stray to the bracelet that is still fastened around your wrist. You’ve been wearing it since the day Jake insistently put it on you. The braided cord is as sturdy as ever, showing few signs of wear, and the loop and hook centerpieces gleam, clean and shiny.

“Shit,” you mutter, and gingerly set the goggles down, retreating back to your tent to look through your things.
An hour later, when you’re finally done and have checked the goggles seven times over to make sure they aren’t going to break apart at the first brush of water, you take off your shoes and head down to the dock.

There’s no reason to believe Jake is around, except you just know if he’s sulking somewhere, it’s going to be closeby. With that in mind, you stand on the edge of the dock for a moment, waiting for any sign of him. When nothing comes, you bend down to pick up a few smooth stones. Weighing them in your fingers, you fling them out, seeing how many skips you can manage.

You nail a five-skip toss before Jake breaks the water’s surface to watch, chirping appreciatively.

“Hey,” you call. “Come here.”

He ducks his head down in the water and lets out a stream of bubbles, spots flashing green and sour at you. You pull a Jane, putting your hands on your hips and waiting.

Relenting, he dives down and cuts through the water to the dock with remarkable speed, popping back up and shaking his hair out of his eyes. “What’s got you pelting my lake with a fuckton of rocks for no reason, then?”

You fold up, dropping to sit with your legs folded in front of you. “You can’t imply I’ve got no reason while also inquiring what my reason is.”

“Clearly I can,” he says, but the tartness has drained from his voice with your proximity. His hands curl on the edge of the stones, and you can fucking tell from his posture there’s a non-zero chance you’re going to get pulled into the lake.

“Don’t even think about it,” you tell him. “These clothes are actually dry and I’ll be a lot less likely to give you your gift if you drag me in like a presumptuous kelpie asshole again.”

“I’ve read about kelpies in one of Roxy’s grimoires,” Jake says. “I don’t appreciate the comparison, thanks much.”

“Sorry,” you say, genuinely apologetic. “But seriously, don’t.”

“I’ll contain myself,” he says even as he reached up to pluck your suspenders with a finger. “What about a gift?”

You take the goggles off your neck and hold them out. Something like this, back home, you’d wrap it properly with all the gaudy paper and the ribbon and tags and shit. Here, you just set it into his palm. “Try these on, let me know how they work.”

His eyes widen overdramatically as he propels himself up, hooking his elbows on the dock and examining the goggles closely. For a cannibalizing of random equipment, the finished product is not the worst thing you’ve ever seen. Jake crickets loudly, and starts to pull them on, his tone getting a little pained as the band twists in his hair.

Rolling your eyes, you bend forward to help, untangling the band and stretching it out as he sets it in place over his eyes. You snap the band in place, and he yelps, slapping your hand reprimandingly.

But then, he gets quiet, and starts to look around slowly, eyes scanning the edge of the lake, the campsite, the distant volcano, the temple.

His eyes catch on the latter and he murmurs in a quiet voice. “Oh. It’s a frog.”
Fuck. There’s a pang in your chest, and you reach out to rub his shoulder, thumb sweeping over his spots as they heat and glow gold. “Yep. It’s a frog.”

The goggles look fucking goofy. You sacrificed your remaining studs and jewelry to attach them to the sides, trying to come up with something fairly ornate and nice. You manage to get the constellation for Pisces in there by using pretty much everything you have, spaced down one side of the goggles with needle-thin lines in the sealant connecting them. It’s an ambitious little design, but hopefully fitting for the celestial equator. Maybe you can point it out to Jake later.

And Pisces seems like a decent fit for him, anyway.

“They should work underwater too,” you tell him as he continues to look around. “Go make sure. If not, I gotta fix ‘em.”

There’s a soft smile on his face as he braces his feet on the dock and launches back, into the water. His tail flicks in a huge arc, and lift an arm to block the spray.

Through the water, you can see the wide loop the Jake takes, admiring yet again at how fast he moves. All the awkwardness to his body on land is just gone when he’s in the lake, cutting through it like a blade. Leaning forward on your knees, you watch avidly.

He resurfaces by you, beaming, and holds out his hands, fingers curling. “Dirk, come on, come with me.”

“Do they work? They should vent enough water under the lenses so you can see. I figured trying for an airtight seal would be pointless with you.”

“They’re a grand slam success, now come here, you brilliant penny of a bloke, let’s go swimming!”

You can see it in how he’s darting towards you and away again, you’re sitting on an ultimatum you can’t escape. With an aggrieved sigh, you stand up and shrug off your suspenders, starting to strip down. “You just always have to get your way, don’t you?”

“My way is unwaveringly the best possible way, so yes.” He spirals back underwater, swimming another loop as you take off your clothes and set them on the dock. With the humidity, it takes so long for your shit to dry here, you don’t want to ruin another set of clothes that just became wearable again.

Down to your boxers, you lower yourself into the water, submerging almost immediately in the warmth. Jake swims close and bumps his nose against yours amiably. “Hey,” you greet, wry.

“Hi.” He backs you up against the dock with the same old trick, pulling your legs up to hook over his hips. “Do you have to wear these?” One finger plucks at your boxers.

“I thought you wanted to swim,” you say quietly. You’d prefer not to do this in broad daylight, but… can’t really work up the ire to really protest.

“I want lots of things, all the time. Especially when it comes to you, chickadee, I want the whole kit and caboodle. But we can hold off on the canoodle, I suppose. Now hold still.” He puts his hands on your shoulders, sweeping down to your elbows, up to your neck, fingertips against your face. Touches spread over your skin, diligent if a little inexorable, until you see him redip his hands in the water. He presses his fingers together again, then rubs your skin more, and you sigh.

“Really?”
“Jane sure likes to remark on how little my anatomy makes sense, but you don’t even have anything to protect you from the sun! Just dry delicate skin, it’s silly.” He reaches behind your neck, and the oily massage against your spine and up into your hair is unfairly soothing. “I’d be remiss not to do what I can to take care of you.”

“You don’t do this for the girls,” you mutter, letting your head sag forward to offer up more skin. At least this way, he can get it over with faster. You shut your eyes and groan as he works your shoulders.

“That’s… different. You’re different. Don’t be obtuse, Dirk.”

That shuts you up. You have no idea what to say to that. Eventually, Jake takes your chin in hand and lifts your head to kiss you. It’s chaste and firm, and you hum into it. The initial warmth of it fizzes out under a rush of tangy cool sensation that slides like ice water down your throat and fans out over your chest. For a second, it’s invasive and weird, and you cough. Jake holds you still, lips against yours as a spell unfolds and expands to fill your lungs like air.

He sinks back, and you cough again, tongue sliding over the inside of your mouth, trying to get rid of the lingering cold-taste. “Waterbreathing?”

“Mmhm.” Jake nudges your legs off him and swims back with a strong flick of his tail. “Come along, then.”

It’s nothing like a mouthful of the taffy. Jake’s spell doesn’t create air for you to breathe, you just breathe the water. It’s a weird sensation, the way you can inhale lake water and exhale it again without issue. But water is heavier and denser than air, and a little fucking terrifying as it washes over the tingly cool magic with its warmth. At first, you’re afraid the magic will abate, leaving you with a lungful of lake water and zero survival chances.

But Jake’s magic doesn’t weaken in water. Which makes sense. It’s still a nagging fear in the back of your mind as you swim along the surface, ready to lift your head out of the water if necessary.

Below you, Jake follows, moving with just his tail rippling like a ribbon behind him, looking up at you. Crossing his arms, he gives you an expectant look.

Alright, fine. You resist the urge to take an anticipatory breath of air and kick your legs up, diving further down. Jake nods, satisfied, and breaks from his straight gliding line, twirling and… somehow almost immediately vanishing in the lower depths.

It’s pretty unreasonable for someone as big and obnoxiously bright as Jake to pull a disappearing act, but here you both are. You swim further down, away from the sunlight that pierces through the surface, fading dramatically as it reaches further down.

As you swim along, the kelp forest begins to tickle your arms, each strand moving as they brush against you, or even as you swim near them, the movement dramatic and liable to catch any lorelay eyes. You look down into it, squinting against the dim murky scene and trying to pick out similar movement, to find where Jake fucked off to. It shouldn’t be this surprising that the lorelay in the lake is real damn accomplished at hiding in said lake, but it still makes you quietly anticipatory.

There isn’t really a chance that Jake’s going to just abandon you to the lake, so it’s a waiting game.

You aim further down, finally nudging the kelp out of your path and heading down into the thick
of it. It’s a weird feeling, with so much of the slick tensile stands brushing against you. A few catch on your limbs, and you twist around to look.

There’s still no sign of Jake, and it’s starting to make your heart race a little. Not in a bad way. You make an effort to stop fucking disturbing the kelp, but every startle probably makes your location obvious and you know it in your bones.

You’re so busy scanning around and below you that the sense of movement in the water above you comes out of nowhere. A hand grabs hold of your shoulder before you’re ready, and you jolt and spin with it, facing up at your handsome, grinning attacker.

There’s enough kelp for you to reach out and seize a handful of it, pulling yourself out of his path and down, trying to propel yourself down and away. It’s even deeper into the forest, though, which makes it hard to move quickly. More than once, you have to shrug off a tangle of kelp, but at least when you look behind you, you’ve lost him.

You let out a sigh of relief, then decide that feels entirely too unnatural on your human anatomy and resolve not to do it again.

Swimming more slowly, you aren’t quite sure where you are in relation to anything. It’s dark enough that navigating by touch is all you can really manage. But looking around doesn’t help at all; it’s all indistinct shadows around you.

It’s also impossible to tell how much time is passing as you make your way along. So completely out of your element, you don’t know if it’s been minutes or longer as you wander around. The tension that filled you from Jake’s first attempt to grab you has dissipated, your pulse slowing. It’s hard not to fall into a strange stillness to match your alien surroundings, just drifting along.

Your foot catches again, this time more securely than before. When you turn around to untangle yourself, you can very faintly see the kelp hooked around your ankle is not just another stalk, but a loop tied in a clear knot.

You’re pulled backward sharply, and into Jake’s arms. His spots are a dim, dark green that barely casts any light, and his little improvised rope is wrapped around his wrist. You had no idea he could go stealthy like that.

His tries to get his arms fully around you, which would end the game pretty succinctly. You paddle frantically back, lifting your knees, managing to get one foot against his chest to shove him back.

For a moment, you think you’ll get away again, hauling yourself forward. You don’t make it far before the kelp you’re sliding through stops giving way, instead catching you in a tight, messy net. You struggle, trying to change direction, but the strands crisscross and pull taut.

In seconds, you’ve learned what it feels like to be caught in a net. When you can’t move any further, golden light radiates from above you as Jake swims down.

He has a bunch of kelp held in his fist, keeping you still. With his free hand, he takes hold of your chin and kisses you, pushing his tongue into your mouth, domineering and triumphant. It’d be poor form to deny him, so you kiss back as much as you can with absolutely no leverage.

He nuzzles your hairline as he pulls back, and takes hold of the bindings keeping your shoulders in place, pulling himself down to you where you’re trapped. Given the lack of air, it’s impossible to sass him properly, so instead you stick your tongue out at him.

He looks delighted and returns the gesture happily. Gripping your bindings, he pulls you against
him, wiggling closer. His tail grips you, squeezing, and you feel a line of pinprick breaks in your skin along your hip and down your leg.

You look at him, brow furrowing. It smooths out as he kisses you again, and starts to untangle you.

It’s a fucking mess he’s wrapped you in, and takes a while to extricate you. Shutting your eyes, you lean your head on his shoulder as pressure tightens and loosens around you, harmonizing with the heat that crawls through your body, spreading from the numerous points where his spines slid into you.

You stop paying attention to him for a while, just floating with the kindling sensation. Which is an unwise move, because left to his own devices, Jake does as he pleases. And apparently, he’s pleased to separate some long, wide band of kelp to tie around you properly.

When you leave the underwater forest, it’s entirely on Jake’s power, since he’s bound your legs together under the knee, and your arms. They’re tucked and folded together, forcing your shoulders back, and what feels like most of your chest is wrapped up. As Jake pulls you back up to the surface, you wriggle, testing the strength of the bindings. Turns out, Jake knows how to tie things up pretty well, and if anything the kelp catches against itself more tightly, a snug pressure on your chest, pinning your arms.

Breaking out of the water is a surprise. The mix of the water and air is untenable for a moment before you spit out a long stream of it. Air flooding the space feels strange and new, and you gasp for a moment as Jake just fucking lifts you, his shoulder against your hips, hands steady on your legs to keep you from falling.

When your throat starts working right again, you say, “It’s goddamn hilarious how you resent the kelpie comparison and yet--”

You’re cut off with a yelp as Jake’s wet hand slaps your equally damp ass, the soaked fabric of your boxers doing nothing to protect you. “You hush up. I won our little game, fair and square.”

“Ain’t nothing fair about this kind of homefield advantage,” you remark, and curl your legs as much as you can, testing his grip. Below you, you can see the casual power in his legs as he trudges out of the lake, his tail swishing along behind. The way he can carry you never stops being a little exhilarating and wild.

One of his hands kneads your ass where he slapped you, and you bite your lips together to keep quiet. “Such a sore loser, Dirk. That’s hardly an admirable trait for a fine gentleman.”

“Where the fuck are we going,” you ask, voice tight. Your dick is snug against Jake’s shoulder and it’s simultaneously a good steady pressure you want more of and a source of piano-chord agony as you try so hard not to shift your hips and rub against him. Fuck.

“Just here,” Jake says, and suddenly the world turns as he lowers you to the ground. You land in a shallow pool of water, off on the edge of the lake. Distantly, you can hear the waterfalls, and there is tree cover as the jungle stretches out over the little wading pool. Beyond, the sky is dyed rich sunset colors. You don’t know how long you’ve spent with Jake already, but it’s been a fair bit.

You look up at Jake. From here, he’s incredibly tall, green and gold and looming over you. He drags one hand through your hair and your throat clicks against the groan struggling to get out. The toxin he’s packing has settled in to make itself at home, your senses fuzzy and bright. Just sitting there, you shift and pull against your bindings, and the pressure sings sweet all over.
“What’d you want?” you ask, sighing as his thumb drags circles around your temple.

He tips your chin up and hums. “Something I think we’d both enjoy.”

Your forfeit, or your consolation prize, slides out of his sheath, that long glowing lorelay dick. It’s already dripping slightly, which is gratifying since you’re sitting with a semi as well. Trying for something approaching aloof, you shrug, and open your mouth, tongue resting on your lower lip.

Jake chirps, feet shuffling restlessly. “Ah, cripes, that is certainly a look for you. It’s just unfair how fetching you are.”

“Thanks,” you say. “You can put your dick in my mouth now.”

Jake flushes viciously, starts to say something about three times because the reticence just dropping off his shoulders. He steps closer, his feet on either side of your legs. He does nothing to help you get going; it’s all you as you bend to catch the very tip of his dick with your tongue and coax him through your lips.

He’s so slick, the lightest contact drawing out an excess of glowing come, and you lose him, his dick slipping free to drip on your lap.

Jake lets out an abortive snigger, and you glare up at him.

Bowing forward, you suck him into your mouth, twisting your shoulders and neck to get a decent hold this time, swallowing him back immediately, lifting your head and letting him slide back. His dick hits the back of your mouth and you shut your eyes in concentration as you swallow, the narrow head of his dick working into your throat.

Jake babbles, not even in English, and loses his composure like a scattering of marbles, grabbing your hair and jaw, hips rocking in even further.

It comes so fucking easily to you, in a way you can’t quite nail down. Is it the toxin making you pliant and eager to please, or just you? Both seem equally feasible, especially considering how many idle thoughts you’ve had about doing this, about getting his dick back in your mouth and finally figuring out much he can give you. It’s more gratifying than you’d ever admit to have that thick watery come filling your mouth, seeping past your lips and down your throat. Attentive and greedy, you rub the bottom of his dick with your tongue, urging your mouth to fill and swallowing more.

It compounds the warm, yielding feeling in your body, weaves into something strong but soft, like a cloak of silk falling over your mind. Leaning in more, you swallow his dick back a little further; the start of your gag reflex works against him, and you shiver as you are forced to keep swallowing to clear your mouth. A low whimpering noise is starting to escape you with every exhale, but it feels so fucking heady and good. Jake’s hands are petting you, clearly pleased with your attentions.

And you just want to find out how much he can feed you.

The pattern is not difficult to fall like an anchor into. You wish you weren’t bound so you could get your hands involved, but every time to pull and flex against the firm pressure, your dick gets a little hard in your boxers. It all still works fine, and you moan and make ungodly wet noises punctuated by Jake’s own intent sounds.

When you feel like you might need a break, you simply stop bobbing your head. Instead, his dick lays across your tongue and you just keep swallowing as needed.
With a tremulous sigh, Jake cups your head with both hands and thrusts shallowly between your lips. That also works, and you hum encouragingly. He doesn’t need more convincing to fuck your mouth.

It’s kind of nice. You keep your eyes shut and let him handle that part of it, focusing your dwindling attention on drinking him down without too much overflow. It’s calm, the hot content feeling growing inside you, unspooling your lingering tension into nothing.

You sway, and Jake grabs your shoulders with a surprised chirp. “Darnation, Dirk, hang on there.”

You whine as he drags his dick out of your mouth. “Hey, no…”

“You still… want more, there?”

Nodding, you lean into his hands. “Much as you got.”

A whoosh of air leaves him all at once. “Alright… Okay, here, let’s try this another way.”

The details of the rearrangement escape you. Where his hands direct, you go, and in a moment you’re laid out on your front, half on him as he sits in the pool. Your ankles move freely, unbound finally, letting you straddle the thick circumference of Jake’s tail, laying across it and into his lap, your shoulders against his legs. Under your head, his sheath is parted, dick glowing and plumped up.

“Yeah,” you say. “This works.”

“Take it slow, Dirk,” Jake murmurs as he takes hold of your face again. You have zero fucking leverage to speak of and you don’t need it as he lowers you on his dick. Lapping and swallowing, you try to get him as deep as before. You manage, and then some, eyelashes fluttering, your knees spreading wider, rutting lazily against his tail.

Jake’s head falls back, brilliantly flushed as he lifts and drops you. Before long, his tail curls back to wrap around you as much as it can. You think you feel another few pricks, but it’s hard to tell through the thick dreamy fog you’re sinking into.

Laid out like this, you drag your tongue against him, diligent and thorough in mapping out every inch of translucent skin, tracing the darker green stripes. This close and intimate with him, you decide he’s pretty much your favorite. It’s a bright giddy feeling under all the bone drenched calm.

You could spend the rest of your life like that, but some undeterminable time later, Jake grabs your shoulders and lifts you fully off him. With a little mourning sound, you let his dick go and blink up at him.

Jake wipes your face, rinsing his hands in the pool and washing your face with water. His fingers tuck your hair out of your eyes. “You still want more?”

You think about it. As you sit up a little, you feel a new, strange weight in your stomach. You feel full. The no is on the tip of your tongue, abated momentarily by how nice it feels as Jake pets you tenderly.

Jake cricket-hums, the sound deep and content as he tips you backward, off him and onto your back in the pool. There is an unmistakable shift in your belly as he does, and you moan, confused and trying to settle.

Your head rests in the water, the tide low enough to swish your hair around and deafen your ears.
A hitched breath catches in your chest as Jake peels your boxers off. They get thrown somewhere, probably never to be seen again.

You can see stars overhead through the stretching arms of the trees. Tucking your chin down, you look along your body.

The gramophone needle in your head skips drunkenly in its path. Jake’s pulling your legs around his waist, gripping his dick to push it in.

One of his hands palms the faith swell of your stomach. Through the gaps in his fingers, you can see a faint yellow glow pushing through your skin, muted but undeniably fucking present.

Your head rushes with the confused, awed feeling that barrels through the toxin fog. “Oh fuck,” you moan, looking at yourself. Beyond your faintly glowing belly, Jake gets his dick to catch, and he bends your legs back, knees hooked over his shoulders as he thrusts all the way in with his dripping, plump dick.

The shocked cry you let out is distant and watery, but comes again and again as Jake fucks you. With each push of his hips, your body moves slow and heavy, and before long you can’t keep your head up to marvel at everything. It brings you to a new place, incoherent and lost.

You’re in that place for a long damn time.

You link your ankles together behind Jake and don’t bother trying to hold on.

It’s really late when you get back to camp. If it’s before midnight, you’d be shocked.

Not that Jake kept you in that little grotto that long, inhuman stamina be damned. Sticking around was your decision entirely. The way you saw it, you had two options. One was slinking back to camp and just hoping the girls’ didn’t notice the press of glow light through your skin. Which: unlikely. Even with your shirt on, you can still detect the faintest edge of it, holy fucking shit.

Option two was to chill the fuck out until the girls had gone to bed before sneaking back to your tent like a teenager out past curfew.

You knew which you were going to pick.

Jake helps you back to the edge of camp. It’s hard to walk steadily. You’re fucking center of gravity is off. Your entire life is a fucking joke. All because you wanted to win the fellatio laureate or something. The phrase eyes bigger than your stomach floats through your head and you have to cover your mouth against the semi-hysterical laughter.

Trailing alongside, Jake keeps a hand on your hip and an eye on your trajectory like he’s afraid you’re going to fall on your ass. Which is not out of the question, honestly.

His goggles are around his neck, glass and metal catching the distant light of the single lamp the girls left on for you.

At the edge of the lamplight’s radius, you stop, putting a hand on Jake’s chest. “Hey.”

“I can’t stay tonight,” Jake answers, taking the words right out of your mouth.
“I-- yeah.” You sigh. “There’s a serious chance they’re going to wake me up early. Ask where I was.”

He nods slowly and gives a small shrug. What can you do, huh? Fortunately, there’s little of his usual quiet bitterness as he says, “Thank you for my gift.”

“Wellcome.” You’re lingering a little long. Everything feels weird. Leaving him here and going to bed alone feels extra weird after so many times having him sleep beside you til daybreak. Tentative, you reach out and take his hand, squeezing it in what has to be a paltry fucking comfort.

It doesn’t feel right to leave him. You swallow against the weird nausea it gives you.

Remembering how much he likes it, you kiss him, lifting up just barely on your toes. As expected, his spots all flare for a second before quickly dimming again. The hand on your hip slides to the small of your back as he leans down into you. It’s good. Reassuring.

You part reluctantly. “Hey. You’re different too. I mean, before, when--”

He grins and nuzzles your cheek. “I remember.”


“Sleep well,” Jake murmurs.

He stands there at the periphery of camp for a while as you get your wits together and remember, oh yeah, you’re trying not to get caught. Dousing the last lamp, you hurry to your tent.

You look back, and see Jake, a vague shape you wouldn't spot if you didn't know where to look. He's crouched low, his long legs bent in a way that is undeniably frog-like. He flashes yellow once, and lifts a hand to wave.

Waving back, you think about Jane's idea, the garden, and how well-meaning it is. And how close to an insult it is. As if a garden could even compare to this.

You duck into your tent, pulling the flap shut and quietly getting ready of bed.

A significant part of you expects to sleep poorly, but you’re so worn out and honest to fucking god content, you’re out like a wick in a windstorm.

In three hours, you wake up having to piss like fucking blazes, but you probably should have expected that. At least it doesn’t glow coming out.

Chapter End Notes

content: bondage, some predator/prey elements, cum inflation, aphrodisiacs, subspace.

Sorry, y'all. I’ve had a Hellmonth like you would not believe. More hours at work, family drama, my mother getting injured at work and needing constant care for several days, finally going to a doctor for the first time in ages.... Just a lot. A lot of little things like asking someone to make dinner because I have to take Mum to the doctor for the fourth time, and coming home and they forgot. /rubs face
Anyway. Hopefully this chapter's good. I'm not sure. But oh well.
Before you’re even fully awake, something feels different.

You’re no stranger to storms. Growing up on the Gulf coastline has given you a sense built from humidity and barometric pressure, the slight imposing feeling in your head like the beginning of a headache that is a harbinger of things to come. Before you’re even fully awake, you know _something_ is up, and that recalled dread has you not only out of bed in record time, but fully dressing for the day.

You’re out of your tent, still straightening your suspenders and holding your boots in one hand as you exit out under the canopy.

Out across the lake, you can see the opposite shore of the island, a sliver of greenery and sand at the edge of your vision. Beyond that is the ocean horizon. Hardly a horizon at all, with the inky blue-black water soft and melding into a sky so dark, it’s impermeable. There’s no sun, and the island is dark enough your eyes don’t even have to adjust to the light. All around, there is a whistling wind, strong enough to rock the jungle in restless waves like a stirring beast.

Jane’s leaning on one of the support poles, both hands curled around the metal. When you walk up to her, she glances up at you for just a moment, then back out at the ocean.

“I’ve never seen a storm like that,” she murmurs.

“I have,” you tell her. “Where’s Roxy?”

“She left early. Said there was something at the temple that would help.”

“The temple might not be a bad idea,” you inform her.

“Don’t say that,” she says, dismay clear as she covers her mouth with a hand.

But it’s the honest truth. This island has gone through serious weather patterns before, that much is obvious. There are worn down and weathered ruins scattered around the place, the remnants of buildings that could not survive without upkeep. What has stood without showing a loss of integrity is the enormous temple reaching imperviously up to the sky.

You look between the camp and the stormy horizon, and the well-trodden path to the temple, running logistics. You don’t have anything as simple and useful as a cart to help you carry shit along to shelter, but you have a witch. Levitating a bunch of supplies might be difficult and drain her energy for a while, but given the _alternative_, you have to run the mental numbers.

“Dirk, stop,” Jane says, and this time it’s hard, that thread of authority that makes your spine straighten with just two words. “You’re not thinking about the _Acorn_. We have to shield it from as much as we can, and to do that I need proximity. If we run to the temple with our tails between our legs, we can kiss our airship goodbye.”

“Oh, you say, feeling a tension awakening in your jaw. You don’t mentally scrap the _carry vital gear to the temple and ride this shit out_ plan, but you’re listening. “What’re we doing then?”

Jane seems satisfied with that, nodding and finally breaking from her storm sentinel. “For the
moment, let’s trust Roxy to have a solution to keeping the camp safe and work on the ship. Conjuration isn’t exactly my speciality, but I’m a deft enough hand at it provided I can hold concentration. And what would help me hold an aetheric shield?”

Christ, this is an impending stormfuck, not your grade school Basics of Magic pop quiz. “Going from my own encyclopedic knowledge of the aetheric arts, I’ll guess a circle’s going to be involved somehow.” Circles are always involved.

“Yes indeed. I’m going to start setting one up. Could you run over to the Acorn and get me a piece of it? Chip off some of it from the inside, anything.”

At least she doesn’t quiz you on that. You grab a hammer and prybar from the tools chest and haul ass up to the airship.

The Acorn is a puddlejumper as far as airships go, but when you stand beside it, it feels like an enormous beast. Your ferry between this world and the real one back across the ocean. It sits like a gargoyle with your camp in its late afternoon shadow, a landmark to guide you home at the end of each day. But with what’s looking a lot like a tropical cyclone on its way to slap your delicate little tented settlement, it’s less gargoyle and more unstable boulder about to roll down the hill and onto your heads.

There is literally nothing you can do about it. It’s an uncomfortable realization. Nothing pisses you off more than being helpless.

You enter the Acorn, take a long wooden sliver out of a spare bit of wall, and return to camp.

Jane has shoved most of the canopy furniture out of the way by the time you return. She outlines her circle with red chalk and places four candles along the circumference, following the cardinal directions. Each of those points are united with a perfectly straight line, forming a diamond, and within that enclosure, she adds another concentric, smaller circle.

You watch, and recognize the emblem slowly. “Fifth Pentacle of Saturn?”

Jane nods as she continues the seal. “I apologize for stealing your brand, but I think the extra precaution might help.”

“By all means,” you tell her. “I didn’t write the Key.”

There is not much you can do as you wait. You leave the aetheric Acorn seed on the table for Jane before circling the camp, looking for loose debris. Making it through storms isn’t new to you, and clearing out anything that could be flung like a spear by a hurricane is always a vital step in your survival.

As you finish moving shit out of the way, Roxy returns. You catch her along the foot-worn path, her backpack stuffed full of something, both of her arms wrapped around a hefty chunk of basalt rock. “Dirk! Holy shit, help, my back is about to go out and leave me cold and lonely.”

“Fuck, Rox, the hell is this,” you ask as you hurry over to her and relieve her of the basalt column. It’s heavy enough to immediately pull against your shoulder muscles, and the change in your center of balance is almost a disaster. Leaning back and walking carefully, you bring it over to camp.

“Put it down, uuuuuu….,” She sucks in a hard breath and lowers herself to the ground, her pack resting against the grass. “Ow, ow, I mean goddamn,” she whines, working her arms free of the straps and freeing herself. “Okay, put it here, Dirk.”
You are more than happy to drop the fucking column where she indicates. Crossing your arms over your chest, you try to stretch out after. “I’m gonna assume this thing is important and you’re not just rescuing random statuary.”

Dusting off her hands, Jane steps over her prepared seal and joins you with a corroborative, “Is that what was so important from the temple, Ro-lal? What is it?”

“Look, once you start figuring out how to sift through all the wacky ceremonial stuff and treatises on why amphibians are spiritual perfection, you find a lot of radical stuff.” She grabs the basalt column with both hands and starts to twist it, carving it further into the earth. “The people who lived here, right, they dealt with storms a lot, natch. So they made these things.” Once the column has sunk in enough to sit stable, she sits back on her heels and drags the back of her hand over her forehead. Pink-gold strands of hair cling to her forehead.

“And these things are…” Jane prods, crossing her arms.

You look out, over the lake. The wind is picking up, and more of the distance is being devoured by a grey mist. “Explain fast.”

“Y’all gotta make up your mind. You want all the juicy ancient gossip or not, jeez.” Roxy drags her pack closer and opens it. From within she pulls out a sphere of that resin glass, holding it securely between both her palms as she positions it on top of the column, right into a subtle concave groove that fits it perfectly. “When there’s rain, you open an umbrella. There used to be a bunch of these around their settlement to protect from sudden storms. One will more than do us, I think. ‘Sides, most of the others are cracked, so I just grabbed the most intact one.”

She takes out another piece, a smooth flat plane of stone. Rising up on her knees, she sets it on top of the sphere. It wobbles as she lets go, and she snaps it back up to try again. “In the beforetimes, they put a little fountain of lake water on these to keep them running, but…” As the plate balances, she goes hushed and carefully leans away. “Phew. But given all the magical buildup ‘round here, I’m thinking a few drops is all we need.”

“Need for what?” you ask, and help her to her feet.

“Openin’ the umbrella.” She takes her canteen off her belt. “Jane, you got a plan for the boat?”

“ Conjuring a shield. I think I’ll focus on air, block the wind. The rain isn’t what’s going to cause damage.”

“Get started on that, then, and I’ll get this goin’ and save our skins.” Roxy jerks her head towards her tent. “I got a chunk of frankincense in my focus box if you need.”

Jane nods quickly, her eyes darting past the two of you, out at the oncoming darkness with something a little wild in her expression. “Good idea. Better we err as far on the side of caution as we can with this.” She leaves, presumably to find the focus box.

As she leaves, Roxy looks out over the lake, tapping her canteen against her leg restlessly. “Seen him this morning?”

You follow her gaze. The lake is shifting with the same restlessness as the jungle canopy, but nothing breaks its surface. “No. Not yet.”

She blows out a long breath, deflating a little. “Well. Lets hope this works, then.”

“You confident in this… magic umbrella?” you ask.
“Oh yeah, totally,” she says with a sharp laugh. “But confidence hasn’t stopped me from screwing up before, so…” She shakes her canteen at you. “Here’s hopin’.”

There isn’t much time left, and certainly not enough to wait for Jake to deign to show his face. For all you know, he’s still asleep on the lakebed, and you don’t have a way to catch his attention if he’s not loitering around. There’s no joy in it, but you refill the water jugs and canteens, dragging them back to camp, and settle in to let the women do their work.

Jane sits cross-legged in her circle, her trident balanced evenly across her knees. The sliver of wood from the airship rests in dead center in front of her, and all the candles suddenly light themselves.

Beyond her, over the tents, you can see the Acorn further up the hill. In seconds, a translucent, smoky dome rises from the earth and eclipses the ship, mist swirling and thickening into a nearly opaque shell, only the faintest shape still visible inside.

“Got it, Janesy?” Roxy asks.

Jane shifts around, getting comfortable, trident laid over her open palms. Once she’s comfortable for a long haul, she picks up the chunk of frankincense and pops it in her mouth.

“Uh, is that safe?” you ask.

“Outside this one very particular application, no,” she says, and every word she says leaves her mouth in a plume of grey mist that looks uncannily like the spell swirling behind her. “But for this, yes, I’ll be fine. Roxy, go ahead.”

Roxy salutes and uncaps her water, standing over her little monument. With one last tossed glance over the lake and to the storm beyond, she bends and tips her canteen, holding it with one clenched hand and using her other hand to brace.

It’s agonizingly slow, how she tips the canteen carefully, getting the mouth of it wet before tilting it back before a drop can fall. Her lips press together hard as she tries again.

“Rox,” you start, only for her to straighten and shush you so hard, it sounds like a cat hissing. You hold up your hands and step back.

“I fuck this up, we’re livin’ out the rest of our days under this fucking shield, so hush up, Di-Stri.” She takes a moment, shaking out her arms and breathing slowly, before bending again and tipping three drops of water onto the stone plate.

The water rolls around the plate for a moment before anything happens. It seeps down and out of sight, barely leaving even lingering moisture to denote where it’d been. Below it, the resin glass gradually comes to life with a pale glow, swirling colors coaxed awake and casting faint light around.

You are so focused watching the monument, you don’t realize anything is happening until a shroud falls over you. It’s not a shadow or swirling mist, but a bubble of translucent color coming down from a point high above the basalt column. The same shifting palette of colored light drips along the sky, spreading out like a lamp oil spill.

After a few minutes of creeping down along its path, the bubble settles over the camp, terminating against the grass and enclosing you. Immediately, the sound of the storm becomes muted and distant, and the view too murky to see through. The air is still quieted, no longer a dull roar, but enough to stir your hair.
“Pretty neat, right?” Roxy asks, a little hushed from her own awe.

“It looks like a soap bubble,” you observe.

“Way more resilient. We’ll be safe as houses under here.” She drags her hair back out of her face. “Right. So. How about some breakfast?”

You are an old hand at the hurry-up-and-wait nature of storms. Boarding up windows and setting up barriers and loading up on supplies, and then sitting around and waiting for the lashing rain and roaring wind. Reading by candlelight in the dark after striking a deal with yourself, that you could use two candles to read with and once they were gone, that was it.

Nothing is more nervewracking than the build up to a storm, and nothing is as boring as waiting one out.

At least this time, there’s something of a spectacle to it.

The canopy is superfluous now with the extra barrier overhead, but force of habit has you sticking close to the peaked canvas, leaning against one of the support poles as you watch overhead.

The surface of the bubble ripples gently as the storm pounds it at full force. At first, you could see the impact of each raindrop as it hit. Now, as the cyclone begins to run over the island, the oil slick rainbow is a hypnotic display of shifting light.

“Dirk, could I have another drink?”

At Jane’s call, you return to her side. She hasn’t moved from her spot in the circle, still gripping her trident, face a tense pull of concern. Outside, she’s keeping up the other shield, safeguarding your only way back to the mainland.

The toll is apparent. A fine sheen of sweat covers her skin, and her breathing is steady and deep in a purposeful way, like a distance runner.

You pick up her canteen from the table, along with a towel that usually serves as potholder during meals. Taking care, you step into her circle, planting your feet solidly in the spaces between red lines and focus items.

Another dubious gift of yours; if Roxy tried to do this, she’d fuck up the spell entirely. But you, you’re fine so long as you’re careful.

Jane’s only acknowledgement of your proximity is a quick flick of her eyes to you and away again. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” You hold the spout of the canteen to her lips and tip until she can drink. After a few mouthfuls, she grunts, and you back off. And since you’re already there, you reach out and wipe her face with the towel.

“Oh, okay. You are certainly thorough, Mr. Strider,” she says, her ears turning red. “I didn’t anticipate such service.”

“When have you known me to half ass anything in my life. I’m not a witch so I might as well
serve your ass like we are itinerant visitors to Butler Island and I’m goin’ native.” Once finished, you take the same care removing yourself from the circle. “Don’t worry about it, Crocker, just keep your eye on the ball.”

She nods, and doesn’t respond, visibly sinking back into the rigors of her spell.

From the grass, Roxy crooks her finger at you.

Dropping down to sit beside her, you settle in to watch the bubble again.

She has her last bottle of wine in her lap, nestled with her hand on its neck like a beloved cat. “Hey. Drink?”

Looking at the lightshow overhead, you nod. “Sure.”

As usual, she’s chilled the bottle, and the glass just barely sticks to your fingers as you pass it back and forth, trading sips.

“Can I bore you with some magic stuff?” she asks after a few minutes of companionable silence.

“Hit me,” you say.

Pointing with her pinky, she says, “A bubble shield is pretty intense magic. It’s like this very very fine balance of air and water. Like how you’re a fine balance between hottie and haughty.”

“Rude,” you say, taking the bottle back for another drink.

“Like, what’s more important to a bubble, what makes it what it is? Is it the film of the sphere, or is it the air that give it the shape? Both are so integral. And like… the purity of an element is impressive too! The sheer power of running water or of a roaring fire, like wow.” She prods your arm, the tip of the crow skull. “Cardinal directions are hard to get exact, but so is the thing directly in the middle of north and east, you know?”

“Sure.”

“You’re not nearly impressed enough.”

“I believe you.” You shrug. “I don’t have a lot of experience here, Rox.”

“Okay, but.” She slumps a little. “I’ve spent a long time getting to know the people from before, like, tangentially from all their leftovers and other stuff. They were real talented mages. I mean, they harnessed the power of a volcano! Even our people don’t fuck with volcanos.”

“Well, maybe that’s why they aren’t around anymore.”

“No, nope, no.” She shakes her head adamantly. “I’m dead sure it was something else. Like… shit, they knew this stuff. Something else happened.” Leaning forward, she plants her elbow on her knee, her chin in her palm. “They were all about sustainability. Keeping this island alive and working was soooo important to them,” she says. “Now, all that work, gone to… shit.”

You don’t know what to say to that, and just take another drink of wine.

Around you, the storm rages. You assume. It’s hard to tell inside the bubble, but the shade thrown over the camp darkens with time, as the sun above is further obscured until all around you feels like a deep dusk. There is little to do and while part of you wants to sit vigil, before long you retreat back to your tent.
You wonder where Jake is. He’s been through storms before, of course, and must have a way to survive them. Probably in one of his caves under the lake.

There is nothing you can do about it. This recurring feeling of helplessness is starting to eat away.

The wheel on your arm spins. It’s as good of a time for a bath as any.

The shield lasts longer than the storm does.

Which is better than the alternative.

You know when the storm is over when Jane stands and wobbly steps out of her circle to slump in the papasan, crumbling from exhaustion. You bring her more to drink, and continue holding the canteen for her as she sips, the strength in her arms too tenuous for you to risk letting her do it alone.

“Incredible, Crocker,” you tell her, and get a wan smile in return.

Before responding, she tips her head back and blows out a long stream of smoke, then again until her breath finally starts to come clear. Her head rests against the chair again. “I could sleep for a day or two.”

“I will carry you to bed if you want.”

“You’re sweet,” she mumbles, shutting her eyes. “I’m comfortable here. For now.”

You figure you can let her rest there for now. When she’s ready, helping her back to her tent is the least you can do.

There is the matter at hand; the camp is still shrouded in the murky oil bubble dome. Roxy seems to be dealing with that, kneeling by her basalt monument again.

Tucking your hands into your pockets, you go to observe. Standing at her shoulder, you watch her take hold of the stone plate and lift it off the top.

She looks up at the veiled sky and frowns, then picks up the resin sphere too.

She looks up again. “Well, that’s weird.”

“Problem?”

Planting her hand against the column, she pushes, and lets the stone fall with a thump onto the grass. “No, defin’ly not, no problem.” She bounces up onto her feet and walks to the perimeter, as close to the outer edge of the bubble as she can.

Jabbing her finger into the shield, she watches it minutely shift and react. “Hm.”

“Rox,” you prompt.

“It’s fine, alright? Kind of a pain to wait for this to run out of juice, but that’s the chumpest change compared to what we got out of this!” She flicks her fingers against the bubble and sighs.
“You can’t bring it down,” you say, extrapolating. Well, shit.

“Doesn’t look like it! But that’s fine. I fed the shield the barest hint of power, I was super careful, so it should come down soon.” Crossing her arms, she turns away from you, walking back towards the canopy. “Should be a few minutes. An hour max!”

Great. Gritting your teeth, you turn back to the bubble wall that keeps you safe and sound and completely closed off from the rest of the world. Fantastic.

There’s a lot about this you don’t like.

Especially as you stand there, waiting for a break in this prolonged sequestering. Through the bubble you can tell the sun is shining again in the wake of the storm, all the colors blurred through it brightening from the midday light.

It is well past an hour when a shape comes up to the bubble. A vague smudge of dark hues and a hunched posture. He walks right up to the bubble and stands there for a moment.

Your lips part as you let out a hard breath.

Jake doesn’t seem to know what to make of the new barrier, and starts to walk along it. You follow, tracking his shape as he goes halfway up the hill, along the long curve. Abruptly, he twists and walks back the other way, with a much faster gait.

He tracks the entire circumference before stopping and standing up to his full height. Then, the bubble shifts against pressure, and you can see the wide planes of his hands against the surface. He slaps the barrier a few times, sending out ripples from the points of impact, before leaning all the way in, his palms flat, his elbows against the curved wall.

You feel it like a knife in your chest, cutting into you every time to take a breath.

The only thing you can think to do is mirror him, and place your hands on the bubble, between his. It feels… weird under your skin. An unyielding thin membrane of water that barely gives at your touch.

For a second, it’s still, then Jake presses his hands against yours, and you can almost feel the weight. Can feel it increase slightly as Jake pushes harder.

After a moment, he whips away again and returns to pacing around the bubble, agitation obvious even through the translucent blur.

“Goddammit,” you sigh, and drop yourself on the grass, watching him as he… tries to find a weakness or something, batting at different points, erratic and plain fucking worrisome to watch.

Eventually, you put your palm on the bubble again, and wait until it catches his scattered attention.

Like you hoped, it slows him down, and he plods back over to your spot, crouching down.

His hand presses against yours, his other resting lightly on the barrier.

You wait. It is all you can do, the only comfort you can offer.

It’s almost another hour before the bubble pops.

Though, that nomenclature doesn’t work really. There isn’t a pop, only the dome of water spontaneously losing tension and plummeting. It splashes everywhere, falling right out of the air
and hitting the ground with an enormous wet slap. You are dry one moment and then soaked the next as it lands right on you, sputtering indignantly as you reel back away from everything.

“What the fuck,” you spit, before you’re nearly tackled onto your back.

Jake pulls you in against his chest, both arms closing around your shoulders and tucking your head under his chin. There’s a burble of lorelay speak pouring out of his mouth, nothing remotely coherent. He twists to rub his cheek against your hair, babbling on.

“Jake,” you manage, wriggling until your face isn’t shoved against his skin. “Jake, it’s fine. Relax, it's fine. We’re okay.”

He lets out a low trill, almost like an amphibious growl. “What,” he says, finally remembering his English, “the merry fucking Krishna was that?”

He still hasn’t let go, and you are painfully aware that all it would take for the girls to spot you is one of them stepping out from under the canopy and looking back towards the hill. Grabbing his shoulders, you push him back, ignoring the way he lets out a unhappy almost-ribbit noise. “There was a hurricane bearing down on us, man. It was going to tear the entire camp apart, and us if we didn’t do something. Rox found something in the temple and used it to make a shield so--”

Jake lets go of you and climbs to his feet, stalking forward to the camp.

“Shit, shit.” You haul ass back onto your feet and try to catch up. “Jake, hang on.”

It sounds in your head like the whistle before a firework goes off. And it feels a lot like trying to catch one right out of the air before the explosion.

Roxy apparently got caught in the blast radius too, standing just clear of the canopy and shaking out her arms, cursing profusely. Her hair’s drenched, flattened against her skull; yours probably doesn’t look much better, shit.

Of course, she just types something into her focus, and comes dry. As she looks up grinning, she catches sight of Jake. “Hey there, pretty boy. Nice bit of weather today, huh?”

“What in the name of Lucifer and all his merry minions was that? That-- that great wall you caught yourselves under like an overturned dish, what was the big idea?” he says, that same semi-frantic spill of words out of his mouth.

Roxy’s eyebrows both lift, and despite a tall, upset lorelay closing in, she doesn’t move. She rests her fists on her hips, not an ounce of hesitance in her stance. “The big idea? The big idea was we were about to get bitcheslapped by the hand of Zeus himself. The big idea that should net me a damn laureate is hauling an artifact from the temple to save our fine asses.”

“An artifact,” Jake repeats, flushing green in the face. “You-- you used one of the thingabobs from the--” His eyes widen as he spots the gently toppled monument lying in the grass.

Roxy waves to it. “Yup. A splash of lake water and some fancy spellwork from Jane, and we all made it out okay. No problem.”

Tail lashing from side to side, Jake hisses softly. “No problem, nothing to fret about at all, just sticking your fingers into what oughta be left well enough alone. No one’s used any of this junk in ages but you put everyone’s necks on the chop block.”

Now, Roxy advances, taking a step towards him, and you watch as Jake shrinks away, springing back to match. “Hey, you don’t get to run your mouth about what I can and can’t handle. I know
plenty about this, prob’ly more than you do, sweet pea.” She shakes her head hard. “Give me a little credit, Jake. We’ve survived before we met you and we know what we’re doin’.”

“But I didn’t!” Jake nearly shouts, the green in his face deepening. “You’re so clever, but if it went bad, you’d be gone, leaving me in the dust!” He trills again, upset. “Swanning about, not thinking about anyone but yourself, you all are driving me batshit up the belfry!”

You step in closer, and give Jake’s shoulder a good shove.

He’s so shocked he stumbles, gaze whipping aside to you, eyes big and hurt. Fucking hell. You take a sharp breath through your nose.

“Listen,” you tell him. “We’re fine. It worked out okay. Getting all twisted in what didn’t happen isn’t going to help anything. Leave it alone.”

Jake’s attention is rocked loose from Roxy, his eyes locked to yours. Entreating and searching. You can’t look away, can’t even move. At your side, you feel Roxy stand up a little straighter.

It would be best if Jake backed off. Before Roxy figured anything out.

Fortunately, he does, turning away and padding back to the lake, shoulders hung and dejected. It twists the knife in you.

Nothing about this feels good.

Roxy rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “Lecturing me about my literal area of expertise, geez.” She drags one hand through her hair, composing herself. “It sucks we scared him, but holy shit.”

“Yeah,” you sigh.

She stoops to pick up the basalt column, hefting it up. “Anyway. Jane’s taking a nap. I’m going back to the temple to sit on my thumb and while away the day--”

“Rox.” You pinch the bridge of your nose.

“Sorry, but seriously. Okay.” She nudges her elbow into your side. “Go check on the ship, maybe? I’m sure Janey did a great job, but can’t hurt to make sure she’s airworthy.”

“I’ll take care of it,” you tell her. “See you at dinner.”

“Probably. If not, don’t wait up.” She winks at you, and you part ways.

You make a pitstop to change into dry clothes before setting off. All the way up the hill to the Acorn, you can’t stop thinking of Jake, his fear, and the looming spectre of time. And the way it’s fraying Jake like old cloth.

Everything’s fine. The worst damage to the ship is the chunk you took out of it at Jane’s behest. After ten minutes of stomping around, you’re confident the storm had no ill effects here.

You climb the stairs up to the cockpit and drop yourself in the chair.

The sun is still up and already, it feels like it’s been a fucking day. That it has the audacity to be
late afternoon at best is unfuckingreal.

The chair doesn’t go back too far, but you can still lean back and shut your eyes. There is tension in your spine you can feel slowly stretching out. A massage would be really nice right now. Big, broad hands.

You shut your eyes and drag your hands up and down your face.

The thought that stalks: what are you going to do.

When you get back home, you aren’t going to have anyone willing to touch you, let alone work the knots out of your back after a long day.

Tipped back and languid, you reach up and nudge the navigator. The map is gone, likely tucked safely away with Jane’s things. The spindly arm swings empty, glinting off the lowering sunlight.

This expedition feels like it’s been a dog’s age. On a whim, you try to remember the color of your walls back at the Crocker Magitech campus, in your dorm.

Doesn’t matter. Does not fucking matter.

You are quiet and half-slumped in the pilot’s chair, head propped in your hand, as the sun sets. Your palm is perfectly positioned to block out the glare from the horizon.

Behind you, the stairs creak.

You do not move, and neither do they for a long moment.

Then, the stairs creak again, and Jake says, “Horsefeathers,” with all the poison of a real, modern oath.

You sigh, and sit still as his feet pad along the wooden floors. He shuffles around, and lets out a grunt and some kind of wet slap.

Relenting, you look up. Then, down. At your side, Jake’s plopped himself on the ground, curling his tail around the pilot’s chair, his tail fin flaring and shifting restlessly. His hands curl around the arm of the chair, his eyes bright as they peer up at you.

“Hullo,” he says. “I’m sorry about making such a wash of things.” His fingers clench against the chair arm. “I scarce know what came over me, but you certainly didn’t deserve the brunt of it.”

“Thanks,” you murmur. “Appreciate it.” You lower your hand to him, and Jake takes it, long fingers enclosing your wrist, thumb tracing your pulse point. “You need to apologize to Roxy, not me.”

Sour green floods his face. “I… of course, I know that.”

“You said some seriously unkind stuff to her, right after she finished saving our lives.”

He lets out a melodic, distressed sound, a warble vibrating against your elbow. “Dirk. Can it… wait ‘til the morrow? I’ll do it, I’ll have some words with Roxy, but… not tonight, please?”
He turns your hand over and presses his mouth against your lax curled fingers. You watch him, unable to look away. His lips curl softly, and with a springy sort of grace, he climbs to his feet.

“You have something else in mind?” you ask, already sure he must.

He pulls until you stand with him, and his smile is immediate and sweet, devoid of the tension of the day.

“Come with me?” he coaxes.

As if there was any chance you wouldn’t. “Yeah, alright. Lead the way.”

As you descend the stairs to the body of the ship, you nearly pitch forward and brain yourself on a table. “Tail! Pick up your tail, asshole!”

“Sorry, gee fucking willickers, I can’t do anything right today, can I?” Jake’s flushing a chroma of pale greens, chirp-humming to himself unhappily as he picks up the bulk of his tail and situates it on his shoulder.

“Try harder,” you tell him sourly, straightening and crossing your arms over your chest.

Once he’s toga’ed up, he closes the distance between you and leans in close, eyes narrow. “You are the sourest of pusses.”

“Do you even know what a puss is.”

“Like, a fruit maybe?”

You sigh so you don’t laugh about it. There is something a little depressing about that. Not knowing what a cat is. If Roxy wasn’t pissed at him, she’d be fucking beside herself to learn.

“Where are we going?”

Jake doesn’t seem to have a destination in mind, leading you up to the north shore of the lake, where the fruit trees are. It takes a ridiculous sprint from the egress of the Acorn over to the shadows of the treeline. He doesn’t seem eager to be seen, for anyone to notice you’re gone.

Which, in a selfish way, you’re fine with.

The storm made a mess of your usual path through the jungle grove. The ground is littered with underripe fruits shaken loose from the wind, and a few ready to eat. You pick up a couple of the almost-persimmons (persimnotts? persimaybes?) to snack on as you navigate the fallen limbs and muddy patches.

More than once, Jake climbs over a bit of rough terrai ahead to turn and pick you up off the damn ground and over the obstacle.

With your boots back on solid earth, you consider this and… yep. Still kind of weirdly hot. And Jake seems somewhat aware of it, how he grins at you and pats your hips reassuringly.

Beyond the trees are the waterfalls. You rinse your hands in the heavy cascade, shaking them dry.

Turning, you find Jake sitting on that rock outcropping that reaches out over the lake. He pats the spot next to him, giving you a brilliant grin. All of the timidity from earlier is missing as he coaxes you to join him.
The rock is smooth under your feet, wet-worn and shining from cast mist from the falls. Balancing is a pain, the incline of the perch just a little too steep to traverse with boots and not tacky amphibious feet.

You take off your shoes and socks and climb up again. At this rate, you wonder why you bother to wear them.

Sinking down at Jake’s side, you are completely unsurprised as his tail curls around you, along your back and flopping heavily into your lap. You turn it bodily so the spines are nowhere near your skin, then palm the smooth green flesh, fingers stroking the strange fibrous fins. They’re lax like this, out of water, and you idly stretch them out in a full fan, thumb pressing against the taut membrane.

The sound starts low, but soon you can hear and feel the growing cricket hum from Jake. In front of you, the lake is shifting with the rush of water flowing down from the volcano into it, but it’s dark like rippling black glass. Near your seat, you can see the golden glow from Jake catching like flickering candlelight on each crest and wave. Further out, it’s so clear, so smooth, you can see the stars reflecting down in the surface.

It is downright fucking tender, sitting here, listening to the waterfalls and Jake’s own happy noises. Romantic. You rub your mouth idly.

Jake chirps inquiringly, looking aside at you.

“Nothin’,” you say quietly. “I just… I’ve never felt particularly attached to anywhere I’ve been. Been no reason to get sentimental about that kind of shit. Just a transposition from one place to another, nothing else really changing but the scenery.” Careful to stroke with them not against, you run your hand down his long fin, feeling each spine drag against your palm.

You let out a deep sigh. “Was just thinking that I’m going to miss this.” More than the island, but you can’t say that through the knot in your throat.

The comforting hum is gone, and Jake stands, slowly, his tail dragging out of your lap as he starts to pad around the outcropping.

“Yeah,” he says. “About that.”

You don’t say a goddamn thing.

In the stretch of silence, Jake’s tail lashes restlessly, the spines all standing up, his peacock fins flushing with light. He even bounces on his toes for a moment, clearly just… tense, vibrating like a strummed instrument. He might shake himself apart if he wasn’t careful. You can see a lifetime of bundled up energy in him, and wonder if keeping a hold of it hurts.

Finally, Jake spins to face you, even if his eyes keep flicking to and from yours anxiously. All of the easy warmth from before is a void now.

“So you still intend to sail off then,” Jake asks, soft.

Somehow, you sort of figured this would never come up, given how Jake was willing to pretend he didn’t understand English for a week just to avoid conversations with people. In a way, you’re kind of impressed. This is progress.

You bend your legs so you can rest your arms across your knees. “I don’t really intend anything.”

“What does that mean?” Jake flexes his hands through the air, letting out an annoyed keen.
“This isn’t up to me,” you tell him as gently as you can. “I’m not in charge of this, and that’s… how it is.”

“So, what, should I go petition Jane about it?”

“No,” you say quickly because *jesus christ no.*

“Right, of course not, that’s bloody ridiculous!” He paces in front of you, tail slipping off the rocks to presumably drag against the water as he strides to and fro in front of you, along the edge. “Why on this green earth would I ask someone else about *you*! I don’t follow this logic, and pardon me, I’m starting to think logic doesn’t have a hand on this pilot’s wheel at all!”

You rub your eyes, trying to figure out how to explain this. This is essentially trying to explain the foundation of your entire life to someone who technically isn’t even human. Who doesn’t understand what being noble is. Who didn’t even know other people *existed* until he saw you.

The tension in Jake is winding tighter. You shake your head. “The real world isn’t nice, Jake. It’s actually pretty fucking awful most of the time. Things aren’t as simple as just saying you want to quit it and… doing that.”

“The real world,” Jake says, and lets out a hissed breath.

Bad phrasing. “I don’t…” You wave your hands, palms up, as apologetic as you can muster. “I don’t know how to explain this in a way you’d understand.”

“Stop that!” His face is twisted with hurt and anger, the fins along his spine standing straight up and radiating light like a lighthouse warning. “You are… are being such an obstinate smartass!”

“Jake,” you start.

“I wouldn’t understand *why* exactly? I’m too dim to follow the know-how of your *real world*? I’m not a simpleton, Dirk! I wasn’t born yesterday! In fact I think you will find if you think about someone other than yourself for five seconds that I’ve had nothing but time to think, I’ll thank you to recall!” He moves to stand over you, bending and towering with all his impressive stature. “You’re so sure I can’t understand things, but I think you’re the one who doesn’t understand.”

You don’t know what to say, shame curdling in your belly, spoiling every bite you’ve had and making you sick.

He bends more, and his big green hands cup your face, holding you still to stare into your eyes. “If there is anything I cannot wrap my brain around, it’s why you don’t believe me. Why you don’t even try.” His brow furrows, anger melting into naked concern. “I don’t want to be alone, Dirk, and I don’t think you want to be either. We’re not *supposed* to be alone. I felt that since the moment I saw you, you great idiot. Don’t you feel that too?”

His grip on your face feels like a vice around your lungs. It’s hard to even breathe through the sheer force of will pouring out of him. It’s like the storm surge rushing in.

It’s a panicked rush coming out: “The shit I feel has never done anything for me before.” And you already know he won’t understand.

Jake stares at you, pupils wide and focused, before he’s… gone. He tears his hands from you, backs away with two long steps, colors a seasick swirl of green to yellow and back again. He shakes himself, and picks up the goggles hanging around his neck, pulling them up over his eyes.
Before you can even think of what else to say, he takes a long stride and a leap, diving right off the outcropping and into the lake water, cutting into it like a blade.

You hurry forward, almost pitching yourself in right after him as you slip against the smooth stone. Balanced on hands and knees, you look down below, into the water. Bubbles are dissipating, ripples fanning out, and beyond that… you see fucking nothing.

As the disturbance from his dive fades, the lake continues to flow with the current from the waterfalls, and you can’t see far enough down into the water to pick out where he went.

Now you look at what you did. You’ve made a disaster out of the respite after a storm, shredding the sweet comfort between your fingers until it’s flayed and ruined.

You sit on the edge with your legs hanging over the water, and think for a moment that this might be for the best.

Maybe, you think, you should do more shit like this, and convince Jake to wake the fuck up and to realize he’s laid his courtship at the wrong goddamn feet. There might be mercy in waking him up to reality, to get him to stop caring so damn much about damaged goods, to make it easier on him and on you.

Slumping, you lean your head in both your hands, covering your face as you gather yourself. There is still a pretty bracelet locked around one of your wrists.

You can’t do that. No matter what the alternative is, you cannot drive him away and hurt him. You are one of three people he’s met in his entire life. You can’t, it’s untenable.

That begs the question what you’re supposed to do now.

Sitting out here on your own feels more than a little pathetic, now that Jake’s pulled an abscond into the lake because he got so sick of you. But it’s better than retreating back to camp right now. You pride yourself on your poker face and have gone this long without tipping your hand regarding the whole lorelay liaison to the girls. But there is a clenching sorrow in your chest right now, and you don’t know how well you can keep up the charade.

If Jane or Roxy ask, what would you even say?

Jake is right. Now, here, you feel alone. But now, here, it hurts like it’s the first time, like something you’ve not felt since you were a teenager and coming to terms with what you were.

All the strength you have leaves you in a rush. You roll onto your back, shirt growing damp from the rock and the misting water, and shut your eyes. Eventually, you will haul yourself back to camp and pretend none of this happened, but for the moment, you lay here and you think about the future. About life across the sea.

Chapter End Notes

fun fact, i had this chapter figured out months ago, well before i had to live through hurricane fucking irma. but the reminder of how shitty storms are def helped in writing this.

we have chapter titles now because i needed help referring back to my own shit and
got tired of always clicking the wrong chapter, lol.

but hello we are now officially off of hiatus. welcome back. sorry its not sexier. that's next chapter in a very big way. time to start putting my money where my mouth is.
It is too much to hope that things will just get back to normal the next day, after your… talk with Jake.

Fuck, there’s probably a proper term for it. What is it called when you have an emotional argument with someone you care about like this? The term might be ‘lover’s spat’ you think, and then you want to never think that again. Already you can imagine the appellation from Jake’s lips far too easily given his enthusiasm for everything and you in particular. Just the idea brings heat to your face, ears burning.

But the point is that after Jake bails on you, he keeps scarce. There is no breakfast guest, even though Jane makes a plate for him and shoots glances toward the pier.

“Would either of you know why our local nereid hasn’t shown hide nor hair of himself?” Jane asks suspiciously as you and Roxy both silently eat.

You shake your head, putting more food in your mouth. Roxy lets out a little *pfft* noise. “Not a clue, gumshoe.”

Jane puts her hands on her hips, eyebrows lifted. “Well, that wasn’t even remotely convincing.” Turning on her heel, she aims her look at you expectantly.

“What,” you say, dropping your gaze to your plate.

“I spent all of yesterday recovering from aetheric heavylifting, there’s no sign of our overly solicitous friend, and both of you look like I just caught your hands in the cookie jar!”

“Dunno,” Roxy drawls. “What do I know about anythin’ on this island, huh Dirk?”

“Roxy,” you sigh, glaring at her.

Jane waves her hands between the two of you, punctuating her point.

Roxy scoops the last bite onto her fork and into her mouth, setting her plate aside and standing. “Mmmphmmmph!” she says through a full mouth.

Jane crosses her arms, eyes narrowing.

Immune to the shaming stare of your esteemed leader, Roxy toodles her fingers and picks up her bag and stenotype before wandering away from the camp, on her usual path around the island to the shrine.

With a pivot, Jane aims the same stare at you, as if unwilling to let it go to waste.

“Goddammit,” you mutter. “After the storm, Jake was freaked out and went off on Roxy a bit. Which, Roxy didn’t give any quarter, of course, so Jake’s probably sulking.” It’s harder to leave out your own involvement than you expect. But getting anywhere close to telling her about your affair is out of the question.

You wonder if in the future, you might tell her about it. Or if it’s just going to be something secret
for the rest of your life. It’s not a comforting thought.

“He what? Oh, that rascal.” She palms her cheek, sighing. “He’s lovely, no doubt, and a fascinating specimen besides, but he does have some bumpy relationship waters, doesn’t he? Hiding away will only let Roxy--”

“I told him, yeah,” you say, nodding along. “Hopefully he stops hiding and talks to Roxy, but. Can’t force him.”

“No, I suppose not. Well. Do you have any plans for the day?”

Waiting around for Jake and spending the downtime trying to come up with something decent to say. “Fuckin’ around the camp, maybe picking up more food. Might get crazy and have a nap.”

“Hoo, such an itinerary.” She squeezes your shoulder. “I’ll let you get started on it, and get going before I’m missed.”

“Missed?” You frown. “Missed by what?”

There is a snap of time when she freezes completely, face darkening. “Oh, by…” Her eyes flick away from you for a moment, before she smiles. “Have you ever owned plants, Dirk? It’s silly but sometimes you talk to them like they’re pets and…” With an anxious little gesture, she tucks a curl of hair behind her ear. “Don’t look at me like that, buster, not everyone is sustained by the morning dew and his own imperviousness.”

“Do you name ‘em?” you ask.

She rolls her eyes. “Plants already have names.”

“Oh huh. Tell them I said hello.”

With a flippant flick of her wrist, she turns away from you, setting off for the jungle.

You watch her go, as if you could divine what was going on from the way the light reflects off her black glass hair or how her skirt swished with the tall grass.

You don’t actually know how divining works. Whatever is going on with Jane and, honestly, with Roxy is beyond you, veiled in sharp, barbed crosstalk and errant remarks.

Turning your gaze towards the lake, you bite your tongue. Though it hardly matters; you’re still alone.

The day is long, its length exacerbated by the fact you’re not willing to stray far from camp. There is only so much to do, and with the end of your expedition looming, many of them seem unimportant. You can tidy up a little, put stray equipment into the right chests to be loaded into the ship later, but that doesn’t take much time.

All you can do is stew in your own thoughts as you wait. Lay on your back under the canopy, one arm folded under your head, and think about how Jake just… gave up on you last night.

It stings, because you don’t blame him in the slightest. The fact he’s put up with you as much as
he has is fucking baffling. All because he saw you first.

You snort in amusement at the idea. To you, it sounds almost childish, greedy in a way that brings to mind grasping green hands.

But. He saw you first. You were the first he’d ever seen.

You can’t fathom that or what it means. Being separated and given heavy regard has been a part of your life for so long. Singled out because something about your aura spelled disaster for people.

There was Roxy and Jane. They cared about you. And you tried to repay that however you could, picking up whatever trade you could that would make you useful enough. That, you could understand. You could justify it.

But Jake didn’t know what the hell a noble was, and still worried over your skin against the sun and wrapped you up tight at night and pulled you to swim with him in the lake, and just saw you. He was the sort of thing that didn’t happen to you.

Now fucking what, Strider.

Now, you apparently wait and try not to feel sorry for yourself. Try to think of a way to make it up to him, in case he’s willing to deal with you again.

Tucking your arm under your head, you lay on your side, facing the lake, and keep your eyes open as long as you can. But the day is long and lethargic, with ocean breeze and humid air. When you doze, you lose control, and imagine a steadying weight against you back and humming breaths.

You are never going to sleep like this again.

Considering you wake up to Roxy tickling your face with a blade of grass, that may be for the best.

You jerk awake, cursing as you tip onto your back, scratching your face against the lingering sensation. “Fuck.”

The toe of her boot taps your ribs. “Who the hell are you and where is Dirk Strider? Where is the night owl-early bird abomination who worked himself into a fit if he went an hour without work to do? Who is this lazy asshole nappin’ in his skin? This is some changeling shit going on right here.”

“You,” you clarify, pushing yourself upright. She bumps into you as she steps around you, dropping into the papasan and crossing her leg over her knee. Her grin is bright and sharp as she settles in, a cacao pod open in her lap.

She kicks your leg lightly. “See, the Dirk I remember is always kind as cotton and never swears.”

“Not the Dirk you just knocked awake from some decent sleep,” you reply. “Where’d you get that? I thought we were out.”

Roxy waves the half-empty pod at you. “Blatant and gross bribery for my affections.” With two nails, she plucks out another clump of fleshy cacao to eat. “Which, given his lack of socialization, is real clever. The application of chocolate makes everything better.”

“Who? Jake?”
“Duh, who else?” After chewing and swallowing, she nods and goes on. “He swung by the temple, or the outside of it. He still doesn’t like going in, but he was waiting for me on the steps and delivered maybe the most awkward apology ever? He’s super bad at it.”

“That’s good,” you say, even as the words try to resolve into something making sense. Jake doesn’t like going near the temple or discussing it much, begging ignorance of it most of the time. But he went to say sorry.

And you still haven’t seen him.

That stings.

Between bites, Roxy stares at you and says, “Didn’t swing by camp, huh.”

“That’s okay.” You try to keep your voice mild and betray how much it… yeah, hurts.

“Wow, what’d you say to him?” Roxy asks, chuckling.

“Nothing.” Sitting here and letting Roxy innocently pry at all the places you’re rattling loose from the mooring isn’t going to lead anywhere good.

From two syllables, you catch her real attention, eyebrows lifting as she looks a little harder at you. “That don’t sound like nothin’. What happened?”

Goddammit.

You haul yourself to your feet. “Some words happened. It’s-- I need to talk to him,” you tell her vaguely. “We don’t have a lot of time left here and I don’t want to spend it like this.”

“Okay,” she says, watching as you move. “I mean, I don’t disagree. The last thing I’d want is to part on bad terms.”

“Okay,” she says, watching as you move. “I mean, I don’t disagree. The last thing I’d want is to part on bad terms.”

“Yeah.” You don’t want to think about that. Instead, you grab a waterbreathing taffy and a magelight, shoving them into your pockets. “There’s cleaned ahi in the box, just--”

She waves you off. “Apply heat and eat, right. Go kiss and make up, I’ll see you later.”

You turn away and hope she doesn’t catch your expression at that turn of phrase, holy shit. You’d love nothing more than that, for it to be that easy.

Before any kind of making up can occur, you have to find him.

It takes over an hour to loop to the far side of the lake, following the north shore and navigating the storm-felled trees and waterfalls until you can stand on the opposite, craggy face, looking down into the lake. Here there are the underwater caves, snaking through the rock.

You don’t know where else to look. The entire lake is Jake’s domain, and the sheer size of it is indomitable to you. Without some direction, locating him is impossible, and besides you’ve seen how he can vanish into the kelp forest below the surface.

You only have the one taffy and can’t tread around indefinitely looking for him. So, you strip down to your shorts and carefully lower yourself into the water’s warm embrace, taffy tucked into
your cheek, ready to mix and activate.

Floating around the water’s edge, you try to make a nuisance of yourself, in hopes of grabbing Jake’s attention. Swimming laps along the curved rockface, you hold your breath for the predictable catch against your ankle or a wave of movement nearby or something.

No dice.

There’s no way he isn’t avoiding you. Usually, you can’t so much as get within ten feet of the lake without being accosted. Now, it’s still and quiet.

A little annoyed, you chew the taffy, and feel its components activate. Reverse breathing never gets easier, and you take a moment to remember the pattern of swallowing air and exhaling before placing your hand against the cliff face and pulling yourself down.

As you make your way down, there is barely enough light to see by. The magelight shoved into your waistband would help, but only for a few minutes and you want to save it. Instead, you keep your hands against the rock, pushing yourself down further and further.

Eventually, you can feel the sheer side break and crack, your fingers finding holds to propel yourself down further. Places with wide gaps, like underwater corridors, make something ancient and nervous crawl up your spine. The fear if you venture down one, you will run out of air.

But you have magic candy, and need to use it. You find an opening that feels traversable, and head down it.

The cave you find isn’t the hoard of water-logged, ruined goods you’ve seen before. Wherever that is, you have no idea. But there are clearly others, and you follow the shallow tunnel through the water a good distance until it curves upward, letting you surface to take a breath of real air.

Immediately, this cave looks different, but just as lived in. More so than the improvised shrine to old, musty artifacts. There’s light here. It’s not a lot, but enough that as you look around, your eyes can adjust to the weak illumination and forgo the magelight.

There’s a loftier ceiling here, a long slope that seems made of dark stone as well as the thick roots of a tree sitting above. Small gaps bring in fleeting rays of setting sunlight between stringy roots, reflecting off the watery entrance and around the room. Ripples of light wave over the walls as you find your footing against the smooth floor and trudge out of the lake’s grasp.

It’s cool in here, and dark, further so as the minutes pass by and the streaks of light run along the floors and up the walls. In their absence, water lillies sit in idle ponds, their bioluminescent buds opening to fill the space with bluish light.

Once your eyes have adjusted, you can see this space is lived in, much more than the hoarding cave. The smooth rock floor has patches of loamy moss, growing down from the gaps in the ceiling and down to coat much of the cave. It’s a little extra friction under your feet, better footing than the bare rocks.

There’s also a flat, long stone elevated and separate from the floor where the moss is especially thick. Next to it, on the floor, the pale light catches on shiny things. Kneeling down by the pile, you see pieces of chipped obsidian and gleaming baubles. Also, what you recognize as one of the china plates Jake stole in the early days of your trip.

On the other side of the rock, between it and the cave wall, are split mussels, empty and stacked messily just out of sight. You can’t help laughing at the sight.
The most incongruous thing in this room-- and you have the dawning realization this is Jake’s bedroom, basically-- is woven lines of kelp and lakegrass hanging from two sturdy-looking forks in the tree roots. The thick, dark lines stretch out into bundles that don’t make sense until you pull at them and see the netting.

“You made a hammock,” you murmur in quiet surprise. “You live on an island, of course you have a hammock.”

It swings gently as you let it go, backing away. This place is nice. Somehow you always imagined the entire island as Jake’s home, or maybe the dark, depressing hoard, with Jake curled around a pile of book pulp. The reality is much better and pleasant. Magical in a way that doesn’t make you want to break out in hives.

You’re crouched down to look at one of the glowing flowers when the sound of water breaking fills the room, loud as it smothers the calm quiet here. You jerk upright, startled, and look to the subaquarian entrance.

Your lorelay is a beacon of yellow light, spots and peacock fins fierce as he looks at you standing in his den, flaring bright. To his waist in the water, he’s wet, catching more light and reflecting.

Once he sees you, he doesn’t move, just staring with vibrant eyes at you.

Which is about what you deserve, so you take a deep, steadying breath. “Hey. I guess this is your place, huh?”

Jake tilts his head slightly, watching you as he slowly walks out of the water, up onto the stone and moss.

You came here for a reason. Any tension humming through the air between you is your own fault. Crossing your arms, you tap your fingers against your elbow and try to keep your cool. “I, uh. Wanted to see you. And to say sorry.” You clear your throat. “About me, mostly.”

As he approaches, he takes one long step to your side, and keeps walking. Circling. The recognition helps, and you bow your head slightly under his regard. At your feet, you watch his tail drag along behind him, curling to close the loop. When you glance up, Jake’s eyes are narrow on you; caught out, you look down again. There’s instincts you’ve never felt before, set off by his proximity and just how tall he is. Making yourself small has always been a defense tactic against a cruel world. Now, it feels different. There’s no fear Jake might hurt you. Not threatening. Something else.

The effort to not let out the shudder that’s creeping up your spine is almost painful. “I know you’ve been through your own shit, and it was some small-minded fuckery to act like you haven’t,” you tell him. “And this isn’t easy for you either.” Still nothing from him, just more circling. “You know I…” You turn at the hips, just enough to follow his relentless movement, only for him to stop and let out a watery click at you that sounds admonishing. You shut your eyes. “You’re right. I don’t want to be alone. It’s just… this isn’t about what I want.”

You didn’t mean for that to come out quite so anguished, but it brings Jake to a halt in front of you. Carefully, you look up, meeting his tense, unhappy gaze, squeezing your arms tighter against yourself.

Jake sways in closer to you, then seems to stop himself. Like he’s waiting.

Being stared at is a prickle against your senses, chafing like a touch. “Except that I don’t want to leave with you hating me. Christ, Jake, I don’t know if I could live with that. If I have to carry that
with me back across the sea, I’ll fucking drown—”

He still doesn’t say anything, just lets out a watery trill and takes your face between his hands, like yesterday, wide and encompassing. You shut your eyes, leaning into it on hindbrain command, and meet him when he kisses you. His lips part yours and his tongue pushes in, and you have the distinct impression you’re being shut up, and thank fucking god. You push your hands against his shoulders, touching his neck, finding the soft scattering of spots along his skin and rubbing them. Jake makes a noise into your mouth, surging up on his toes until you almost fucking trip backwards over the thick sprawl of his tail.

He grabs you to keep you upright, then lets out a pained, impatient sound and just picks you up, your feet leaving the ground. One hand pressed to your back, the other under your ass, holding you up. You let out a shocked kick at the sudden complete loss of leverage before your back hits the moss-softened slope of the cave wall.

Your toes just barely catch the floor as you’re soundly pinned, and the ensuing kiss is even less gentle. His teeth catch your lip, you gasp, and shift in the limited space between his body and the wall.

It’s hot, but also confusing. Jake keeps letting out intent, almost winded cries as he tries to get ever closer. There’s desperation in every move Jake makes, like he can press you so close you’ll melt into him, and you know where it’s coming from. The sand running out of the glass.

You want to reassure him somehow. Touching his neck, stroking the cast of spots across his cheek. All your good intentions wash away like salt when the great muscle of his tail works around you, and you feel three discrete spines slip under your skin.

Any sweet platitude you might’ve offered dissolves into a muffled moan of Jake’s name, mouth finding home against his shoulder, lips catching on the soft texture of his spots, the yellow glow invading even through your eyelids. You tongue one, tracing the shape of it. Yellow, yellow, bright sunshine warmth for you. You wish you could swallow it like liquor.

The edges of the world grow fuzzy and strange; you’re wrapped up in a familiar warmth, the pleasant feeling of Jake around you that’s lulled you to sleep so many times, but now dreamier than sleep. You’d be happy to soak it in and hide against his strange, smooth skin, but Jake lifts your head, looking into your eyes. Beautiful eyes that are going to haunt you for the rest of your life.

His thumb strokes along your lower lip. Without thought or intent, you drag your tongue against it, eyes fluttering shut. Try to grab his wrist to hold him still. His hand twists and grabs yours in return. Only his knee shoved between your legs keeps you aloft as he captures both your wrists and holds them over your head.

You are not even a little surprised when you slip and fall to your knees, laughing at the shocked burble of sound Jake lets out. “M’fine,” you inform him, words melding together with drowsy heat. “‘Sides, I’m good down here.”

He could let your hands go. It’s what you’re waiting for. Instead, he gathers both your wrists in one hand and keeps hold, reaching down with his other to cup your face.

He looks concerned. He also looks a little wild around the eyes. And his tail is greedy, the solid weight of it laying across the back of your thighs. Jake watches as another spine catches you, how your eyes roll up at the rising tide of molten arousal that takes you.

“Cheater.” You rest your flushed face against his stomach. You are so hard, your boxers are
tenting and you would do anything to just get a hand on your dick. You pull at your wrists, twisting them, trying to get loose.

All you get is an admonishing hum and Jake’s thumb against your mouth again, drawing you back into an arch. Fine. You did mean anything, and turn your head to nip at his palm demonstrably.

He nearly purrs, stroking his hand back into your hair, getting a hold and pulling just enough for you to know, enough for you to feel it. As if there could be a single mistake, with you cocooned up and held close and tight. Resisting his hold, you look up.

Jake holds your wrists to the wall in one broad hand, and leans over you, his forehead pressed against mossy stone, mouth open as he breathes deep and hard. When you catch his eyes, he chirps softly, his fingers scratching your scalp affectionately, even as his grip tightens a bit. As if you’re going to forget who’s got a hold of who here.

Though, the way he avidly watches you… You smile like a fool, a nautical mile away from giving a single good goddamn, and push against him. “Come on. I’m here now.”

A long, low cricket hum makes you press your smile against him, trying to hide. This close, you can feel the vibration in him, the way his muscles go tense and lax in anxious jerks. If you could, you’d stroke his calves soothingly, but since that’s not an option, you do what you can, and search around with your tongue to find where his skin parts into his sheath.

The way he rocks his hips against your face is pretty gratifying. Suddenly, unbidden, Roxy’s little kiss and make up remark flits through the comfortable fog of your brain and you have to turn your head to snicker helplessly.

God. You’re a mess.

Jake nudges his sheath against you, and you take the hint, silent request laced with toxin and a longing to comply that’s too loud for you to smother this time. The slit is invisible, but you can feel it, and work your tongue against it until it starts to part for you, listening to Jake’s flood of lorelay speak above you.

You wonder what the hell he’s saying, and for the millionth time you’re pissed the Allspeak charm was never a possibility for you.

With careful attention, you wind Jake up, coaxing him open, the taste of watery slick in your mouth and probably smearing your face. It’d be neater if you could use your hands, but by now you’d almost be disappointed if he let you go.

His voice is caught in a continuous rough purr as you nuzzle his dick as it peeks out of him. Once you can feel it against your cheek, you take a gander at it.

And. Hm.

It’s not the long glowing curve of his dick that you’ve grown so fond of. What you’re faced with is something else entirely: a soft, almost flaccid appendage, thick but translucently pale. It pokes out at you, unassuming and strange as it hangs there.

With an intrepid heart, you press your lips against the side of it. The velvety texture reminds you of the pads of Jake’s peacock fins, so plush your touch sinks into it. The connection helps, reassuring, and you lap at it to see what happens.

Jake lets go of your hair to bury his face in the crook of his elbow, leaning more heavily on the wall, legs fucking quaking. When you mouth the tip, he braces himself, breathing heavily.
None of this is very discouraging, and following your instincts hasn’t hurt you yet.

Sucking the new thing seems the way to go, as it usually is when you’re kneeling like this. You feel the shifting of Jake’s tail and it wraps you closer, and if there is another prick against your skin, it’s useless, nothing against the relaxation you already feel. You’re secret and safe, tugged away and listening to the sounds Jake makes as you explore something new. Working your tongue against the almost hollow center rewards you with a thick, lush sensation filling your entire mouth, Jake’s hips urging it deeper.

The skin of it is so malleable, you can barely keep yourself from stroking your tongue against it just for the new feeling. It softens further as you prime it, until it fills your mouth, your cheeks, and fills itself with warmth. Something that leaks out of it, more tart than the glowy come you’re an old hand at swallowing back.

So, of course, you swallow.

It coats your mouth with a tingling feeling, like when you accidentally drink a potion, that instant reaction, but less malignant. The sensation is almost ticklish as it works its way around your mouth and down your throat. For a second, it itches fiercely, and you muffle a noise into Jake’s sheath, tugging your hands in his grip.

But it passes, the itch fading and leaving you feeling… unwound. Lax. Your brief demand for Jake to let go stops, and you shiver all over. It’s something like magic. You only have Jake’s little spells for comparison, but it feels like that same kind magic, uncomfortable for a moment before settling into you.

Your mouth is full again. You swallow, and feel this weird new dick go softer and longer, butting against the back of your throat. Whatever gag reflex you had is numbed away, and there is nothing to resist it as you swallow again, and the malleable thing sinks a little bit further, into your throat, getting thinner as it stretches out.

There isn’t an ounce of struggle in you. The singular sensation of this lengthening, insistent thing coaxing its way into you seizes your senses. You can barely see, can barely hear how Jake’s chirps and warbles have faded into panting breaths, can barely fucking think. It’s the opposite of an out of body experience, you’re so fucking rooted in the moment, you barely know your name.

You’re leaking against your boxers, and it’s utterly unimportant in the face of the way your throat opens up for this soft soft thing.

Everything narrows down.

Jake lets go of your wrists to cup your head instead. Your hands fall limp in your lap, forgotten.

The length of strange warmth across your tongue moves in strange ways. It’s compelling to just curl your tongue against the underside and feel it, sinking deep into a meditation on these new sensations.

With your narrow focus on what’s happening in your mouth, you still almost miss it when something changes. A soft pressure in the soft dick that opens your mouth a little wider for a moment as it slips inside. Rich heat slides over your tongue, rubbing against your palate, and back further where it settles. You shake all over, eyes rolling at the tension. It’s a relief to swallow and feel that ball of heat move down your throat.

When its gone, you come a little unhinged, hands clutching Jake’s legs, tangling in the dangling peacock fins around his hips. They cling stickily to you, radiating light as Jake pets your hair with
both hands and barely rocks his hips.

Another pressure against your jaw, and hot weight curling over your tongue. You press it against the roof of your mouth, feel it squeeze loose and slip down your throat after the first. Then, another.

You aren’t helpless to resist; there is no resistance, just a curiosity and fascination so narrow it crowds out everything else. You feel warm and enclosed and somehow too conscious.

It’s with the fifth in your mouth, toying with it as much as you can before it slips your weak grip, that you think that maybe something is going on.

And all at once, the spell breaks. You shudder and groan, calm breaking for confusion, and in the process accidentally swallow one more. That only gives you an awareness of what the hell is in your throat that honestly you didn’t want but now you have to deal with.

You pinch Jake’s legs, hard.

He yelps, stumbling back, and the long soft appendage falls easily out of your mouth, leaving you coughing at the lingering ticklish feeling. The slick’s effect on you immediately fades, leaving you dizzy, gasping for air, and slumped back against the wall.

Without real thought, you grasp your dick and squeeze it, letting loose a sharp cry. Fuck, fuck, finally, fuck, that feels so good, you feel so good, shit.

When Jake picks you up, you nearly fight him. You have to get off, you need to come right now or you’re going to lose your fucking mind. He’s lucky he just carries you over to the mossy slab of rock, two steps away, laying back on it and pulling you on top. He’s chirping incessantly, fingertips digging into your legs nearly bruising.

You can work with this, and plant both your hands on his chest, bracing yourself as you frot against him. Everything is strung so tight, you have no finesse to do anything but rub yourself against his smooth skin until the tension snaps and you come, head lolling back, struck stupid by the intensity.

Your breaths are deep and labored, and you would fall off Jake and onto the stone floor if he didn’t hold you up. He strokes your arms, pets your sides, until you start to settle enough to slump down against him, arms folded against his chest, head hanging.

He cups your face, thumb petting across the delicate line of your eyelashes. He pulls you down, until you unknit and lay on him, cheek against his shoulder.

The toxin is close dancing with your orgasm and tangling into a tight knot that ties you down. You’re exhausted and sated down to your curling toes. The chill in the air around you is abated as you tuck in against Jake. As you settle, he wraps his arms around you and rolls onto his side. His tail drags itself up, and finds its way to press against your bare back. Your head pillows on his arm. Warm, and tenderly held.

You should talk. When you open your mouth, it’s a yawn.

Jake nuzzles against your hair, and... in the morning. Yeah.

Slinging your arm around his waist, you fall into your well-deserved sleep.
Jake’s cave is badly designed. His little mossy bed is right under an open spot in the ceiling, and light cuts right over your face.

It’s also much less comfortable without him acting like an amorous furnace, keeping you warm. You try to curl up on your side, but your skin feels vaguely damp and cool. There’s no way you can get back to sleep.

You turn onto your back and rub your face.

The distinct sound of wet footsteps catches your attention. Dragging your hands up into your hair, you look over. There you find Jake crouched, long legs bent in that weirdly endearing froglike way, his hands resting on the edge of what’s essentially his bed.

“No wonder you keep sneaking into my tent to sleep,” you mumble as you start to rouse. “Your bed sucks.”

He rolls his eyes. “Sometimes a gent can long for a rock hard supine position to work out the kinks.”

“Do you say shit like that on purpose?” You prop yourself up on an arm and feel your back protest. Never again, hell no. You’re not twenty-two anymore. “Ow, jesus.”


“Cooked?” you ask. Jake frowns, lip jutting in a pout. “No, I’m…” As you swing your legs over the side of the slab, he catches your ankles, fingers rubbing the hard bone above your heel. You watch his hands, the sharp contrast of skin, and take stock. “I’m not hungry, actually.”

He looks down at your lap, flushing green and yellow in turns. “Oh. Of course. The anatomy books mentioned that, you humans with your dangerous stomachs, all of it. Wouldn’t be viable, obviously.” He chirps plaintively, and keeps his gaze low.

Yeah. Alright. That’s one fear assauged. Score one for humans.

As you sit there, Jake starts petting your skin, and you recognize the grooming thing as him sharing his protective oil again, rubbing it into your feet and up your legs with methodical care. All of his little habits are coming together into a solid picture. The cohesion is oddly comforting, even if he’s just groping you.

When he pets your knees, you finally manage to say, “So, that was… something.”

Every spot on Jake’s body pops yellow and bright for a moment before dimming again. You prod him with your toes, and he mumbles something.

“Jake,” you prompt.

“That’s…” He frowns, still not meeting your eyes. “Never happened before. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. But those were…”

His color shifts sharply to pale green, embarrassed and hunching forward. His head nearly rests on your knees as he curls up. “Does it matter? Nothing’ll come of it, so why not just--”

“Did you know you had…” The word lodges in your throat for a second. Not unlike Jake’s--
“Eggs? That’s what those were, right?”

It’s like you hit him, the reaction is so quick. He bounces up from his crouch in an easy spring, and darts away from you. Even with his back turned, you can tell he’s agitated, his tail lashing, lifting up to thump heavily against the floor. For a moment, he seems at a loss, then pads over to the strung netting hanging from the ingrown roots. Watching him climb into his hammock is a production of long, awkward limbs situating and bending up small until they fit.

You stand and walk over, while he pulls his tail up and wiggles it between his legs and arms. He hugs it tightly, its wide fin at the tip against his head.

You immediately get the impression he’s done this before a lot. A long life with no people, but a thick warm tail to cuddle.

Carefully, you reach out and pet his arm. A soft cricket hum comes to life in his chest. Look at you, trying to soothe instead of just fucking everything up. Maybe you’re making progress too.

“So, did you know that could happen?” you ask quietly, toying with his fins. You curl one around a finger and stroke your thumb against it until it glows.

Jake ducks his head under his tail fin. “Of course I was cognizant of the possibility. Had to, didn’t I, after Ms. Jane poked and prodded and all, talking about mers and things. I assumed you knew! She probably wrote up a whole treatise on my bits and ‘talia.”

“I didn’t read it,” you tell him with a faint laugh. “I kind of assumed I’d already gotten the grand tour.”

“Oh.”

Yeah, you’d sound sheepish too. “That’s never happened before?”

A noise of almost existential despair emits from under the tail fin. It fans out, like it’s hiding Jake further.

Well, you’re going to wait him out. You keep touching him calmly, tracing the shifting hues between brown to green, and say nothing, just breathing out a sigh through your nose. On a whim, you push the hammock a bit so it rocks. The cricket hum intensifies.

With a sudden burst of movement, Jake pushes himself up, hands clenching around the edge of the netting, his tail winging just barely over your head and back. It hangs over the opposite side, counterweight as Jake leans in closer to you, face pinched. “I don’t know how to make you see. All your words just do a wash of it, and tangling with them never seems to go well for me. It’s like…” He touches his forehead to yours, humming. “Like I’d been asleep all my life until you came along. There is a whole friggin’ mess of things I’ve never had to deal with before.”

That is… not a completely foreign concept to you. Actually, you think you understand it pretty well.

You nod against him. “Right. Then… what happened…” Even as you put the words together, your face heats. “Does that mean…”?

Jake pulls a grimace and lets go, falling back onto his swing with an aggrieved growl. “I don’t know! This is all new to me. You’re new, all this…” He squirms, tucking his face away again. Letting out a keen, he says, “Does it matter? In the grand scheme of what we’re wagging our tongues about, does any of it matter?”
The bitterness and upset in him flays you, and you step back, unsure what to say. Everything keeps coming back to that. It has to, you suppose.

This is your fault. Given the way Jake’s collapsing down, small and angry, you… should go, you think. The last thing you want is to do this to him, to hurt him more.

You seem to do that just by proximity.

Your first step into the water is a fresh noise, echoing around the enclosed space.

“Wait,” Jake’s voice follow you. “Are you-- where are you going?”

It arrests you, and you turn slowly around.

He’s still tucked up in his hammock, looking tense and miserable. Despite that, his eyes gleam luminously at you over the edge, his brow lifted and curved sad. It’s a gutpunch just to see.

“I,” you start, and lick your dry lips. “I figured you wanted to be left alone.”

Restless movement makes the hammock swing gently. “I’m already going to be alone, Dirk. I’ve no desire to hurry into it. Please, just…” He shuts his eyes tightly. “Don’t go yet. I’ll swim you back later, for supper, but… please?”

Here, you are helpless. You don’t want to go and he doesn’t want you to leave.

Stepping back out of the water, you return to his side. As soon as you’re close enough, he reaches out, taking your hand and pulling you in.

Lacing your fingers, he tucks your hand against his cheek, lips parting around a soft chirp.

For now, you’ll stay. You can’t fathom doing anything else. The future is a grey, bleak, featureless expanse before you. Not like here, with the quiet sound of lapping water, soft lorelay words, and shifting watery light.

When Jake drops you off back at camp, it's right onto the pier, setting you on the edge before sinking most of the way underwater again.

The trip back, holding onto his back as he cuts through the lake, is silent and sullen. You’re not in the least bit surprised when Jake doesn’t join you, leaving you with one long, lingering glance. He dives, and vanishes in in the span of a blink.

If you take a moment just to ready yourself for this, it’s nobody’s business.

The walk down the pier is an age. Your shirt’s gripped in your hand, your pants only just pulled back on a few moments ago. Back in polite society, you’re going to have to adjust back to the reality of wearing clothes on a daily basis. That there, that might be the insurmountable feat of returning to the mainland.

It’s early in the evening, and the girls are still both awake. Dinner seems to be put away, with some stacked plates ready to be washed in the lake later. But your friends distant conversation ends as you trudge up the shore, both of them watching you hawklike.
Now’s really not the time to lose your nerve. Especially given what you want to do here.

“Hey, sorry,” you open as you get within earshot. “I didn’t expect to be gone that long. Sort of… camping out with Jake.”

Jane has her hands in her lap, fingers intertwined and knuckles white as she nods. “Oh, that’s fine! It would’ve been nice to know where you got off to for a whole day, but we’re just glad to know you’re safe.”

Roxy shrugs one shoulder, and pulls her legs up to rest under her in the papasan. “I mean, I told her that you and Jake were having a meetin’ of the minds, but you know the Janes.”

“When a friend breaks routine and vanishes for almost twenty hours, that’s a perfectly acceptable cause for concern,” Jane replies, bright and tart.

Routine. “Yeah, about that. And about Jake.” You don’t want to get too close, as if they’ll get a good look at you and know somehow. Aiming for casual, you lean on one of the canopy support poles, tucking your hands into your pockets. Your fingers close around the magelight left in there, and you worry at the imperfections of the glass bottle idly. Something to distract you.

“Yes,” Jane says, suddenly incensed. “About Jake. We were hoping you’d come back sooner since we’ve… been talking about him. About what to do.”

Your own plans dissipate like smoke at that. “Right. Okay.”

“We’ve been talking about some of our research and some of the things you’ve said about the situation,” Jane says, her fingers unfolding and refolding together as she speaks.

“Don’t imagine I’d have much to do with it,” you mutter.

“Stop,” Jane scolds. “Your opinion means the world to me, and if you don’t start believing me, I’m going to stencil it on your forehead.” She sighs. “No, about what will happen to this place when we come back. A lot of things I… didn’t want to think about for a few days, honestly.”

Roxy nods along. “Yeah, she told me about that. My money is honestly on the magical resort for rich assholes, but schyeah, we know something’s gonna happen. Nothing good, either.”

Clapping her hands together, Jane leans forward, looking into the smouldering fire rather than at you. “I love the work we’ve done here, and I know Roxy does too. The amount of material we’ve gotten is…” She laughs, the sound more sad than cheerful. “We could advance a few fields of magic, honestly. It’s the big break we’ve dreamt of!!”

“But we’re thinking about chucking it all in for kindling,” Roxy says with finality.

“That’s unexpected,” you say mildly. You have no idea what to do here. A cold nausea is filling you.

“As much as we want to keep it, we know it’s going to draw attention here. And the thought of--” Jane’s voice falters, and she shakes her head.

“We love that goofy frog guy living in the lake,” Roxy goes on, her voice cavalier despite her deep frown. “And ruining what little peace he’s got with a bunch of money-grubbing pricks--”

“Not that everyone at the Crocker Trust--”

“We know, we know, there’s good eggs there, but seriously?” Roxy slaps her hand on her thigh.
“I know,” Jane moans, dropping her face into her hands. “I know, I know, I know.”

Roxy waves a hand, going quiet and looking away, off at the horizon. At her temple, maybe. The habitual veneer of joy you’re so used to seeing from her, that baseline of positivity that has kept you afloat more times than you can count, is gone. Just a placid expression on her face.

With a loud sniffle, Jane straightens, composing herself. “Anyway. We’re not certain yet. But we’ve talked about it a lot. I just… have these nightmares about standing up on that stage to accept my laureate, and thinking about Jake. I don’t want to make my career on his back.”

“There’ll be other discoveries,” Roxy murmurs. “It’s a big world.”

“Sure,” Jane says, voice small.

Then, she looks up at you, eyes red-limned. “Well, what do you think, Mr. Strider?”

Deep, deep down, hidden in your chest, behind the cage of your ribs, in a red hot beating place, you think what does it matter.

You’ve spent the entire day with Jake, caught every resigned and hopeless look. And what did any of it matter.

But that’s not your role here, and when need be, you have a poker face like Roman statuary.

“I’ll follow whatever you decide,” you say.

Jane’s face falls. “Is that all?”

You open your mouth to say yeah, yeah of course, before you remember. “Actually… no. Since we’re talking about Jake.” You want to look away, worried you’re going to give something away here. Screw up this delicate situation. But that’d be much more suspicious, so you hold her eyes. “We’ve got, what? One week? Two?”

“Two, about,” Roxy supplies, still not looking at either of you.

“Well. Jake’s not so thrilled about meeting people and having to say goodbye so soon. Frankly, his situation sucks, and…” You take a deep breath. “If you guys think you can handle a few days, I want to sort of… stick with him. Since there’s not a lot of time left.”

Jane’s lips part into a little surprised oh, before she nods. “Goodness gracious, you’re right. I… I’ve been thinking about his bodily safety with Crocker Magitech boots on the ground, but…” She bites one finger, nodding along. “He’s so sensitive. And this must be hard for him.”

Understatement of the year. “Yeah.”

“We’re going back to beloved friends and family, but he’s not!”

“Exactly.”

She keeps nodding, growing more sure. “Right. Yes, that’s– we could probably fend for ourselves for a bit. We’ll need your help to pack up and get the Acorn ready, but..” A smile breaks through her cloudy expression. “That’s very kind. I’ve never known you to be quick to make friends. But that’s– you should, absolutely. That’s a good idea.”
The weight in your chest should lessen at that. The nausea should settle. It’s a sickness you can feel in your heart, pushing through your veins.

But you don’t know what else to do. And at least this is… better.

Jane quickly excuses herself for a bath, and Roxy keeps sitting there, staring off. You stick around for a few minutes, in case she wants to talk. But boisterous pain in the ass or not, she’s always kept her shit close to the vest.

Given what you’re doing, you can’t blame her.

Turning in early still feels like an admission of defeat, falling like moonlight over the camp.

Chapter End Notes

city: have you seen agar water cakes?
arc: oh my god

chapter warnings: aphrodisiac, restraints, oral oviposition, deep throating, subspace. no, dirk does not have eggs in his tummy. not how that works. he's fine.

i made myself sad writing this shit, what the fuck. also the hammock started as a joke but then like, well, of course jake would use it, he's been alone for so long, it's a way to self-hug. 8( 8( 8( yepppp made myself sad. i deserve that.
Deep down you always knew that your presence on this trip was somewhat superfluous. If absolutely necessary, Roxy could pilot the airship, despite her protests, and manual labor is always nice to have, but two accomplished witches could probably combine their magic prowess to do any and all of the work you’ve done.

That truth reverberates around you head as you pack a bag with some essentials and set off for the far side of the lake. Much of your life is dependant on the kindness of your friends and you are grateful for all they do for you.

But there is something quietly satisfying about abandoning your post as the camp valet.

Now, you know generally where Jake lives when he’s not in the lake itself. The gaps in the ceiling of his cave and the support of the tree give you landmarks to look for. Searching for him is a careful endeavour, with you hunting for familiar sights to search, then walking cautiously over what could be his roof. It’s probably a little too much care, given how sturdy it was on the inside, but the idea of falling through and punching a giant hole into his house dogs you.

Eventually, you find a lone tree away from its fellow, between the lake and the ocean shore, and recognize the stone grey bark. Finally finding it makes your heart race. You’re here.

You just hope you’re welcome.

You test every step you take for stability, wary of weak points. It seems fine, though, and soon you find a hole in the ground, situated above a stone cavern. There’s that pale blue light and shimmering water reflections on the wall, and you think this is the right place. Unless there are other spots like this, which you wouldn’t know. There were other people here once, obviously. You don’t know about other lorelays.

Laying down on your stomach, you lean over the hole and, after a moment of paralyzing uncertainty, call out, “Anyone home?”

At first, there’s nothing and you assume you’ve got the wrong spot. Then, below, Jake walks by, his spine fins straight and pointy, posture tense.

You clear your throat. “Look up, dude.”

Jake whips around, turning in a complete circle before he glances up. All at once, his unhappy green spots flicker yellow. “Oh! Hullo!”

“Hi.” You cross your arms and lean further out so he can see you.

“Well, what are you doing up there, then?” he asks, walking directly under you, head cocked to the side.

There’s a chance you’re about to look very foolish here, and he’s staring avidly up at you. “Came here to… Shit, so we’ve got about two weeks left here, and…” The reminder dims him, his colors, his expression, and this isn’t how you wanted this to go. “I’m fucking this up. Look, Roxy and Jane don’t need me for a few days. So… if you were interested, I could…” You wave a hand demonstrably, but Jake just keeps looking up at you. Maybe this was a bad idea. “You don’t have
to say yes, but if you wanted, I could stay here for a while. With you.”

“Here?”

“I mean-- sure? Unless you don’t--”

Jake lifts up his hands, waggling his fingers and lifting up on his toes. His only response is a wordless trilling noise, which even you can’t misinterpret.

Face heating, you turn your head against your arm. If he’d said no, the walk of shame back to camp would have been murder. Even as you gather yourself, Jake chirps brightly. “I’ll come up and fetch you, hang about!”

“No, wait a second,” you call at him, watching him jerk to a halt midstep and bounce back under the hole. “If I’m staying for a bit, I need clothes and shit.” Jake gives you an incredulous look. Yeah, of course he would, fuck. “And I brought you the last few books you haven’t read from camp. Don’t want to get them wet.”

“Suppose not,” he agrees.

You hand your pack down to him, dropping it into his grasp. Later you’ll have to get it back out without using the tunnel, but you have time before that’s a problem. Now, you climb gingerly back to your feet.

You don’t make it five steps to the lake before green hands clap onto the edge of the cliff face, and Jake hauls himself out of the lake bodily, a completely graceless flop of his body on the grass. He swings himself up, out of the water, tail landing with a wet slap before he sits up to beam at you.

“Wow,” you intone dully, and clap.

“Stuff a sock in it, handsome,” he tells you, then does his grabby hands at you again. Either you bridge the distance or he’s going to just expedite it by probably picking you up and carrying you off like some pulp novel monster who got his hands on the nubile young witch.

You walk over, and take one of his hands. When he pulls, you go, and wind up sort of on his lap as he urges you to sit on one of his legs. “Uh, okay,” you blurt, surprised as he holds you close. His hands find the line of your spine and spread wide over it, thumb to little finger to thumb again almost covering the entire length.

His knee bends, pressing against your legs between his, and his cheek comes to rest against your collarbone. Stiff discomfort holds you for a moment, until you just…

You’d expected his jubilant excitement to drag you along into something. This is much quieter, and the pressure around you feels like a hand closing gently around your heart, urging it to slow and relax. You rest your head on top of his, and feel the hum in his chest as that watery cricket noise stirs.

His nose rubs idly against your skin where your collar’s open. “How long?” he asks, his words tinged with vibration.

“Hm?” If you put your arm around his shoulders, your fingers can tuck into his damp hair. Shit, he’s getting you soaked… The sensation of wet clothes is becoming more a part of your life than dry ones.

His fingers tighten on you slightly as he rubs his cheek against you. “A few days? How many?”
Oh. “We need to eventually break down camp and pack shit up and reinflate the ship’s balloon, so… three or four for that, I think? So I don’t wear myself out before that long fucking flight back. That means… if you wanted, I guess a week and change?”

He tugs you down, off his thigh to sink to the grass between his legs, and folds you up in his arms again. His face presses against the back of your neck, his breathing deep and steady, moving against you. It’s not the frantic, anxious thing you expected at all.

You let go of him, resting your hand lax against his leg, and lean against his chest. Later, you’ll fill the time differently, but there is seduction in just being still and letting your worries go, washed clean like soapy water against a blackboard, the pristine blankness as you’re held close like a precious thing.

Just for now. It’s alright to pretend. It’s all you have, really.

Your first day is simple. Getting reacquainted with the little cave home Jake’s made for himself. He bashfully tries to clean up a bit, getting rid of the tower of empty mussels by his bed and piling all his keepsakes neatly on the china plate. You let him futz around, and sit with an empty journal and pencil at the edge of the little wading pool against the wall, separate from the lake. Away from the warm water coming off the volcano, the pool is much cooler, and refreshing on your feet.

On a whim, you sketch out the shape of the glowing lilies that illuminate the cave. Maybe Jane would enjoy some botanical illustration. If she wasn’t going to destroy all her work later anyway.

You don’t want to think about that, so you push it out of your mind.

Eventually, after he’s done making the place presentable in little ways you’re not even going to notice, he sits by you, tail looping behind you and trailing into the water. Leaning in, he watches you work for a bit.

“I remember that anecdotal admission before. About art classes,” he says.

“Yeah.” You shade carefully, trying to convey the luminescence of the flowers. “I’m real stubborn though, and you can teach yourself almost anything.”

Jake rests his cheek on your shoulder, watching avidly. It’s weird to realize that he’s never had this before. The only paper on the island is the messy pulp of the ruined books in his hoard. The thought makes you stop drawing, and Jake chirps plaintively at you.

“Dry your hands a bit,” you tell him.

Taking off your shirt-- and reflecting how that didn’t take long-- you fold it up and put it on Jake’s leg, then rest the journal on top. You have other pencils, and pick out a wider one and teach him how to hold it. Circles and straight lines and careful curves, the usual building blocks.

He flushes dark all over. “I don’t think I’m a smart crack at this thing.”

“Give it more than five minutes.” Then you change tactics and draw a tic-tac-toe board. Then, after a while, the four-by-four array of dots needed for dots and boxes, which he’s much better at.

Evening falls sooner than you anticipated, and Jake leaves to fetch some food. In his absence, you
flip to a new page and sketch out his shape. By now, it comes easily to you: the sinuous curve of his spine and tail, the radiant splay of little fins, his broad shoulders. You’ve done this before, for Jane’s notes, but that was staid and academic. Now, you try to capture something more.

Jake brings you the dark persimmon things you like and some of the more edible root vegetables. When you take them, you hand him the journal in return, and try not to stare at his vibrantly glowing reaction.

He warbles for a bit to himself, holding the journal and pacing around the room.

“Can you craft some self-portraiture?” he asks you eventually.

“Uh.” You frown. “Why?”

He turns to stare at you.

Oh. Right. The idea of drawing yourself chafes something fierce, but given what he’s facing in just two weeks, you can definitely see the appeal. “Shit. If I had a mirror, maybe?”

“I have one. I can just pop off to the other cave and—”

“Not tonight,” you tell him. “But… fine. If you want.” It’s really the least you could do, even if committing your own face to paper makes your skin crawl just a bit.

He hugs you, and you jump and gasp as one of his goddamn spines catches you in the hip. In his defense, he seems apologetic about it, rubbing the spot with his fingers. “Oopsie daisy. I know it’s a hell of a tale to swallow, but I didn’t mean to do that.”

“This time,” you say, sighing. “Shit. That stuff makes it hard to sleep.”

Jake leans in to nudge his nose against yours. “You make me hard to sleep.”

“Shut up,” you tell him, rolling your eyes.

Even with the added cushion of your bedroll, the moss bed is killing your back. You wake up that first morning and place your hands against your hips, arching back until your shoulders and spine crack in protest.

“I’m too old for stone beds,” you mutter, feeling every day of your age.

Jake pouts as you sit beside him, at the water’s edge. He has breakfast already: fresh fish. He’s clearly put in a little more effort than usual, cleaning it and putting it on a broad green leaf. Still not cooked.

You sigh and pick up a piece with your fingers. “Fine. I think the Japanese eat it raw when it’s fresh enough. If I get sick, you’re taking care of me.”

He smiles as you shove a bite in your mouth and cautiously chew. It’s cold, which isn’t particularly pleasant, but it comes apart in your mouth much easier than you expected, and the taste is fine, if different.

“I thought about it a lot,” Jake says while you eat. “And I definitely want two drawings of your
lovely visage. I’ll put them at opposite ends, on the walls, so if one gets destroyed by rain or some ill weather, I’ll still have the other.”

His voice is exuberant with excitement over his idea, but it only makes it sting more. Knowing you’re leaving him with something so inadequate, and it’ll be all he has. You don’t know if you have the artistic ability to create something worthwhile, let alone twice over.

But you nod along, because it’s all you can do.

There’s an old murky mirror, liberated from the hoard. You clean it off best you can, then set it up on the moss bed, adjusting it until it sits where you have a clear view of yourself.

For too long, you sit there, trying to sort out what to do. Should you smile? Holding a smile long enough to draw it seems like an insurmountable task. And every angle you try to situate yourself doesn’t seem compelling enough.

The cliche is sitting on the tip of your tongue as you twist to look at Jake, the dreaded *what do you even see in me anyway*. But it dies gracefully as you watch him.

He’s got a pile of kelp and lakegrass draped over one leg, and the hammock untied and laying in a heap at his side. As you watch, he runs the kelp through his fingers, water sluicing out of it before he twists it tightly.

Seeming to sense he’s being watched, Jake looks up at you, tilting his head and letting out a weird inquisitive *brvvt* noise.

“Nuthin,” you say, and turn back to your own work, both of you settling into your own tasks. If you had Roxy’s gramophone, it’d be perfect, but the silence isn’t bad at all. The only thing this island is missing is birdsong to fill the air.

By midday, you have a really shitty rough sketch, and Jake ends your work by taking the mirror away and dropping his apparently finished netting in a sunspot. “Come on.” He takes your hand, pulls you in for a kiss that fizzles cool after your tongue and throat.

Snapping his goggles on his face, he pulls you onto his back, and you go swimming. You are dead weight against his back, legs hooked around his hips, arms looped around his shoulders. Making no attempt to swim yourself, you let him propel you both through the lake. He darts through watery sunlight for a while, the surface and clear blue sky above a translucent mirage over your head. Then, deeper, into the kelp forest before, pushing the great tangles of tensile ribbon out of the way as he drives you further on with his powerful tail.

There’s errant fish down here, and you get to watch him grab one right out of the school going by, reflexes like a viper. He beams, pleased with himself, before letting it go.

When you start to feel the water in your lungs, a uniquely horrific dawning feeling, you tap his shoulders and let go of him to drift away. Twirling around, he faces you, and gives you another magic-laden kiss when you tap your mouth insistently. The spell renews, and you float there calmly, breathing the lake in.

Jake watches you, just smiling. You mouth “what” at him, and he sticks his tongue out at you. You do the same.

It’s unfairly nice, and you drift through the lake until the light dims to the point you can no longer see. Then Jake leads you home, swimming slowly so you can keep up.
Dinner is another type of fish, again raw. You’re going to have to eat up on the surface so you can make a fire, have something warm tomorrow. But for tonight, it’s fine. It’s even better when you squeeze out a mess of citrus on it and mix it up. Then it’s pretty great, actually. Needs pepper.

You haven’t really spoken more than a few words since you came back from swimming. It’s quiet and calm, the blue-shade darkness a heavy balm that keeps your mind clear and blank. The annoyance from not being able to draw a fucking picture is just… unimportant, at least for the moment.

Only Jake’s yellow-green glow breaks the atmosphere. He rehangs his hammock and throws himself into it with all his weight, rocking it heavily before climbing back out, looking satisfied.

“Grab your blanket, lets give this a shake,” he says.

You unearth the blanket from your pack that you stowed thinking of that chilly morning before. “What are we shaking,” you ask.

“I made it bigger, so we can sleep here. No more of my wonderful refreshing moss bed that I’ve worked so long to cultivate.”

“Yeah yeah."

As you approach, Jake sits on the hammock, and coaxes you in. Getting a full grown man and a big lorelay into the same hammock is a feat, but Jake helps lift you up, sitting you almost between his legs. Getting yours up and in seems impossible, so you instead just pull them off the floor, tucking into the side.

Grinning, Jake pulls your body down against his before unfurling your blanket and draping it over your both, the edge curling around your head where it lays on his chest.

His body is warm and curved under you, supportive and fitting around you in helpful ways. Shutting your eyes, you take stock, and decide this might be doable.

Half his tail is hanging out, onto the floor. He flexes it, and the swing rocks softly.

This is nice, you think as you shut your eyes.

You sleep deep through the night, waking around dawn, like your body’s expecting to be roused by Jake’s as he wakes with his habitual earliness. But today, Jake’s head is heavy, lolled against the wider straps of the kelp netting, lips idly parted.

As far as you can recall, you’ve not had the chance to watch him sleep. You indulge for a while before putting your head back down.

Later, with sunlight finally working its way into the cave from the ceiling, you wake again. With your eyes still closed, you can feel Jake touching you. The pads of his fingers trace along your hairline, your brow, pressing a little more firmly against the apple of your cheeks before running along your jaw. Under you, you can feel the muted purr in his chest, soft and quiet.

Without your permission, your hand on his shoulder clenches, curling tightly as you try to keep your fucking cool.
After breakfast, you stare at the paper in your lap, tapping the pencil lightly against the binding of the journal.

Jake leans over your shoulder. “It’s… why are you frowning so hard?”

“That’s just the way my face is,” you say tartly, and flip to a new page to try again.

Jake kneads your skin, and you are forced to reflect on how having a creature's protective skin oil rubbed all over you is becoming just a fact of your life as you both go up to the surface.

The sun is brilliant, chips of white light dancing off the waves as you stand on the beach. Warm air against your skin after the admittedly pretty chilly atmosphere of Jake’s home is refreshing. You stand on the shore, and let the waves carry sand up to coat your feet, digging you down by degrees. It roots you down, weighty and damp.

You breathe deeply.

“Be careful over there,” Jake calls at your back. You sigh fondly, sure he can’t see it.

“I’m fine.” He can’t come close, obviously, with how salt water acts like poison to his anatomy. It makes perfect sense.

Still. You like the view.

Leaving him there for a while, you walk along the beach. There are shells here, which you rarely get back home; witches snatch them up for components all the time, leaving beaches picked clean. You grab a few for yourself, just enough to fill one cupped hand. Along the way, there’s a piece of glassy rock that resembles your bracelet pretty closely. If this is where Jake got it, it was while risking getting sick from the salt water.

You pocket that one to keep, smooth and flat like a worry stone.

Walking back, you find Jake up on the grass, laying out like a spilled bottle of ink on his stomach. There’s one of Jane’s detective novels in his hands, and his tail flips this way and that, landing heavily on one side of him only to lift up again and flop to the other, and back again.

As you approach, he keeps reading. You take a sip from your canteen, then empty half of it onto his shoulders and down his back.

He chirps, brightening a bit. “That feels spectacular, thank you. Are you done prancing about by the big deadly water?”

Sinking down, you sit against his side and drop all your findings in your lap to sort through. “For now. I might go back later.”

Jake makes a faint, noncommittal noise, and swings his tail over your legs. You lay one hand on the springy green skin and rub it idly as you clean sand off shells and rocks. If Jake will show you how to make that thin cord he uses, you could make something decent to wear, probably.

At some point, he either finishes or grows tired of his book and rolls onto his side to curl up around you. One hand touches your arm, rubbing at the slowly moving shapes there. His fingertip
finds a spoke of your wheel, following it in its easy gliding rotation.

It’s unfairly soothing, and you are drawn like gravity back against him, your eyes closing. As you settle, his hands skate over you, refreshing the oil, keeping you from burning in this sun. You doze like this, unthreatened and momentarily safe in a way that’s more intoxicating than hours of day drinking.

In the back of your mind, you aren’t certain this is a great idea. Jake makes space for you at every turn, building a place for you to stay. It makes the looming departure cast a greater shadow. In truth, you should resist. Redraw the boundaries between you both.

But you are helpless to resist, and want to soak up all the attention and affection like sweetwater.

As the sun sets, you build a fire just large enough to cook up some tuna. Turning the stick over the fire slowly and carefully, you listen to the ocean tide as it unfurls and rolls up the beach, the pop of the fire, and Jake, laying out a safe distance from both, as he almost sings, chirps and hums folding together into some weird amalgamation of feline and frog. It reminds you of cicadas, the din that faded into white noise around you, just becoming as part of the night as the dimming heat and pale moonlight.

The fifth time you glance at Jake as he carries on, he grins at you and pauses enough to ask, “D’you like it?”

“Sure. Does it mean anything?”

“Hm. Only that,” he answers, cryptic and weird, before rolling onto his back and starting up again. It’s a nice sound, like a balm falling over you.

The moon is rising in the sky when you finally douse your fire with sand and follow Jake back to the lake, back to his cave for sleep.

Around the fourth day, a bone-deep fear worms its way past the thick layered calm that is part of your little vacation here. It seeps in through the cracks, dripping in and filling you by slow degrees.

Jake claims to want a little time to himself and gives you a prolonged, earnest kiss before diving into the lake and leaving you in the quiet of the cave.

The quiet is much less peaceful today.

You fiddle with the things you found on the beach and some leftover stuff Jake has laying around. Out of everything, you almost have the right materials for another bracelet like yours. All that’s missing is a piece with a good enough hook to act as the clasp.

For the time being, you put it all into Jake’s little stash of baubles on the plate. Then, pick up the mirror, set it up at the right angle to see yourself, and try again.

The problem is your face, mostly. With every iteration, you are getting a better likeness, the muscle memory of doing this returning to you in pieces. But it’s still your face, and you can’t stop the ugly frown from marring your features. Even when you smother it, you just look… at best blank, at worst perturbed.
Handing Jake one of the drawings is unacceptable, and all you know is the available sunlight from the gaps overhead is shifting and moving outside your reach. The angle comes in too dramatic, leaving an empty hollow under the blade of your cheekbone, suddenly gaunt.

You tap your pencil against the paper too hard. The lead inside will break because of you.

When Jake eventually returns, he waltzes right up to where you’re sitting, your head pillowed in your arms and looking at the mirror. He sits behind you, arms wiggling around your waist, his chest pressing up against your back.

“Any luck? I figured you’d give it a few more shots while I was on my little sojourn.” His hands stroke up and down your chest. After a moment, he lets out a confused sound. “Dirk?”

“Not yet,” you manage, tucking your head down against your elbow.

He presses his palms against your pecs, pressure nudging you back against him. “Your heart’s racing.”

Yeah, there is a rising panic in you. You don’t have time. You thought maybe a week would help, but more and more, this feels like a mistake. In the moments when you can let go and just be here in the now, it’s… fucking tremendous. Having someone close, who gravitates to touching you reminds you of every time someone looked at you with trepidation. Noble. No one so invested in keeping you safe, making sure you’re comfortable, putting in the effort so you’d want to stick around.

And it’s not enough. You’re trying to repay him in the small ways you can, and there’s not enough time for you to get it right, and that helplessness is a knot being woven in your chest, lodging in your throat.

If you stayed away, Jake wouldn’t be chirping worriedly in your ear and rubbing your skin trying to soothe you. If you stayed away, you’d have your shit together.

When you leave, you know you will never have something like this again. In a sense, you have lived a desert wanderer’s experience, getting by on dew and what errant forage you could find. But Jake is an oasis, filling you up and teaching you the miracle of shade.

But now, there’s only the desert before you. You have to remember what you were before. Desiccated and brittle.

You… don’t think you like that man very much.

Jake clearly doesn’t understand what’s wrong; you don’t have the words to explain it, and he doesn’t know what to say to you like this. But he draws you into his lap and rocks, singing chirpy platitudes into your hair while you wait for the fear to finally settle and take its barbed hooks out of you.

The movement along your arms hasn’t reached the point where it demands attention just yet, but you elect to visit the waterfalls anyway. You are longing for that release, when the built up tension is dragged out of you. The days you’ve spent just searching for that particular feeling and clinging to it are frequent and as regular as the tides.
You strip out of your boxers, the only clothes you bothered to put on today, and hand them to Jake as you work your way under the warm deluge coming from some basin above. As ever, it takes a few tries to get your body fully under the torrent, water hitting your back like an aggressive masseuse going to town on you. You bend, offering up the plane of your back to the attention, and groan in a mix of pleasure and pain as it pounds into you.

Just another thing you’re going to miss.

When you’re too lax and beat tired to stand, you finally step out from the waterfall, walking on weak knees as you carefully traverse the wet ground and settle next to Jake on his outcropping.

Last time you were here, you shoved your entire leg into your mouth and Jake bailed on you. Now, you lay in a sprawl across the rock at his side, and stretch out your warm muscles. Arm falling against his thigh, you tap him. “Hey. Gimme.”

“What sort of demand is this?” Jake asks, flicking your hand away as you continue to tap at him absently.


A hand strokes through your hair, brushing it back, off your forehead. “I’ve considered the evidence laid out before me, and have come to a different conclusion.”

“No more detective books.” You smack his leg with the back of your hand. “Give.”

Watching him through your heavily lidded eyes, you can see just enough to track how he balls up your boxers and throws them towards the lake. Being too lightweight for a good toss, you both watch them fall onto the rock a foot from the edge.

Jake frowns and swishes his tail, knocking them off. “Whoops. Case of the butterfingers. I’ve not had butter, but I’m given to understand it’s a slippery morass you wouldn’t want on your fingers.”

“You asshole.” Sitting up is a production; you prop up on your elbows to glare at him. “Humans need clothes to protect themselves. Not all of us can have your streamlined bullshit to keep us safe.”

“Safe!” Jake nearly squawks. “Protection, protecting you from what! I’m the only one here, chickadee.”

“Well, from you then, maybe,” you tell him, climbing to your feet. You undermine it immediately by bracing yourself on his shoulder as you pad across the rock to where he knocked your clothes off.

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“Is that so,” he says, and his tail shifts as you walk by it, the fins flaring against the long spines, just enough for you to notice.

Glancing back, you see him watching you closely. There’s tension in his body, and it finds its answer in yours as you try to play it cool and step out of his reach. But you already know how this is going to go, and make a break for it, two long steps before you throw yourself into the lake.

Before the bubbles around you finish dissipating, you see Jake break the surface with much more speed and grace than you; he dives like a dagger thrown, sliding right past you and into the dark water.

You arch back to the surface for a breath of air before swimming down, trying to disturb the water as little as possible. It won’t matter; you have no illusions about this, about how you are in Jake’s
domain completely and there’s little you can do to even the stakes. But this game is still thrilling. Maybe in part because of the inevitability of it.

The lack of light makes it much more stressful. You can’t see a damn thing, and have to propel yourself with wide strokes of your arms just to get a feel for the space around you. You have a vague sense of the lake, and *think* the kelp forest is further towards the center and closer to the temple. Here, there’s nothing, and you swim deeper into it.

You’ve always been an exceptional swimmer, and can hold your breath for a long time. By that alone, you know Jake has kept himself scarce for a few minutes, because suddenly you need air. Kicking up to the surface as fast as you can is an option, but…

Instead, you float still and tap your mouth, and wait.

That trust is rewarded; in about three seconds, he’s on you, taking hold of your wrist to pull it from your lips and fit his mouth against yours. Tingly cool magic flows into you, and you lean in, cupping his head and opening your mouth. His tongue is hot in the wake of the magic.

The game dissipates as you just forget about it, about everything except floating in comfortable, warm lake water and holding on as you kiss him. It should feel like falling, letting everything in your body unspool to press against him, make him take your weight. But you’re weightless, and Jake pulls you closer with just one hand wrapping around your waist. Everything is dark and gold and so fucking magical you can barely believe it.

His fingers slide up into your hair from the back, thumb stroking behind your ear as he nudges his forehead against yours with languid affection. You push back, and are relieved that you can’t speak and definitely can’t let out a breathy sigh of his name against his lips, thank fucking god.

Stroking your hand down his back, his peacock fins run lushly against your palm. Lower, where his tail fin starts, you trace a long spine with your thumb, pushing against its tensile strength. You don’t know how much sensation he has there, but it’s enough for him to lean further into you, mouthing your neck with avid attention. Your sense of gravity is fucked, and you *might* be spinning slowly through the water, but it’s impossible to be sure.

You flick your thumbnail against the end of the spine, and Jake shudders, pulling you flush against him as he maps out your collarbone with his lips. Your head drifts back, dark water all around as you both work your bodies closer. Hooking your legs around his hips lets you frot slowly against him.

Jake lifts his head to look at you when you keep fucking with his spine, resting his forehead against yours and frowning contemplatively at you. You lift your eyebrows at him, and flick the tip one more time before putting your hands on his chest. It’s not like you can speak to tell him. But you don’t need to. Jake wraps his arms fully around you, holding you tight as his tail finally curls up and you take two injections right around the shoulder, your whole body jerking with the sudden rush right into your bloodstream, jesus fuck.

He drags his tongue against the closer puncture mark, soothing it as his tail slides away again, presumably propelling you both.

Eventually, the radiant yellow glow from his spots and fins catches against something, just a second before you land against the lakebed. The disturbance knocks up a silty cloud of soft earth, and you jerk away from it, worried even through the rising heat in your belly about breathing that shit in.
Jake rolls you under him, against the lakebed, which seems like a bad move until he waves an arm in a wide arc through the water. It ripples, all around you, and you have just enough light to see the drifting dust and loam and silt spread out away from you. As it spreads out, it builds almost a glowing dome around you, shimmering with the caught light and fading slowly.

It’s fucking magic. Literally. You almost laugh, but the pressure of water in your mouth and chest is too strange.

Beneath you is some stringy grass and smooth lake stones, details that refuse to catch as you stroke your hands over Jake’s arms and chest, addicted to skin. Dimly, you can see the great lash of his tail propelling him down, crushing his body against you. You’re covered and pinned, by water pressure and an amorous lorelay. It’s good. There is something about being held in place that rings through you like struck brass.

You clutch his shoulders, mouth at the side of his neck, pet fingers through his fanning fins. He could crush you and you’d probably want more.

Legs just splayed and drifting with the faint current rocked from his tail, you are open and easy when he starts rubbing his dick against you. There’s an intensity to him-- though when isn’t there- - and dimly you worry about being too tense for it. But it’s easy to reach back and find his spine, apply just enough pressure.

Your head lolls, hair floating around your head like a corona as you hold on and squeeze him, the only encouragement you can offer.

Even with the unspooling tension leaving your body, he still can’t seem to get it in you, which is distantly frustrating. He eventually reaches down, tucking his fingers into his sheath before working you open, slickness coaxing you. It’s amusing enough for you to grin as he gets both hands down there, letting you hold onto him as he holds you open and guides himself into you.

His fingers slip away and you can’t avoid clenching down on him. He’s just barely in you, but as he buries his face against your neck and jerks his hips, you open easily, tension smothered to silence. All you have to do is hold him, nosing against his hair as he works deeper and deeper into your body.

Your breath tries to hitch through the weight of water. It’s impossible. You can’t even cry out or moan, and that is a dizzying feeling, making you dig your nails in and grip him tighter. You are so fucking deep in magic you could drown.

But Jake lifts his head, catches your eyes and holds. And that… helps. You kiss him, and that helps even more as he rocks into you with leisurely pumps of his hips, his dick slipping in with each one. Some last knots of resistance untie themselves, and you shudder as the dense heat of him works so far into you, your eyes cross.

Toes flexing and curling, you can’t stop the minute shakes through your body. Clenching down, he’s… soft. It’s soft texture pulls at you, stretching out as it moves.

You can’t speak. You can’t even groan as the sensation builds in you. Just stare up at him with shock and a shivering awe.

His hands press your shoulders into the lakebed, his forehead held against yours as he fucks you in long strokes that feel like they’re getting you in the fucking soul, like somehow he’s reached some core of your being.

That’s overwhelming enough. Then, pressure. Just enough to urge you open. The slick from his--
the other dick, it has stripped you down to nothing, and all you can do is watch his eyes squeeze shut as he works the first into you. You are a hot, heavy thing, and still the heat of the egg catches you off guard. You feel it discretely as it shifts down the soft tube, further into you.

You also feel it acutely when it crests and settles inside you, your eyes rolling up.

You want to scream against the sudden intense wave that seizes you when that damn thing touches you deep inside. The muscles on your stomach pull tight and you come in an instant, like being submerged. Your toes curl, back arching, and you exhale so hard you wouldn’t be surprised if some sound somehow managed to tear out of you.

It takes a moment for you to pull yourself together, nerves reconnecting one by one, until you come around to the taut feeling of Jake’s dick working two more into you. You have enough time to think oh shit before the next one crests and you shove your hands into the earth below you so you don’t accidentally claw Jake’s skin off.

It’s so much. Nothing like when you swallowed them and they just settled nice and heavy in you. Now, some kind of cumulative effect is building and you can barely even see through the pounding of your blood in your head, through your body.

For a second, the fact you can’t say anything, the pressure of water instead of air filling you, has you shaking in a less earth-shatteringly good way. You press your face against Jake’s body, mouth open, breathing in the lake.

His hand pressing along your face. It’s an anchor to hold onto, and you find his eyes again. Green frames with vivid sunlight yellow, intent and gentle. His body presses you down, steadying you, as another egg moves with its fellows. He’s there to watch you and hold you as you fall apart.

His thumb strokes across your cheekbone, like he’s done every morning you’ve spent with him.

God.

Your head is full of drowsy arousal as you focus on that simple tenderness. His hips circle slowly, and by the time the last egg is tucked away, orgasm is about the furthest thing from your mind. There is nothing left for your body to give; it’s a huge effort to turn your face into his hand, the heat radiating out from your belly thick, stealing every last ounce of your strength.

Jake nudges a kiss against your cheek. You nod slowly.

Finished with its work, Jake’s dick shrinks back up, and tugs out of you. Water insinuates in the empty space and you manage one last boneless shiver.

You’re deadweight when Jake lifts you up. You don’t even have the strength to hold onto him, just letting him do the work of pulling you from the lakebed and away. Trusting him to take care of everything, you shut your eyes, dozing as you dangle almost limp in his arms.

It’d be enough to put you to sleep, the bone-deep heat in your body, the soothing embrace, the dark quiet. Before you can slip away, Jake moves, feet planting against the floor, and you’re carried up, out of the lake into cool air.

Like you’ve done a dozen times now, you spit up water, and nearly sob at the return of air in your lungs. “Fuck. Oh, fucking christ,” you moan in naked relief.

“I’ve got you,” Jake murmurs. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you, pretty.”

You don’t bother opening your eyes, just remain lax and useless as he does all the work. You’re
so warm. It’s seeping into your muscles, your bloodstream, this deep calm.

Fingers curling, you rub your knuckles against him. “Jake.”

“Pretty, pretty thing,” Jake says to you. “Here we go, up and in.”

The gradual suspended swing of the hammock is familiar. You keep your eyes shut, breathing. Godfuckingdamn.

Your head rests against his chest. It’s nice. You twist enough to tuck your legs up, across his lap, body centering around the heavy nice feeling. “Feels strange,” you sigh.

“Aw, hell and all its hellions, I can’t reach your blanket from here.”

“S’fine,” you mumble. “Warm.”

Jake’s hand strokes over your forehead, drawing your wet hair back, out of your face. “Oh. Alright.” He strokes your hair again, other hand cupping your hip. “That’s fair as feathers, you just rest. Pretty thing, my pretty dear.”

Under your cheek, his chest vibrates with a deep hum. It strums through you and pulls you down into exhausted slumber.

Sometime later, Jake untangles from bed, hands on you as you sink back into the space where he was with a quiet sound. “Easy. Go back to sleep. It’s early, just rest. You need rest.”

He doesn’t need to tell you twice. You’re awake long enough to feel him spread the blanket over you before you’re out again. There’s nothing worth getting worked up about when you feel this comfortable and warm.

Later, though.

Later, you wake again, because this cave has a serious problem with sunlight. You try to tuck your face under your blanket, but entreating your body to move is a feat and a half.

Squinting your eyes open at the starting day, you come around, peering at the kelp rope netting. One hand you can’t stop rubbing against your belly.

Fuck, it’s warm and you could probably just go back to sleep.

It’s a close thing, but soon your hand stills and a thought chips at the nigh impenetrable wall of good feelings that have taken successful conquest of your body.

Hey. That dense good warm feeling. Was that a bunch of eggs?

It’d be good if that drifting realization popped the spell of weary laziness like a soap bubble, but it still takes you an effort to sit up, hand grasping the edge of the hammock for balance.

When you actually focus, you can feel them. It’s an unfairly pleasant shift in your center of gravity. There’s enough of a change in your body that getting to your feet nearly makes you stagger. That should make you panic or something.
But the feeling doesn’t quite catch. Like it can’t get a foothold. You’re too distracted rubbing your stomach.

With great effort, you make yourself stop, pulling your hand away.

A deep breath, filled with good sense and some much needed logic.

You have eggs in you. They feel nice. But you should probably tell someone. Probably Jane.

Right. Do that.

Getting dressed helps. You pull on the last dry set of clothes in your bag, and stand there for a moment, gathering yourself.

It’s a long trek back to camp. You know the path from the cave to the closest, climbable bit of lakeside by heart, and it’s well within your lung capacity. But there is a sluggishness to you that’s impossible to shake. Petulantly, you want to just sit your ass down and wait for someone to take care of you.

Which isn’t the kind of thought you usually have. That more than anything spurs you on as you navigate the lakeside and head back towards camp.

It gives you time to take stock. Most importantly, to count on your fingers as you try to recollect exactly what happened. A lot of it a blur, like things always are after you let Jake dose you up on his happy sex toxins. But you think… five. You’re almost certain five.

Holy shit. You touch your abdomen again, this time with something a little closer to trepidation. Okay.

As you cross out of the fruit grove, the camp is clear in sight. You almost falter right there, the severity of what you’ve done starting to hit you like an airship about to touch seawater.

Holy shit, you let your charming magical frog-mer-ish kind-of-boyfriend put eggs in you. It was almost fucking romantic. You spent the last month and a half sleeping with him and the last week living with him, fuck, he probably thinks of you as his, what? What the hell is the word? Besides his pretty thing, which albeit makes you flush all over like you’re about to avail yourself to a fainting couch, but maybe his… mate or something?

What were you thinking?

With a flood of shame, you sit down on a fallen tree, a victim of the storm. You know exactly what you were thinking. You didn’t want to be alone. You didn’t want him to be alone.

You sow, you reap. Now you have to tell Jane Crocker that you’ve been romancing her research subject and you even knew he had some kind of secondary egg-centric dick, and you still--

So. You sit for a while, your head in your hands, feeling your rising anxiety drag itself as if from the ocean out of the warm happy egg-induced feeling trying to soothe you. Well, shit, the eggs want you to feel better. That’s… almost sweet.

Your center of balance is still subtly fucking off as you pull yourself together and finish the long journey back to camp.

Some of the things are packed, to your silent surprise. The tables are cleared, and one of the travel chests is sitting out, lid tipped open like a hungry maw, about half-full of books and equipment. Some of the lamps are down, sitting in a neat row to presumably be shrunk down and stowed. It’s
not a lot, but it’s enough to remind you once again about time.

While you’re standing there, the flap to Jane’s tent opens, and she walks out, fully dressed and presumably ready for the day. As she spots you, she freezes, and her dimples pop immediately as she smiles. “Dirk! You’re back… about two days sooner than expected! Shucks, buster, you missed breakfast, but…”

She trails off, and her smile folds itself neatly back up. “Dirk? What’s wrong?”

“I fucked up,” you say, the words dropping out of your mouth before you can stop them. And now, you can’t hold the rest in. “I really fucked up, Jane, and I’m so sorry.”

Before saying anything else to you, Jane turns and yells, “Roxy! Rox!” Then she takes your wrists and pulls you under the canopy. “Come here, sit down, Dirk, what happened?”

There isn’t a lot of sense left in you, but you have enough to sit down and wait for Roxy to finish dressing and emerge from her tent to join you. As you slump into a chair, Jane stands behind you, her hands settling on your arms and rubbing. It’s almost maternal; Jane’s never been great at being comforting except in the moments you absolutely fucking needed it. Then, she became a goddess.

Roxy about pulls the same jubilant greeting on you, but the scene seems to quiet her spirits. She settles in the papasan, leaning forward on her elbows, rubbing your knee.

It’s an agony. Dragging yourself back to your friends and being welcomed with so much concern burns viciously. You breathe through the smoke and say, “I fucked up.”

“Hush,” Jane says, rubbing your shoulder more vigorously. “We’ll be the judges of that, Mr. Strider.”

Well. Fair enough. “I’ve been screwing around with Jake for over a month now,” you say in a dull tone. Jane’s hands freeze on you. Yep, there it is. You swallow. “Started as kind of an accident, but… I didn’t really stop. And it…”

Roxy’s mouth opens in shock, her eyes darting between you and Jane standing over you. But when you try to subtly move your leg, to pull out of her grip, she holds on tighter, pale eyes narrowing on your face.

Fuck everything, and fuck you especially. “I kept doing it, because it was... “ You shake your head. “Fuck, that doesn’t fucking matter. What matters is that I got carried away like a goddamn kite in a tornado, and now I think I have lorelay eggs inside me.” You let out an embarrassed bite of a laugh. “Figured I should let you know.”

The silence afterward is almost worse than having to say the words, to spill your admission at their feet. The two people out of the world who you cared about and, more remarkably, who cared about you.

You take another breath, and it’s even more awkward than breathing lake water.

Then, Roxy snorts.

You whip your head up, stop staring at your feet to stare at her as she covers her mouth with a hand. But you know that crinkle around her eyes, the little laugh lines. She’s… smiling?

“Roxy!” Jane snaps, scandalized.

“I know, I know I know, oh my god, I know, it’s super duper serious. But…” Another laugh
escapes her, barely stifled by her hand. To your astonishment, she lurches forward and hugs you, leaning you back against the chair, and snickering helplessly against your shoulder.

You put your hands on her back. “Uh.”

“We’re the worst,” she says through helpless laughter. “Holy shitballs, you and me, Dirk, we are just the worst and I’m just fucking thrilled as kittens someone else is as stupid as I am.” She kisses your temple with a loud smacking sound. “You dumb dumb dumbo.”

There’s only so much you can handle right now. You grab her elbows and nudge her back. “What,” you say, “are you talking about?”

Roxy straightens, and pulls free of you to rub her hands up and down her face. “Right, okay. Big ol’ trust exercise here, I guess! I…..” She drags it out, rocking back on her heels and grinning almost manically. “I! Have been…. let’s saaaaay communing with the god of the island.” Roxy gives you an exaggerated wink, an unmistakeable one of her wonks. “If, ah. You can figure out what I mean.”

Your mind skips like a record needle falling right off the track. “What?”

Roxy takes two steps back and waves an arm at the temple looming in the distance. “Actual god! She totally exists! And I sort of…” She lapses into more laughter, blindly backing into the chair to sink down. “Oh my god, it’s such a long story, guys.”

“There’s a god of– what? What do you mean, communing?” you ask, even though you already have an idea just from the level of lasciviousness in that wonk. What the fuck? “I…”

You look up to Jane for assistance in dealing with this.

Jane looks… like a deer caught downsights. There’s shock in her face, certainly, but also something else that has her mouth opening and closing soundlessly. Her hand slowly slips from your shoulder, and she folds her arms, pressing her lips together in a pursed expression.

“Janes,” Roxy starts, inquiringly. “Janesy, babe?”

Her mouth opens again, then clicks shut.

After a long moment of flush-faced silence, she says, “We are all very stupid.”

Chapter End Notes

content notes: the usual xeno, consensual use of aphrodisiacs, underwater sex, oviposition. some form of breathplay maybe? unsure.

sorry this took so long, that was not my intention. also, my original intention was to already have the next chapter ready for y'all so i could drop them at the same time or within a day of each other. unfortunately, i got an emergency wisdom tooth removal, and then for fun i had a bad reaction to one of my medications. so it's been... a lot. sorry.

anyway. tune in next time for "wait, what the fuck have the girls been doing"
This is the first entry of Jane Crocker, ScD, of the Crocker Trust for the Advancement of Magic and Technology, documenting my personal observations during my expedition to a newly discovered landmass in the South Pacific, colloquially referred to around camp as “Frog Island.” A more appropriate name will come with time, I am sure.

We are a team of three, something of a quick strike team of an expedition. I am the leader of our party, in charge of final decisions and of biomagical research. I’m joined by Dr. Rochelle Lalonde, my expert on ancient magic and language, and Dietrich Strider, a noble working as our airship pilot, mechanic, and “valet” (his word).

Upon landing, we’ve not had much opportunity to investigate the island, as establishing a base camp has been our top priority. We’ve taken one trip to the towering visage of the Frog Temple (where our temporary appellation for the island comes from, the top of the structure has a massive carved frog) and I’ve delegated its investigation to Roxy (Dr. Lalonde).

There are other, more pertinent discoveries than whatever the temple has to offer. “What,” you may ask yourself, “could be more important than the ruins of an unknown, obviously magically gifted citizenship?” How about a new magical species entirely?

I don’t have a name for it yet, but there is something living in the lake. There is some cursory similarity between this new creature and other aquatic members of the kingdom *mythica*, but it’s too soon to say if that’s a matter of relation or of convergent development. I will document all I know about this creature at a latter date, but needless to say it is very magically potent and seems unthreatened by our presence so far.

Which is an enormous relief. If we arrived here only to be chased off by a territorial native beast, I’m not sure what I would do!

Dirk is calling for dinner, so I’ll continue this later.

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*Day 1*

**PERSONAL NOTES, NO STRIDERS ALLOWED ♡**

Let it be known that Dr Crocker and Mr Strider are my best friends in the whole wide world and all its plains

but they are also complete dumbos. Very very attractive lovely smart dumbos.

**CATALOG OF TEMPLE THINGS:**

1. bottles filled with residue that upon introduction of clear water reconstitutes into mixed oil
with trace elements of ginger and dried/dessicated aetherflora that stimulates the senses. it even has a little sponge on top for easy application, very clever.

2. wading pools in strategic locations in temple, about 4 feet deep.
3. enormous 20 ft diameter resin bowl in shape of lotus flower, with apparent connect to much smaller bowl at altar.
4. dick chairs.

There are a bunch of stone chairs around the temple with phalluses sticking out of them. Clearly some ceremonial dick chairs.

The engravings around the temple will probably shed some light on this stuff, but it’s still pretty obvious looking around that the people who built this temple were very horny and fans of frogs.

Preliminary theory: tantric sponsorship would be very helpful in big acts of magic, like lifting an enormous frog statue onto the top of a very tall otherwise inaccessible temple, or building huge pillars out in otherwise magic-cancelling salt water.

Good theory, if only because: how the hell else do you get big pillars of carved rock out there???

That or the god of frogs helped. What do I know.

Note to self: lotus bowl for orgies?

four.

We finally had opportunity to take a closer look at the jungle that encompasses the western shore of the island. We ventured a few miles into densest part of the tree cover, then turned due west to reach the shoreline there.

The oddities of the island are mounting higher and higher. There is some kind of superflora situation dominating the entire habitat. There are plenty of new species that I will have to spend a considerable time taking samples of and cataloging, but even the more recognizable species here have such a gargantuan scale, they almost seem like some sideshow novelty. I would expect these on display in the hanging pots outside a particularly ostentatious botanist’s carriage. Here, it’s the entire population!

I will attend to fully documenting the flora soon, but there is something even more strange, if that could be believed!

With the significant exception of the creature in the lake (that we have since my last entry decided to call a “nereid” for the time being), there is no sign of any fauna living on the island at all. Not so much as a squirrel.

Dirk has made some insightful remarks about how this also means there are no mosquitoes here, and I can’t say he’s wrong.

But that brings up the question of how the superflora here has grown to such significant size without natural pollinators. At present, I only have unfounded theories. I’ll wait to organize my thoughts more before committing them to paper.

Barring the magiscientific conundrums, the outing was about as pleasant as a jaunt through the
jungle could hope to be. Dirk was my companion for the excursion, and his presence always makes any task eminently more enjoyable.

He has no idea how the island feels, which is a little frustrating. The aetheric signature, the “vibe” of the place (to borrow Dr. Lalonde’s parlance), is wholly unique and remarkable. There is something very old about this place, but also very… comforting. It feels comforting in a way I’ve never experienced in all my travels. The closest approximation of the feeling I can conjure up is when returning to a childhood home after a long time away, the way the familiarity of the energy calms you.

Dirk doesn’t feel any of that. It makes me sad. But surely that also means that he doesn’t get aetheric feelings from anything.

When I remember the particulars of his condition, it’s sometimes quite concerning. Something so core to our lives has no answer for him. I wonder about it a lot.

He would not thank me for any of this navel gazing, I’m certain.

Day 5

I can hear all the shit my professors back at university said about nonhuman languages like someone’s casting a haunting hex on me from when I was twenty and stupid. “Rochelle, you can read all you want of these mystical glyphs and words until you’re seeing them in your cereal every morning, but if you don’t go and speak to these people, you’ll always be a novice of the field.”

Cause you know, my prof of aquatic languages got her kicks from getting her students drowned in merfolk waters.

But you know I’m trying! There’s this babe in the lake who speaks this stuff, and every once in a while I hear something, like when an English speaker is like “oh I understand this French person cause all the shit we stole from them and how all Romance languages got the same skeleton,” right?

But he’s useless. Or that’s mean. He’s a doll. But I’m trying to do the impossible here and make all these little blocky letters make sense. Cause I told Janes it’d be easy because I am also a dumbo like them (see: very attractive, etc)

Prob is that I have NO INDICATION which way to read any of this. Every column and wall and dick chair has these rows upon rows of neat letters stacked up in almost grids, so which way do I read it? I found a few repeated patterns and some that resemble other aquatic lingua, but am I just clinging to patterns and maybe I’ve got it all backwards???

There’s nothing but this temple. I checked the other ruins, that were apparently some settlement for the people before, but everything’s erroded to shit and useless.

I wanna haul that green boy out of the lake and just ask him if the written langauge is written vertically or horizontally and left or right

oh shit what if its boustrophedon

I hate my job so much, I’d rath
You’re sitting in the temple, minding your own business and jotting down what’s rapidly turning into a tirade into your personal expedition log. Being the language specialist of the expedition is difficult, and no one understands the trouble you are going through trying to work out so much as a partial phrase amid all of the blocky lettering covering the basalt rock.

As you’re explaining this to your journal, for lack of better audience, you wave your arms a little too excitedly and manage to catch your canteen and knock it over. Since you’re the type of person who leaves the cap off things, it starts to spill right into the goddamn lotus bowl you’re sitting next to.

“Shiiiiit! Shit shit!” You snatch up the canteen and plonk it down, upright, on your other size, scrambling the cap back onto it.

But now, a good splash of water is swishing around the resin bowl. Which could be harmless but might also damage the resin, knowing your luck. Ruining an intact, delicate artifact with a bit of clumsiness would be very you, and with that in mind, you scramble for your pack.

There’s snacks and books and magical miscellany in there, but more importantly you brought a towel. Maybe you could take a dip in the lake before heading back to camp, provided the lake boy wasn’t lurking around.

Now, it’s all you got to deal with the spillage.

Knee-walking back to the edge of the bowl armed with towel in hand, you lean over to see the potential damage.

The bowl seems perfectly intact, thank fuck.

The water itself is… another story.

For a moment, you think there’s something wrong with your eyes. Then, you feel the pulse of energy and the entire thing comes into stark vivid relief. The water has lost its clarity, instead taking on the shifting hues and swirls like lamp oil. But richer. But glowing, a rainbow of colors roiling and seeming to lap at the bowl as high as it can reach in its rolling waves.

“Okay,” you say on a long exhale. “So not inert.”

Definitely not inert at all. You try to extend your senses to grope at the new aura and get a feel for it. But it’s just… a lot. Enough that the aetheric poking makes your head swim a little.

There is another essential in your bag: a stick. A nice long stick is maybe the most useful tool you could have on an excursion.

Holding it tightly, you drop onto your belly on the edge of the bowl, one hand gripping the stone rim, the other reaching out. Your stick shakes a little as you try to give the transmutated water a prod.

Before the stick even touches the surface, the reaches up, the colorful material grabbing the end and holding on.

Alright, Lalonde, maybe this thing is alive, not just a magical component. And you wanted to poke it with a stick.
Rearing back, you pull out of this dumb situation you’ve got yourself in. But the rainbow stuff is still clinging to your stick. Before you can abandon stick or shake it off, it slops its way along and tries to grab your hand.

With a yelp, you fling the stick away and flap your hand, feeling something wet and viscous against your fingertips. “No, no, fuck you, nope!” You keep flapping, little flung splats of colorful goop flying off. “Shit shit shit.”

Eventually, you feel in the clear, but keep going for another few flailing flaps anyway. Just to be sure. Then, with great reticence, examine your hand.

Visually, there’s no sign of the goop on you. Aetherically, you can feel the fading remnants of something, like the heat of sunlight dissipating in shade. You flex your fingers, and… think you’re clear? Hopefully. It’d be real embarrassing if some rainbow goop took you down.

As you try to relax, you watch the stuff in the bowl, sloshing around. It can’t seem to get out, the steep curved sides far too steep for it. Which is good.

But there is something else. Something new. Around the bowl is a stone ring adorned with more of the blocky local lettering your can’t read.

Couldn’t read. Now, as you rub your fingertips idly together, you squint at it. Meaning flitters through your head like a drunken dragonfly, weaving around more as you try to catch it.

Something about water. And life. And color. Something.

thirteen.

I wonder what will run out first: the pages in my journal or the days of our expedition. Certainly it will not be the number of species I have to catalog! Every time I make my way into the jungle, I try to take a slightly different path and in doing so I find another cluster of something remarkable.

Writing in complaint about the materials and time I have for the work I must do is a terrible use of aforementioned materials and time, I realize. It still needs to be said.

I found yet another interesting specimen out here today and it’s gotten my wheels spinning about the island’s aetherflora. But first let me jot down some notes on the specimen, then circle back.

Specimen 18 is a type of aetherflora that is located uniquely hanging from trees. It’s body is a loosely coiled vine that wraps around a tree branch, leaving the buds of the flora hanging down. The heads of these flowers seem very heavy, and their bells face the ground. They are a vivid cerulean color with darker blue veins. A single petal is about the size of my entire hand from fingertip to the base of my palm.

Several of the flowers are closed but just as many are open, and rather than the usual pistil and stamen, a long fibrous cluster of silvery thread is fairly spewing from the ‘mouth’ of each bell. The fibers vary in length, but many hang almost a solid foot beyond the flower bell.

Here is where it gets interesting, in my opinion. I picked out one of these bells and took a stick (the more useful tool in a naturalist’s kit, if I do say so myself) to agitate the fibers. When I looped some of the thread around the stick and exerted a modest amount of force, more fibers
immediately grew and extended the cluster!

When I tested how far this would stretch, the cluster eventually came loose from the body of the aetherflora and just dropped in a bundle to the ground.

Simultaneously, the now-cleared bell of the flower exhaled a frankly enormous amount of pollen that proceeded to get caught up in my hair and blouse. It’s a pale yellow color.

And once that happened, the other bells attached to the trees nearby sort of reached out and rubbed against the pollen that had gotten all over me.

From this, I’ve concluded a few things.

The first is that being pet by a grouping of these aetherflora is incredibly ticklish.

The second is that the expended cluster of fibers is remarkably strong and I think could be easily refined for use as cloth or rope or other useful material.

The third is that this situation with this specimen follows similar patterns that I’ve observed over the past few days with other specimens. All of the aetherflora exerts a rudimentary intelligence that’s not uncommon for its type, but what if this is how the island once flourished? What if there was a sort of quid pro quo arrangement between the locals who once lived here and the flora?

I was given a useful substance from this specimen. In return, I helped sort of pollinate its fellows. There is a chance more of the specimens on the island exhibit similar behaviors. I’m excited to see!

Oh, and fourth: I would like to call this one the Crocker Island Floss Flowers. I think that’s very apt.

What you’re doing isn’t much better than pacing around the table and holding up different pages of charcoal-rubbed impressions up to the walls, looking for possible matches. Jane got some interesting patterns for you from the ruins that apparently crop up in the jungle. Theoretically, if you find a match you could extrapolate some meaning from there.

Theoretically, you could also be the Consort-Queen of the Wood Elves of Chicago. Theory sucks and don’t mean shit.

The worst part is that you can actually pick out the vaguest hint of meaning in a few words, but only very broad concepts. You can still remember ‘water’ and ‘life.’

Not super exciting given a third of the text in the temple seems to talk about those things. You assume it’s the core of their worship somehow. But you can’t…

You probably could, but you can’t stop thinking about the flickering candlelight of illumination you felt after your surprise tangle with the goop monster. Gnawing at your lower lip, you think about it, what it could be or mean. It moved like it was somehow alive, but the only effect it had on you was imparting a little nugget of knowledge. Why on the gods’ green earth would it do that if it were going to, for instance, gobble you up?

This is bad thinking. You definitely should not be thinking about how much easier your life would
be if you could… what? Drink some slime and suddenly see Yggdrasil and all its luminous branches? Please. That’s some impressively self-destructive thinking, Lalonde.

You fairly slam your texts and papers down on a bench with an obstinate huff. This is not getting you anywhere. What you need is another breakthrough.

Not that getting friendly with a slime was a breakthrough.

You tap your nails against the stone bench for a moment, thinking as you look around. One thing does manage to catch your eye; at the center of the place is that lectern, overlooking the benches. Probably some impressive civic leader in a very good hat stood there. Now, all there is are the little shelves holding miscellaneous crap and a bowl.

The bowl is made of resin stuff, like all the other important-looking stuff. It’s as good a place to start as any, you think; clearly pouring a bit of water into the big lotus did something. You can only assume a splash here will do the same.

You dump a healthy splash out into the bowl and stand back, just in case. But instead of reacting in any cool or dramatic fashion, it just glows and… drains.

Maybe it’s not enough. Lucky your canteen is one of those near-bottomless ones and you filled it up on the way to the temple. You upend enough to nearly fill the bowl, and spring back again.

It glows, and the water whisks away. You don’t even see where it went.

But after one more cycle of this, you hear something new. Behind you, there’s a damp slap sound.

“Oh, come the heck on,” you mutter, and turn.

Lo and fucking behold, upon taking a few steps in the direction of some truly gnarly damp sloshy sounds, you see over the edge of the lotus bowl and a brand new slime guy is there, futilely trying to climb up the steep edges to get out. It’s quite a bit larger than the last time, but you also dumped more water in this time. How were you supposed to know water in one bowl meant water in another?

Although, now you are forced to think about the implications of that. So big ornate beautiful resin bowl. Temple with clear sermon area. Smaller, connected resin bowl on the lectern. Contact with the wet rainbow buddy who did not melt your skin or enthrall you.

Unless you seriously misread this place and some sign their temple was the epicenter of some evil cult, this… is probably intentional. That, or you are super missing a beat by not pouring something else into the bowl. Like wine. But you have a limited supply of wine, so forget that.

You sit on the edge of the bowl and contemplate the goop as it settles, seeming to give up on its scaling attempts. It’s still a strange spot on your senses, a deep density of potential and aetheric disturbance that you can’t pick up anything concrete from it. If anything, it keeps shifting around as soon as you get metaphysically close.

Hypothesis: Maybe this thing is a conveyance of information, and that’s why you can’t pull anything from it. There’s just too much, especially to you, so far from understanding what this place was for.

You have zero evidence, only conjecture.

But you’re also sick of dead ends. So you’ll be extra careful and try to get a repeat performance of last time.
You take off your shoe and sock, and scoot your butt to the very edge of the bowl. Hands gripping the stone, you tip forward enough to reach out your naked toes to the slime.

At first, it does nothing, just puddles sadly at the bottom. To get closer, you scoot your butt right past the edge, biting the inside of your cheeks as your arms tense in their effort to keep you from falling over like a drunken spinning top.

This time, the slime almost leaps at you, not just a dip of your toes, but a big heavy slap that encloses you up to the ankle. You have enough time to say, “Oh, fuck me,” before it sucks your leg in, fairly yanking you down into the bowl.

Dragged against the smooth sides of the lotus bowl isn’t a picnic; your skin drags against it with a humiliating noise, punctuated by your palms slapping as you try to prop yourself up. But on your back like this, you can feel the warm dense thing lift up, curving to fit the contours of your body and you lose grip quickly.

Your belt pulls tight, and you fling your gaze in time to see the slime open your canteen and start slurping up all the water left inside. Before your eyes, you see the entire thing expand and grow, glimmering sunlit prismatic hues, so bright they sting your eyes.

“Holy shit, fuck, do not-- don’t eat me,” you huff out, jerking and pulling against the unyielding slime. “Jane would kill me. Dirk would kill you.”

So surrounded by glowy, rainbow goop, it’s hard to tell what the hell is even happening anymore. In a bid to escape, you shove your feet down into the mass, trying to find the bottom of the bowl to push off from. There’s nothing but more slime. It encloses around your feet and holds them still and you shriek in pure fucking annoyance.

But with your legs held tight, you can bend at the waist and sit up. By now, the canteen is empty and the lotus bowl is nearly filled to the brim. If you could swim through this, you could probably haul yourself out.

As soon as you have that thought, the slime almost parts under you and recloses. Yep, it’s gonna eat you. This is how you go out. What a fucking inglorious end to a Lalonde, wow. Though, fair dues, you can’t pretend you didn’t deserve it. Where was your stick? You should’ve used a stick.

While you’re indulging in a bit of misery, your legs kick through the slime, arms moving slow. It’s dense. It’s warm to the touch. It’s definitely holding you in place, but loosening enough to let you wiggle. Rude.

But it’s not eating you yet. Your head remains above the surface as the rest of your body is sort of squeezed and groped. Which makes you snort, a sudden delirious laugh. “Okay, okay, easy tiger,” you manage. Maybe you aren’t doomed. Like, fuck, this is a temple at least partially devoted to getting it on. Maybe… this is fine?

As if to answer you, the slime mass gropes you more firmly, making your back bend and legs swing uselessly. You feel constriction around your thighs that makes you gasp in a breath. Been a while since anyone-- anyway.

The damp pliable heat pushes full against your smallclothes, moulding fucking perfectly against your mound, hard enough it jostles you upward a bit. And as it soaks through, you spare a hysterical thought toward being eaten and how this was not what you had in mind, but you will take it.

Your very good slime friend rocks you in its hold, moving with you as you bend your legs, and
when you can get past the total lack of control here, there is something… almost nice about the sensation. You are cradled and felt up and fucking lapped at. You can’t help but get on board with this. If this is going to take a turn and winds up being your doom, you have to admit it’s not a bad way to go.

The slime rubs warmly against your folds, pressure urging your labia to part just a bit. Grinding down into it, you try to get a better angle, one that works your panties against your clit more because the friction would be great. As you make the attempt, the whole thing lifts and jostles you, rolling you over a few times. You fling out a hand for the bowl, and feel your nails scrape the resin before your flipped over again. You’re a ragdoll in its grasp, panting and straining to get anywhere and having the distinct sense its unimpressed with your human flailing.

It tosses you back against it, the surface curving under your weight, then overflowing around you to coat you again, heavy warmth. Your toes are free for the moment and you flex and curl them as you try to move. With enough effort to make a sweat break over you, you still fail to budge, and with a yell let go, sinking against the creature.

It’s not enough, and too much all at once. But you’re weightless. Drifting. At the mercy of this sex monster. When you stop trying to escape or move, it rewards you with some much needed hands on. Slime on. It rolls over your outer lips, where you are now embarrassingly wet, and you grind and moan under the attention. Unable to move and being crudely felt up and pet is a terrible thrill that gets you off with a shout and panting breaths.

After you come down from orgasm, your exhausted body is heaved out of the bowl. You roll, and your whole body make a wet noise as you slap onto your back to pant at the high ceiling.

It let you go. You’ve heard of really nasty creatures that will fuck a gal endlessly until her body gives out, gobbling up the released energy. Not this one, apparently.

Your head lolls to the side, and you watch as the remnants of the slime on your body slide together into long rivulets that rejoin the whole. Even your clothes dry as the creature reforms itself.

In the absence of it, the balmy humid air settles over you. You take a moment to rub your face and squirm a bit. It felt pretty fucking great. Wow. Score one for sex temple. Maybe you’ll try the chairs next.

When your bones feel a little less melty-good, you sit up, and drag your sweat-damp hair backward, out of your face. Without meaning to, you glance at the lotus bowl, and in doing so you read the inscription carved with great care into the rim.

The Waters of Kaleidos. And the words unravel their disparate parts. Water is the body, the blood through the veins of the land, leyline and artery, feeding it with everything it needs, filling the parched throat with life, with color and joy, with knowledge and guidance, and with love love, so much love, such a big love it’s too much. It’s too much and you shut your eyes, conking the fuck out on the temple floor.

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eighteen.

Oh, I’m not sure what to write today. Suffice to say I will have to choose my words carefully and
perhaps redact a few things from the final reports I submit to committee.

But at the same time, goodness gracious, it’s terribly thrilling to be caught up in the way the island works. I’m only finding more evidence for my theories as our expedition wears on. It’s enough that I would be dreadfully grateful to collaborate with Roxy to get her input and see if her observations from the temple are at all cooperative with my observations from the jungle. But I also fear her making fun of me.

Anyway. I’m still working on trying to locate a traversable path to the volcano. It’s almost certainly the root of much goings-on around here, and eventually we’ll have to investigate it in particular. Getting close is somewhat intense, though, like the aetheric equivalent of standing too close to an open oven.

It may become inevitable to recruit Mr. Strider’s help. But that always comes with the trouble of how I could even employ his assistance.

By now I am wasting paper dodging my usual specimen cataloging.

In the process of trying to find a path to the volcano, I instead came across a particularly verdant pond formed from a nearby waterfall. There seems to be a larger basin further up the mountain, but it’ll be a hike to reach it.

The pond itself was inhabited by the largest specimens I’ve yet seen. Scattered around the surface of the pond are enormous green pads at least five feet across. Some reach nearly ten feet across! In the middle of each pad is predictably a lily.

Each flower is segmented into dozens of narrow, lavender petals that have much tensile strength and rise to a narrow point over my head. I would estimate their height to be around six foot, maybe six and a half. Each one is normally overlapping with its fellows to form the body of the flower, a study ring.

Upon closer inspection, the petals appear to react to proximity and will spread open further, lowering to the surrounding pad. It’s worth noting the pads are sturdy enough to hold the weight of a human without much strain. When the petals open, though, they have no qualms about falling against the nearby agitator, and with the wider splay, it becomes treacherously easy to fall into the central space. Once a suitable pollinator is lured into the petal wall, it is able to lift with surprising force and reseal.

Inside the petal wall, the lilies have several stamen dusted liberally with lurid pink pollen as well as a strangely shaped pistil. The latter has the breadth of a dinner plate and is liberally ribbed and coated in fine hairs. They are all densely clustered and very adept at spreading pollen over a recipient.

After the recipient is thoroughly coated and fairly sneezing up a storm, the wall lowers again to let them out. It was my experience that the assumed low grade sentience of the island’s aetherflora continues with the lilies, as once I was unleashed from the flower, all the surrounding flowers opened as well. It’s fair to assume they were encouraging pollination.

This entry is a mess but that’s to be expected after the day I’ve had. Now I have to return to camp and face my team. I look like I lost a fight with a chimney flue full of pink soot.
You don’t bother pretending to tackle the lettering yourself. Instead, you walk right over to the lotus bowl and sit crosslegged on the edge, leaning forward, elbows on your knees, chin on your fists.

Before you, a substantially sized rainbow slime creature ripples and shifts. From here, you think it could spring an attack and nab you, but it’s not. Which is a new, polite leaf for your friend here to turn over. You appreciate the gesture.

After a moment just watching the prismatic shift of color across the surface, you loosen one arm to grab your canteen. Spinning the cap off with a thumb, you pour more water over the slime. It ripples with more energy, the liquid shining like sunlight off the ocean for a few seconds before it settles and joins the rest of the mass.

It continues to ripple, but out from the edge of the bowl near where you’re sitting. You arch an eyebrow and scoot closer. “Now I’ve got your attention, huh?” The ripples continue without change. “So… do you… hear me?”

Nothing. Which is a little disappointing. You’re trying to suss out how close this thing is to sentience, and you were hoping it would respond.

But… maybe this isn’t how it communicates.

Oh, you already knew you were going to go for it. You even brought a change of clothes, just in case.

Standing up, you cast one quick glance over your shoulder towards the open, airy entrance to the temple, as if someone would follow you. There are only three other people on the damn island.

Taking a deep breath, you strip. Both shoes off this time, no more scandalous liaison leaving you with one boot on. You take everything off, tossing it over over of the dildo chairs nearby where they won’t get dusty from the floor or anything.

Then, you stand there, your feet balanced on the edge of the bowl, in nothing but your altogether. This hasn’t stopped being a really reckless idea, if you take a second to be honest with yourself. Which, why start now?

But you can look around and the meaning of the words around you chafes against your mind like old suede. It’s close. You feel like an epiphany is just outside your reach. If this is the slime pal coaxing you to your doom like an angler fish, well, the bait is working wonders on you.

Shutting your eyes, you lean out, and step off the edge.

Immediately, you sink to your belly in the slime, startling a really wimpy yelp out of you. At least before you had clothes in the way. Now, you can feel the magical charge so much more acutely as it closes around you, touching you goddamn fucking everywhere. Flinging one hand back, you grab the edge, just to have the reassurance as you sink further down.

It closes around your breasts, and you jerk at the sudden squeeze, both of them gripped tight in the slime’s grasp. “Hey, pal!” you say with a cackle. “God, you’re just like all the others. Get some jubbies in reach and that’s all you want.”

It still doesn’t seem to understand that, but regardless the touch gets softer. More like kneading, which you mind a lot less. It’s nice. The gentle handling wasn’t what you were expecting, really.

All of it seems like a distraction as your lap is filled with the warm body of the slime. You nearly twitch away, the sensation alien and fucking weird even now. But there is nowhere to go, and you
hiss out a breath as you try to chill the fuck out.

Even with fewer barriers in its way, the creature slows down while you tense up. You kick a leg through it petulantly. “Come on. Hurry up, let’s get some communin’ on.”

Still it waits and waits, just cradling you, most of your weight rested against the mass against your lower back and hips. You float there, letting out an explosive sigh and lolling your head back. The base of your skull presses against the slime, and does not sink. You didn’t anticipate it suddenly changing its mind and wanting a Roxy snack, but it was always on the table.

Weirdly, it clearly can’t hear you or anything that approaches verbal communication, but for your trouble you get to float there woefully unmolested (outside more soothing breast massaging) until you finally relax. It can’t hear you, but it can read your body clear as day. Only when you slump and close your eyes does it get down to business and applies the pressure needed to open you up. Squeezing your eyes shut, you let out a whine at how damn slowly it moves. Slow, but thorough.

You can feel the solid thick density of it flowing upward and it’s nothing like fingers or tongues or toys. It fills you, inexorably flooding in and pushing you so wide open you scramble for your grip on the rim. The stone is just wide enough that you can hook your fingertips around it and hold the fuck on.

A concept hits you like a punch in the stomach. Other people grabbing on for their dear fucking lives just like you, just like this. How many could have been here. How many gasped and yelled senselessly at an unhearing host while it moved into them like a glass overflowing, making them all too aware of what a vessel they made.

Ffffffuck it’s hot is the thing.

Thinking now that you and your friend are so close and intimate, it might let you in on the action, you try to get your hand down to help out and touch yourself. The slime resists you, leaving your arm stuck on its surface, unable to push down. You let out an angry noise and instead try shoving your hips against it, anything for more than just the maddening wet warm fullness. You need something.

It takes a while to come. Or, you do. The whole deal seems terribly unfair. A good friend would not edge you without your say-so, but you are stuck and left panting, both your hands flat against its surface, wriggling and trying to movie only to be held in place.

When relief comes, it’s not like being fucked. It’s just rippling pressure, weird and at first almost making your stomach twist in a bad way. But it fucking calibrates like a long low hum, and you are helpless, eyes rolling up as you gasp and come. And it keeps on until you choke out a sob, slapping it with your open hands.

This time, it does not roll your post-coital boneless body to the side. This time, you sink down, its body parting for your arms and shoulders, until even your ears are submerged, and the world is suddenly silent as a tomb.

It’s been so long.

It’s a foreign thought in your own head, and you are suddenly wide awake and on your guard. Shit, there’s the catch. There’s always a catch with magical creatures.

But you’re safe, and it’s trying not to scare you.

That is also not your thought, and you furrow your brow, trying to sort through the weirdness of having your own mind giving you horseshit.
However, it’s impolite not to introduce yourself.

Oh, you can do that. You are Roxy Lalonde, and you have survived banging upstart sidhe lords and a fair share of succubi, and you aint scared of a big slime monster.

The next thought isn’t clear. It’s like light through black glass, warped and strange as it tries to fit itself into your own inner voice. The edges don’t line up, the shapes don’t overlap, and the creature around you shudders, and you feel frustrated for a moment. It’s not your own frustration.

Maybe you should try charades, you think wryly.

That’s funny, if ultimately not helpful. Not that there is not an inherent worth to good humor, particularly in the face of a brave new experience.

“The fuck,” you breathe out, even as the answer politely unfolds in your mind and makes a tidy guest.

This is Kaleidos. And she’s very happy to meet you.

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twenty-eight.

Today was a doozy! I’m not sure where to even begin.

We spent an unconscionable amount of daylight in the lake, just having fun and swimming. I wish I could say I made some important breakthroughs while spending time with my compatriots, but in truth it was just hours of carousing in the water. The most scientific thing to occur was getting to watch Jake perform some sort of grooming on Dirk.

How remarkable is it that our camp is frequented by a brand new magical creature to eat and socialize, and yet I am too busy to give them an ounce of due diligence. There just aren’t enough hours in the day. Hopefully I will be able to return on a second expedition to finish the work I start here.

After our lake soiree, I brought Dirk and Roxy along to examine the monolith I found the other day to get their take on it. To my surprise, Roxy seemed to know exactly what to do with it! There wasn’t an ounce of hesitation or even caution as she set off the structure by pouring some lake water into the resin bowl on top.

She even referred to it as the “waters of Kaleidos” and spoke about how the upkeep of the island’s structures was seen as a sacred duty by the locals. This is the first I’ve heard of any of this nonsense! Like me, Roxy has been keeping her expedition notes close to her chest and getting any information out of her is about as fortuitous and rare as unearthing a pearl from a very antisocial clam.

I suppose I cannot judge her too harshly. I’m doing much the same.

Anyway, the monolith seemed to cast some sponsored magic, fueled by the volcano. The spellwork was remarkably green, both in field and in actual color. I hadn’t noticed the drabness of the jungle until the monolith imbued it with a bit more brightness. The difference is astounding and beautiful.
But all of this is convalescing into a grim portrait. My studies into the aetherflora have been marked and dogged by how eager they all are for my intervention to assist them. With no natural pollinators on the island and nothing to harvest the products of the specimens, they languish away. Compound that with the revelations about the ruins around the island and the similar intervention needed to use their power. I’ve seen the before and after, and I can’t help but worry this island needs caretakers to even survive.

How can such a thing happen? How can an island need people to collaborate with to sustain it? It’s downright absurd!

I asked Jake about it multiple times. He has no sense of duty to this place. He doesn’t go into the jungle, citing how long tails and jungles don’t mix, so he’s never even seen these scattered monoliths, nor pays attention to anything else that would require such care.

I’m so worried. What happens after our expedition? I will perhaps have to leverage the Trust to keep up this work. But to do that, I have to keep documenting it so they will understand the necessity. And to do that, I will have to allow my colleagues and underlings to read these journals.

Just… shucks! I need another solution!

With the help of Kaleidos, things have been getting easier. With each communion, your understanding of the language left behind by these people grows. It’s nothing like immersion training or good old book learnin’ and memorization. It’s just a seed of pure bedrock knowledge being watered and coaxed into further life. There’s no way it should work, and yet, here you are.

Your fingers follow the lines of text as you search for relevant passages. Everything shifts and moves; sometimes you have to marvel at the people who did this. A sentence that works reading horizontally will often intersect with another vertically, some great statement of intent. So, as you seek out specific ideas, you read up and down, trying to find relevant lines before following it further.

You hop from one thematic statement to the next. On the far wall, there is a long list of duties for the priesthood (“The lilypad footpath to carry the most devout hearts across/into the waters.”). Wrapped around the pillars are simpler rituals meant for the congregation (“And through these dances become one with the water without taking a drink.”). The wading pools have their own script that seems focused on how great frogs are (“The perfect vessel/home carrying the green of the earth in their cute bodies.”).

You squint at that last one for a few minutes, but no it definitely says frogs are cute.

There isn’t a hint to what happened to these people. Everything you read feels cheerful. Devoted to their water god, but bubbling with happiness about it. No hint of a great evil to battle or a looming danger. There aren’t even any doomsday prophecies! What the hell is that about, how can you have a deistic religion without the obligatory deathstravaganza at the end of times?

You don’t know where they went.

After a few hours, you get tired of reading and decide to go to the source.

With repetition comes routine. You are used to the process of feeding Kaleidos some fresh water from the lake and having a float. And with each time, the connection comes a little faster, a little easier. Eventually, you could pick out her voice without it riding yours. Seems that was only
necessary while she was weak. Your own psychic voice doesn’t work when you are dormant for
fuck knows how long and left with no source of energy.

You’re helping as much as you can. Most of the work seems to be rooted in giving her water to
rebuild her physical form and just… spending time. More than once you’ve settled in, laying on
top of the slime with a book, and read while she just enjoyed your presence or something. Which
is nice. You like to present the brand image of being a party gal, but nothing’s better than
spending quiet time with someone nice.

It’s wild, considering how you met. Kaleidos is apologetic about that at least. From what you can
figure, contact is what allows her to connect with you, and well.

Some places on the human body are more permeable to a psychic slime god than others. It makes
sense.

Today, you sink in and the connection snaps into place after only a few minutes. You fold your
hands over your belly and shut your eyes, since that helps a bit too.

*Hey, how you doin’,* you think at her.

Her response is fully separate from your own inner monologue now. Much more stately and sugar
sweet kind. You can feel-hear the careful enunciation in the thought-speak.

*Every time you return is a fresh new breeze of relief, I don’t mind telling you. And around the
words, you feel the dimple-cheeked cheer, the slightly maternal care, the intense rush that comes
from speaking to someone after so long with alone.*

You grin and think back, *Yeah, I can imagine how centuries on your own would be totally awful.
It’d drive me nuts, I think.*

Kaleidos shifts under you. *Not nearly that long, actually. But now it’s tinged with sadness,
enough the words are crowded by the feeling. You have to focus a bit to understand through the
emotions.*

*That’s kind of what I wanted to ask about,* you start carefully, taking caution to arrange the words.
*It’d be really helpful to know what happened here? Like, where did your people go?*

Bad idea. Terrible idea. You jolt and curl, trying to sit up against the force of phantom sensation
that hits you. Balance fucked, you slurp into the slime a bit. Distantly you are aware that Kaleidos
is keeping your face aloft and free as you writhe, but it’s subsumed under the tidal wave of
emotion.

The words are crushed under pure fucking sorrow. It hits you like a hammer to the ribcage, the
sudden stone-heavy loss that forces the air out of your lungs. The purity of the emotion is like
nothing you’ve ever felt. Mourning, mourning friends and loved ones, mourning your own life
lost, mourning a sense of wonder about the world, mourning the knowledge that once everything
was beautiful and sweet and now it’s just gone.

You haul yourself out of the bowl, laying on your side in a curl as aftershocks wrack through your
body. Burying your face in your hands, you wail for a people you never fucking met, now lost.

The feeling subsides eventually. Faster, when you lay there, separate from the slime mass. You
watch the trails of rainbow goop rejoining the whole and rub your nose, sniffling.

Knee-walking over, you shove your hands into the slime and think really hard at her: *I don’t
understand. It’s all fragments and messed up sad shit. But I’m gonna help, okay?*
The link’s tenuous and weak. You’re not even sure if she got the message before you get a reply, just as ephemeral: gratitude.

I am going to burn this book.

Alright, no I’m not, but that felt good to write. As if I would ever sacrifice research of such enormous consequence! But I’ve been sitting here for an hour unsure of how to take down the events of the day.

I think I could keep a professional, analytical facade if Jake of all people hadn’t seen. Ugh. Just a little while ago I couldn’t even look at him, I was so mad. Now, I can’t look at him for all new reasons! Will I ever be able to meet his eyes again? I dread to think.

But alright, so, given the amount of time remaining, I have ceased my endeavour to catalog as many species of aetherflora as living on the island. Instead, I am narrowing my focus to performing a more detailed listing of a few species. Narrow but deep instead of broad and shallow. It’s my hope that if I can prove the worth and viability of these specimens beyond a shadow of a doubt, I will have the leverage to protect them and ensure their survival with the Trust’s help.

Dirk is pessimistic as ever. His predictions are haunting me.

Anyway, this new tactic means taking more samples and trying to ascertain the potential uses and applications. Which is fun work, when it’s not completely idiotic.

I didn’t update this journal yesterday because I was beside myself after my collecting of a sample from the tentatively named Crocker Island Water Comb. They’re the ones that sit in the undergrowth and are shaped like brightly colored pinecones. Well, yesterday, when I checked on them, instead of being bone dry like usual, they were seeping out this thick viscous material. I think maybe the rain set off some kind of reaction.

Obviously, I needed to get a sample. But the process of getting the Water Combs to cough up the goods was undeniably lascivious. And each one is larger than I can grasp with one hand besides!

I just can’t help but think about Dirk’s regular collection of fruits for our camp. I don’t think he is forced into a pantomime of illicit favors to get the trees to give him something to eat!

Anyway, the Water Combs’ fluid seems to be an excellent cleansing material and even leaves behind a bright gingery scent. I would bet a king’s ransom the locals made good use of it for washing up.

That’s not even all of it, because today was a much more intense encounter.

Specimen Crocker Island Bacchus Pot. It’s set apart from the other pitcher plants both in scale and by its distinctive solitude. While most flora on the island is clustered together in small colonies, the Bacchus Pot stands on its own. It has a faintly luminescent yellow-green color that increases in brightness in moments of shade or during the evening. The glow is captivating in a way that may be magical or mundane. Further testing is needed.
Inside the pitcher is a thick sap that seems aetherically charged. Getting to it is tricky, as once the lip of the pitcher is breached, a heavy outer ‘lid’ moves with haste to close. Furthermore, inside the sap are very hard to see filaments that can grab and essentially stabilize caught prey.

Nevermind. I’m never going to let anyone else read this one, I think I would rather die. I fell into the pitcher, and had a very sound panic as I tried to climb out, but when you are wading in what feels like overly affectionate syrup, it’s tough! And predictably, the sap got absolutely everywhere with no sense of propriety or so much as a how-do-you-do.

It was interesting. There seems to be a dampening effect to the sap that makes keeping a straight thought to cast anything is useless. Or if I’m honest, that could have been me being distracted.

I was stuck in there for what I estimate to be about two hours! It was dense and warm and got absolutely everywhere. I’m flushing just remembering the details. It’s all a little hazy.

Unfortunately, I did not get a sample. I forgot. So I might have to visit it tomorrow. I’ll endeavor to be much more careful.

But that’s not even the worst of it. What’s even more awful is that obviously after spending so long in the Bacchus Pot, I had no choice but to go clean up before returning to camp. I’ve been able to play off a few odd incidents, but walking up drenched head to two in sap and other things would not go well at all. I reckon it’d work about as well as a lead wand.

Jake was in the lake. The lake is enormous and yet he just happened to be there while I was wringing out my clothes into the water and trying to tidy up.

He only said hello and asked something about some human words he was having trouble with. As if I were in any state to tutor him!

Goodness’ sake, I hope he doesn’t tell anyone.

Day something who cares.

Okay so Jane is all mad at me for not writing down my shit, so here I am, writing it down. I’m gonna encrypt this with my best majycks later but whatever. Letter, not the spirit! Jane should know better, my thesis was on fae linguistic machinations.

Here is what I know:

The god of the island is real and her name is Kaleidos. She’s kind and seems genuinely benevolent in a real way, no trickery or anything.

There was once a big settlement here. Then, SOMETHING happened and… signs point to everyone dying. When Callie tries to tell me about it, there’s a force of sorrow so great it drowns out everything else. Could become clearer once I build up my psychic slime affinity more, but signs def point to them being wiped out.

I don’t know how Jake fits into it. TBH kind of scared to ask. I know it’s not nice to avoid bringing up the mudskipper boy to her but when I’m communing with her, it’s intense. How would she even react??? Better if I can somehow get J to get over himself and come inside the temple. The happy reunion would be grate, I would cry.
Back to what I DO know: There are alot of relics around here and a ton of them still WORK. Not just the pillars outside the island or the monoliths Janesy found. There’s more, and the instructions for them are carved into almost every inch of this temple. I just have to find the right bits and decipher them. It’s getting easier all the time.

I apologize to the folks who wrote it all down for bitchin about their system before. The horizontal-vertical interplay is pretty incredible actually. And really intricate and difficult for little ol me to wrap my head around. Good for them.

Another thing I know: that volcano scares the shit out of me.

And here’s a super important factoid for the fucking record. I love Janey, but I don’t know how I feel about going back to Crocker Magitech and telling them I met a minor god. The idea of putting Kaleidos in danger when she’s already been through so much and lost so many people she loved is just impossible. She’s just coming back from the brink!!

I don’t know what to do anymore. Nothing about this expedition has gone right. Jane’s hiding shit too, and given what I’ve gleamed about how this island worked Once Upon A Time, I have some ideas on what my girl’s been hiding. Even Dirk is acting weird, I think. It’s hard to tell with him, being all stoic and professional and shit, but something’s off around camp, I’d bet the whole airship on it.

Something’s gotta give. I hope it’s not us.

Chapter End Notes

in this chapter: yes you all called it, jane gets her plant/human relations on. Plant sex, human pollination, soft vore?? (That's how I always think of pitcher plant stuff?)

TEAM THE BEST TEAM. GOTTA LOVE THEM. Disasters, all of them.

Also just in case you missed it, there is now a jamfic of our dear Froggo's POV of this story. It's here: they don't speak your name in distant lands.

Oh and I published Episode One of the Jake English Adventure fangame.

I'm a busy woman.
When you start to turn the page in the journal, Jane squeaks and waves her hand at you. “I told you to just read the pages I indicated! Don’t go on!”

“Alright, okay, got it,” you tell her, holding up a hand peaceably.

Roxy holds out both her hands, fingers curling and uncurling with avarice. “My turn! Gimme.”

“Do not give Roxy my journal,” Jane says with grave severity.

You give it back to Jane, who immediately sits on the book and sticks her tongue out at Roxy.

Taking a moment, you help yourself to a mug of tea. About halfway through Roxy’s anecdotes, Jane brewed it up. Given how often Roxy veered into the type of stories you tended to only read in very seedy publications and confessional columns, Jane probably needed something to distract herself with.

By now, its been steeping a long time, and the tea is exceptionally strong. You wish you had milk to cut it a bit, but settle for overdoing the sugar instead.

When you sit back down, you hold the warm mug against your chest for a few seconds, closing your eyes. You’re drowsy. It’s a constant struggle to keep yourself from dozing off.

The others are quiet and you open your eyes again, and find Roxy with her gaze averted towards the temple and Jane staring at her feet.

What a fucking tableau the three of you make. Goddamn. You take a sip of tea. “So, if I’m going to summarize everything… We have a literal living god on this island that acts as a guiding hand for everything here. But all their people are gone somehow, and Jake has no idea about her for some reason. And with no caretakers, she started dwindling, and the island has been too. And we’re at this…” You wave a hand vaguely before laying it in your lap, fingers lax. “Sort of a critical failure point, it sounds like.”

Roxy nods and tears her gaze away from the temple. “Kaleidos was just about gone by the time I started to coax her back. It was damn close there.”

Jane continues to look at her shoes but adds, “And the ecosystem of the island is near a failure state. On top of that, the volcano that is somehow used to generate power for all the magical relics on the island might be closing in on a similar state.”

“And that’s… bad,” you say.

Jane snorts. “Yes. Big magical generators left with no intervention for decades on end will fail, and dramatically so.”

The three of you look at the volcano. It looks calm enough to you, but what do you know. You have no aetheric sixth sense. No idea what the volcano feels like to normal people.

Jane sucks in a breath through her teeth, then looks at you. And her eyes gleam. “So, about your little conundrum.”
Oh god. “Can we not?” you ask.

Roxy cackles. “You! I thought I was the only freak here but you got eggs!”

Silently, you kind of resent the term ‘freak’ but you don’t know how to explain that. Or even if you can. The thought of explaining how things are with Jake, talking about your emotions, gives you fucking hives. And there’s no chance either of them are going to understand.

Fuck, you kind of wish you’d followed your instincts and stayed in the cave. At least until Jake came back.

Shit. Where is he now?

Jane is going on. “Cross species egg implantation is not unheard of in the kingdom mythica. It’s been known to happen before. What’s important is that I’ve done a physical on Jake and have some loose understanding of his reproduction. Not, ah…” She flushes. “Not your firsthand experience, but enough academic knowledge that I feel alright saying… you’re fine!”

“I’m fine,” you repeat dully.

“Most likely. See, Jake has two separate appendages, one ovipositor and one inseminator. If he put eggs in you but they go unfertilized, they will probably follow the pattern of similar creatures and just… go away. Either dissolve over time or go inert.” She shrugs. “All you have to do is…. well.”

“Don’t let him fertilize ‘em,” Roxy fills in helpfully.

“Essentially,” says Jane, coughing delicately into her first before looking to Roxy. “So, were there more nereids before? The ruins here, the lost colony, were they frog-mers like Jake? Perhaps he’s feeling an urge to procreate with his own kind?”

You cross your arms, biting down bile.

Roxy flicks both her wrists as she shrugs. “Hard to say. I’m getting better all the time at understanding Callie, but truth of the matter is that she cannot keep calm when I ask about them, and it makes parsing the psychic dialogue impossible. But I’ll get there!” Leaning her cheek on her fist, she frowns. “I think not, though? Like, you have no idea how much these people loved frogs. There’s a shitton of old poetry about how great frogs are. And Jake’s people were sort of holy symbols, I think. I’m just not sure if they were… native creatures here or imported from elsewhere or what.”

She sits up, and clicks her nails together. By now, all the varnish has chipped away, leaving the naked surface behind.

“Hey,” Roxy says, slowly smiling. “Do you wanna meet her?”

You’ve not ventured to the frog temple since that day early in the expedition. The path along the southern rim of the lake is clearer now that Roxy’s been walking it there and back almost every day for coming on three months. It’s easy to trace, flattened grass and exposed stones and earth leading the way.
Honestly, you would prefer not to go. The idea of being in a temple to some magical water god doesn’t sound like a good time. Better to leave it to Roxy. Besides, as you walk, you keep yawning conspicuously, until Jane at your side shoots you a troubled glance. More than anything, you want to lay the fuck down; you have the type of exhaustion that comes from a solid day of hard labor. Every step further along the shore to the temple just… drains you.

But Roxy insisted, and she’s thrilled to introduce you both to her divine friend.

You’re not sure how it’ll work with you, being noble. If the slime creature’s psychic magic will find resonance with you. At times like these, it’s important to be ready for failure. The life of a noble is a life of navigating lowered expectations.

The past week has been such a complete vacation from all that shit. You already miss it.

You’re still being a grouch in the privacy of your own mind when the shadow of the temple casts over you. It’s a perilously tall tower, and this close you can only just see the curved shape of the frog, the nuance of anatomy lost with proximity.

Roxy hops up the stairs quickly, making a wordless excited noise. Jane rolls her eyes and gives you a smile.

“Ready?” she asks you.

“Don’t much know how you get ready to meet a god, but sure,” you reply quietly.

Inside the temple is cooler than the sun-hot midday air outside, which is a relief. There’s a breeze in from the entrance, enough to ruffle your hair, almost making you shiver. You rub the back of your neck and look around.

Inevitably, your eyes fall on the pedestals you saw last time, with the rods poking out. The dick chairs. Wow, fuck, they really are the perfect height for someone to climb onto and use to… warm up before getting their commune on, huh.

Jane follows your gaze and flushes, saying nothing. You vividly remember her grasping one to feel it out magically.

Well, it’s not even close to the most risque shit she’s done on the island, so it’s probably fine.

God, all of you are stupid. Jane was right.

Ahead, Roxy has already knelt down by the big lotus-shaped depression in the floor, braced up on one arm so she can lean forward to thrust her other deep down. “Aw, shit, I shoulda remembered to bring more water. Sorry, Callie. I’ll grab some later.”

At your side, Jane squeaks, and grasps your hand with both of hers. Which, yeah, you understand that feeling.

When neither of you join her, Roxy turns to look at you and beckons. “C’mon! Don’t be shy!”

Jane takes a half step back, behind you. “Roxy, listen. We’ve done a lot of… very candid sharing of certain experiences, and that certainly required a lot of-- a high comfort level with each other! And I wouldn’t dream of sharing that with anyone but you two. However, I!” Her face darkens. “I don’t think I’m to a point where I could…. engage in…” She flexes her fingers in the air, gesturing vaguely. “Oh, you know!”

Yeah. “I’m also gonna sit this out. Same reason.”
Roxy stands and puts her hands on her hips, one coated in a glimmering material. The rainbow slime god, you assume. Fucking hell. “What, we’re not to the point we could have a lil ménage à quatre with Callie?” She pouts for a moment before it dissolves into a grin. “I would never do that. No, Jane, remember that old school trick? Where you hold hands to pass messages along so the teacher can’t hear?”

You have no idea, and gently remove Jane’s hand from your arm so you can go sit down.

“C’mon, guys please! Dirk, if I had a solution for you, you know I would be all over that!” She waves entreatingly to the bowl again. “Can we try? Please? Maybe Callie’s magic is like Jake’s and will work on you and it’ll all be great! Just.”

“Alright,” you say, and get up, stalking forward. “I’m not stripping.”

“Given the amount of stripping you’ve done since we got to this place, I’ve had my fill of your pale man-flesh, it’s all good,” Roxy says brightly. “Jane, get in, no one likes a sourpuss.”

Getting everyone into the bowl is a feat. Roxy has no problems sliding in, sitting on the edge and pushing off to stand hip-deep in… Kaleidos, the glowing prismatic shifting watery material that makes up some minor god apparently. Once she’s standing comfortably, Roxy turns to Jane and holds out both her hands.

Jane only lets out a low unhappy moan before sitting down too, and taking one of Roxy’s hands, the other gripping the edge of the bowl. “I already fell in here once, and Dirk had to rescue me.”

“No rescues needed, come on. What would the committee say if you passed up this chance, girl?”

“I’d be rewarded for my commitment to common sense and self-preservation skills.” She scoots off the edge and slides along the bowl into the slime with a shriek. “Oh, it feels weird! I don’t like this!”

“Give is a sec, would you? And she has feelings, Jane, god.” Roxy loosens her hand, only for Jane to keep holding on, their fingers tightly linked. Giving up, Roxy twists around to look at you, one eyebrow arched high.

You give it a moment, watching Jane hop around through the slime, her face a tight grimace as she fidgets and moves anxiously. Unwilling to let go, she pulls Roxy’s hand and arm around her back, making Roxy squawk, “Ack!” and nearly fall, only for her body to stay afloat, supported by the slime. “Jane, sit your ass still!”

“Sorry!”

Holy shit. This is rapidly losing its scare factor and becoming slapstick. You heave a sigh and sit on the edge. “This would be a really embarrassing way to die.”

“You’re not gonna die! Get in, Strider!”

You take off your shoes and get in.

The slime nearly comes up to your hips, and is viscous and thick like syrup in winter, resisting your movement for a moment before you feel it react; it parts, and allows you to wade around, just a clinging tackiness against your legs, making your pants mould to your legs.


While you get acclimated, Roxy urges Jane to sit, which she does while clinging both hands to
Roxy’s arm, making upset kitten sounds as she lifts her legs and sits in the rainbow sludge.

Roxy sits next to her, and pries off Jane’s hands until she and interlock their fingers. “Just like back in school, right?”

“Right,” Jane mumbles, tapping the fingers of her spare hand against the surface, watching it ripple.

You join them, trusting this to work as you ‘sit’, and feel the thing around you contort and hold you.

“Now,” Roxy says, clearly giddy with excitement, “just think at her and she’ll hear it. Hopefully,” she tacks on, shooting you an apologetic glance.

Right. Okay. You watch Roxy and Jane shut their eyes and do the same. You’ll give this one fair shake, and then climb out, leave them to it.

You barely finish putting together a half-hearted, directed, This isn’t going to work, at the thing around you before everything snaps into place, and your mind fills like a goblet under a wine cask with a presence, warm and soft as setting sunlight, and a voice, a solid voice that speaks in carefully enunciated syllables and a faint lilt:

A person of such a particular inclination with such little faith! I daresay you are in for a small shock. I’ve not felt a mind like yours in what feels like a century or two. But where are my manners. Hello, Dirk. I am Kaleidos.

“What the fuck,” Roxy says out loud.

“I heard that,” Jane reports. “Or, most of it? This is strange.”

“Yeah, that’s great, Jane, but shush up. Callie, what the fuck?”

You fucking feel that mental goblet go full, and almost drip down your spine with that sunlight heat. You jerk against the foreign sensation, and Kaleidos closes around you with gentle firmness, keeping you still. Easy there, nice and easy. Most of the priesthood is slowly taught how this process works and forewarned so they are not too shaken by the first connection. I’m sorry, but I promise you’re fine, for whatever my word is worth to you, Dirk.

“Oh,” you manage, opening your eyes to look down at yourself, seated in the slime, the way it obscures your shape. “I’m going to echo what Rox said. The fuck?”

Everything your mind is floating around in churns. It’s a weird goddamn feeling, but warm and… patient. I’m horribly neglecting Roxy and that’s terrible, I’ll have to answer her in a moment, but you have no idea how exhilarating it is to have a complex meeting of minds again after so long. Roxy mentioned that she had two compatriots with her, but I did not dream to believe one of you would have the predisposition. It’s always been something of a rarity.

You had been prepared for nothing to happen when you dropped into the slime other than damp clothes and disappointment. Now, there’s a god babbling excitedly at you.

Roxy’s frowning. “You are moving way too fast for me. Are you talkin’ about… nobility? That Dirk’s got no magic?”

Oh, well, I don’t know what noble means, per se, but I do know your friend carries a certain
aptitude. Every one of my people could come to learn how to speak with me given enough time and openess, much like you have learned so diligently, Roxy, much to my delight. But a few were born with a unique talent for it. Often they became members of the priesthood, given that utility, and because other more... performative magical talents were not so open to them. A sacrifice and a boon all in one, to be certain, but I was blessed enough with a people who considered the affliction to be a great calling. For the less gifted individuals who wanted to feel that ease of communication and piety, there was always the path of the lake.

Jane takes her hand out of Roxy’s and crosses her arms. “I can’t. It’s all too complicated, especially when you’re half-distracted and not sharing with me,” she tells Roxy sullenly.

“So sorry, sorry. I’ll sum up later, this is huge.” She runs her hands through her hair, leaving glowing streaks stuck in her bangs. “Shit, what first. So nobles were, like, your right hand folks?”

“Very much so, many of them. And all the slime squeezes around you in what... could be a hug. See, with... what is the term you would use? Ignobles? With them, there is an awful lot in the way of the connection, so it takes effort to maintain it. Nobles have a certain purity of... of.... great blazes, I’m not sure if I could explain it to a mortal. Something similar to your conceit of the soul is clearer to me.

“What do you mean by that?” you ask. The rest of it is... frankly shit you don’t want to think about right now, it’s too strange to even contemplate. A fucking water god is happy you’re noble, that-- “The path of the lake?”

It was not for everyone, of course, but many people took on the transformation and lived alongside the rest of the people, but changed and inhabiting the lake.

“What.” Roxy flails, waving her arms excitedly, flinging bits of slime as she moves. “Ohmigod, holy shit, so the first people like Jake, they were, what, fucking made from the humans who lived here? That’s-- that is so much more than changeling shit, that’s--”

Jane perks up at that. “What? Are we talking about a-- a transformation? From human to nereid?”

“Maybe, how is a transformation on that scale even possible, Callie, I need to know everything about that! Slower and with smaller words, please.”

But there is a bubble of tension in Kaleidos, and it fills you, and sympathetic magic suddenly makes sense to you, here as your breath catches against the wave of emotion. It’s like standing on a precipice and staring down.

Who, she asks, is Jake? Have you met one of my people, the green-hand guardians? They yet live?

Roxy trembles, and bites her lip, her previous excitement draining. Watching her, Jane reaches out to put a hand on her shoulder, worried.

“Uh. Just... just the one. I didn’t know how to tell you, because every time we talked about your old friends, you got so upset it was impossible to get a grasp. Not like this time, I guess with Dirk? But there’s... one. Jake.”

Jake. One last guardian of the lake. You are aware that you are weak, so much weaker than you once were. Once, you could feel every bead of dew on this entire island, every clear water of life and love, but it’s like grasping at a puddle with mortal hands, it leaks out of your grip every time and you sob, breath catching in your ribs because you can’t feel him! You don’t feel him anywhere, and calling him to you is too difficult while your voice still does not resonate through
the water in more than a faint skip-stone ripple. Jake, they said, but Jaec, you think, how fitting
your revenant is named for the old word for hope-springwater-revival.

“Stop!” you say in your own words, digging the heels of your hands into your eyes, damp with
the tears that aren’t yours. “Stop, stop,” you say in a ruined voice.

She stops, and the full feeling in your head tips, the goblet overturned, and the consciousness
spilling back out until you are just you again. Just Dirk.


A solid, human hand closes around your wrist, and Roxy wraps her own slimy arm around your
shoulders, rubbing up and down from your elbow to shoulder. “Hey, handsome,” she whispers.

You laugh like a bolt coming loose, and rest your forehead on hers.

Around you, there is movement, as the slime lifts and moves you all to the edge of the bowl,
letting you climb out. Disquieted and silent, all three of you sit on the rim, looking at Kaleidos
rippling.

You remember the tang of her grief and relief warring in a typhoon of anguish, and swallow the
lump in your throat.

Faintly, lacking the clarity of before, her voice returns, this time as if from a far distance:

*Bring him here, please. I want to see him, please.*

“All do,” Roxy says, leaning down to swish her hand in the slime. “As soon as we can drag his
green butt out of the lake and frog-march him over here.” She snorts, and looks between you and
Jane. “Get it?”

Jane rolls her eyes and climbs to her feet. “I might go toss myself into the lake real quick, this is a
very unpleasant sensation. I have the distinct feeling I’ve gotten the short end of the stick in this
communion.”

“Sorry, yeah, my bad,” Roxy says. “Oh, shit. go fill a canteen and bring it back, please! Callie’s
looking a little thirsty. Do you need mine?”

Jane waves her off. “I’ll get some water, don’t worry. Just give me a few minutes.”

She leaves you both there without a backward glance, and it’s fucking wild to you. Here you just
had fucking contact with a god and Jane’s going to have a wash-up. Either this shit is de rigueur
for witches or… it seemed she wasn’t as affected. Not like you.

Or Roxy.

While you sit there and drip dry, Roxy scoots closer to you, until your legs are sticking together
uncomfortably. Then she makes a face and shimmies back an inch. “Hey.”

“Hey,” you reply quietly.

“Soooooo, do you like her?” She bounces her shoulder into your arm.

“Do I like her,” you repeat just to parse the question. “Do I like your friendly lake deity who lives
in slime?”

“She doesn’t live in slime, you ass. She lives in all the freshwater on the island, and this is just her,
like, condensed tangible form.” Roxy blows out a breath, a loud *ppffppff* noise. After a second, she turns to grin at you and knocks her shoulder into you again. “You said she’s friendly.”

Roxy’s always there for the pertinent detail shit. You shrug. “She seems nice. Kind of forceful, but I get it.” You blink. “I… actually really get it. Jesus, she was in my head. She’s been alone a fucking long time.” Desperate and sad and hopeless. Reminds you of someone.

“Yeah, wow, that sure was something! Look at fuckin’ Di-Stri, professional medium over here!” She slumps against you, head finding a spot to rest, her hair brushing your cheek. “You did great. Totally strolled up into my turf and knocked my socks clean off.”

“Are you jealous,” you ask, and there’s not enough humor in it to avoid being a serious question.

“Only a bit. I wish I could speak to her like you do, but…” She sighs. “Like she said, right? Gift and a curse.” Quietly, she takes your hand, and strokes her thumb against yours. “Man. What a fucking pair we make, huh.”

Immediately, you know what she means and almost wish she didn’t bring it up. Away from the excitement of meeting Kaleidos, your weariness is coming back, and there are few things you wouldn’t do for a chance at that hammock Jake has. Or, well. Jake.

Roxy pokes you with one nail. “At least my island babe didn’t put any eggs in me.”

“Fuck off,” you say, and push her away as she laughs.

“Well, seriously! And… ugh.” She kicks her heels against the bowl idly. “I’m just-- we’ve all been keeping secrets so long. It’s nice to have someone… get it, you know?”

And she shoots a glance over to the entrance to the temple, then away again.

Yeah. Yeah, you know what she means. You know about the tense worried knot she’s probably hauling around as this expedition comes to a close, because you feel the same lead weight inside. In some more tangible ways than others.

Both of you lapse into silence, waiting for Jane to return.

You wonder if she’s also thinking about what the future holds. For you, for them, for the island.

Chapter End Notes

No relevant warnings this time. Next chapter is gonna be where shit pops off. I’m hype. Also: terrified. Hope y’all are ready for this.
Sleeping alone in your own bed is strange after so long without. There is something unsettling about just laying there in the dark, a discomfort that is slightly remedied when you tuck a pillow against your back, giving you the vague impression of someone there.

You’re so caught up in the strangeness of the sensation, you expect a shitty, insomniac night. But as soon as you are comfortable enough, your legs curled up and bent, you feel a core of heat burning away inside you, dense and heavy. The goddamn eggs. For a while, you try to ignore them. It’s impossible; in the complete darkness of your tent, they’re distracting, a heavy ballast in your body, and oh yeah they glow.

It’s faint, and you can only see it now in the absence of any other light, but yeah. They’re glowing. Just a bit, barely visible through your skin.

That should be enough to keep you awake, staring at the wall and silently panicking. Instead, the eggs are so happy that you are laying down finally, resting after a day of trudging to and from the frog temple and all the excitement there. They’re so relieved that they drench your mind in warm sleepiness, and you sink into slumber.

Which you wish you’d been doing all day, honestly.

You sleep deep and uninterrupted until morning, when Roxy raps on the taut canvas of your tent to wake you. And then does it again five minutes later, because the first time didn’t take.

It’s an uphill slog to get dressed and upright, and breakfast is ready by the time you stagger out and sink down into a chair.

“Nice of you to join us,” Jane says, eyebrows lifted and a smile on her face.

“Little magic eggs really take it outta ya, don’t they?” Roxy hands you a full canteen.

“I’m never living this one down, am I?” you ask as you take a sip of crisp fresh water. And suddenly, damn, you are parched.

“Oh, no, never, not until the day we all shove off the mortal coil and join the choir invisible and all that jazz,” Roxy informs you cheerfully. “Does Sir Expecting want some breakfast? Jane made the sorta crepe thing again, with the yellow juicy fruits.”

Jane hums and prods the food sitting in the pan over the banked fire. “I think I’m a fan of the flavor profile, but the yellow berries are such a hassle to chew through. They’d probably make an incredible jam.”

“Oooh, yes. Yes, please.” Roxy laughs.

On the other hand, you shake your head. Mouth of the canteen still at your lips, you say, “No, thanks. Not really hungry. Just thirsty as a dry county in midsummer.”

“You should eat something,” Jane chides softly. “We need to head out and find Jake, it seems. Since that’s what Kaleidos is focused on right now.”
There’s a tartness to Jane’s words. Last night, Roxy relayed all the information from the communion with Kaleidos with her to catch her up. Ever since, she’s been just a little curt about everything. You have no idea how to handle it, given the source. It’s remarkably fucking uncomfortable, and you look away, out at the lake, sipping your canteen.

“Well, Janey, Callie wants to reconnect with one of her lorelay babies after ages apart, thinking they were all dead. Can’t fault her for being a little single-focus about it.”

“Nereid,” Jane mutters quietly, then clears her throat. “All this news is remarkable. I barely slept, I spent so much time thinking about the implications.”

“I know, holy shit!” There is a sharp noise as Roxy apparently wrangles a high five out of Jane.

“I cannot begin to fathom the process the witches of the island had to utilize to manage such an astounding change!” Jane says, her voice gaining tempo alongside her excitement. “When the fabric of your magic is so dramatically altered, even retaining your sanity should be impossible. But this was apparently routine!”

“Yeah, it sounds pretty wild. All just to communicate better with Callie! It’s so sweet.” She coughs. “In a weird way.”

“I don’t know about that, though the theory’s perfectly sound,” Jane goes on airily. “The nereid anatomy is built upon permeable skin, so presumably it’d make communication with her simple.”

“Wonder what came first,” you murmur. “The frog fanaticism or the Path of the Lake.”

“What’s even more interesting is how it, well… Explains some things! You know, I’ve been stumped on how odd Jake’s anatomy is. Compared to other marine mythica, he’s almost unsuited to his tasks. He has no defensive capabilities, no streamlining or webbed fingers. Almost all his fins are decorative instead of functional. He seems poorly designed because he is!”

“It’s apples and oranges. It doesn’t make a lot of sense to compare him to other marine mythica, since he doesn’t have anything to do with that kind of life. From what Kaleidos said, the lorelay people branched off from the humans and lived alongside them,” you point out.

You don’t need to turn to know Jane’s staring at you.

“Anyway,” Roxy says loudly, and you can see her glancing at you from the corner of your eye. “We should probably split up. Jane knows the north shore by the jungle best, she can head that way. I’ll swing along the south. And Dirk can stay here for when Jake friggin’ inevitably just shows up at camp wanting lunch.”

Even Jane lets out an amused snort, the moment of tension passing you both by. “True enough, I suppose. Are you sure you don’t want to eat something, Dirk?”

“I’m good,” you tell her. “I’ll take care of some stuff around camp.”

“Oh, if you have time and inclination to pack up the camp a bit more, that’d be wonderful,” Jane says as she stands and dusts off her skirt.

Roxy joins her, stepping into her shoes and tugging the laces into place. “Right, we’ll be back later. Jane, don’t get distracted by any flirty ferns.”

Jane rolls her eyes, face flushing, and stalks off without another word.

In her wake, Roxy lingers long enough to stalk over and kiss your hair. “Later, Strider.” Then, she
heads along her own path, leaving you to your own devices.

Playing a waiting game doesn’t sound very productive.

What you could do is split the difference, and go east, right into the lake, swim out until he finds you. Honestly, you have no doubt in your mind it would work. It would even be quick; he always finds you out there.

But somehow, you don’t think that would go the way everyone else is hoping. Sitting there, trying to keep your eyes open against the urge to just shut them and doze, you don’t quite trust yourself to make rational decisions.

Instead, you force yourself to stand up, swaying with your weird shifted center of gravity, and get to work. You have to do something, or you’re going to fall asleep like a cat in a sunspot, and that’s just embarrassing.

Roxy is right, though.

After a while puttering around at camp, you refill the canteen— you drank fucking half of it, Near Bottomless Charm be damned— and start packing up the remaining equipment. It takes an hour or two at the pace you’re going, which could only be favorably compared to sloths or maybe snails, but eventually, you pick up a box of aetheric measuring equipment and start lugging it up the sloped field to the Acorn.

No one is around to bitch at you for putting your noble mitts all over the delicate magical crap, thankfully. It’s quiet and calm work, the sort you always enjoyed losing yourself in. Though now you recall how it was often the only work you could get away with doing, making it a strange self-fulfilling prophecy.

On your second trip up to the ship, you linger to put stuff away in the cabinets, securing everything for the flight. Each hinged door has a latch to close on, so hopefully nothing will open and spilt out its contents all over the floor.

With the shade from the rising sun, it’s cooler in here, if a little stuffy. You could open the sliding doors to the desk, get some airflow.

The little bell rings as you push the doors open, the ocean air immediately pouring in salt smell and stirring your hair.

Behind you, the egress hatch opens, the telltale creak of the hinges familiar and loud.

You turn, and watch Jake creep in, hurriedly turning to grab his tail and drag it inside, out of the path of the door before letting it fall shut again. He gives the hatch a stern look before scanning the room, letting out a soft, inquiring chirp.

“Hey,” you breathe, pushing off the door and walking into the cabin proper again. Your lips part to say more, but you don’t know what words you want to use here, now as a tumultuous surge rises in you.

You don’t get the chance anyway, as Jake lopes across the cabin and wraps his arms around you, so suddenly you step back and bump into one of the counters. His face is close to yours, pale
yellow light filling the space alongside a low, throaty hum.

Sucking in a breath, you slowly put your hands on him, around his biceps to clutch his shoulder blades. As you do, he bends, almost hunching over you, your head falling easily to rest against his collar. Jake’s nose rubs against your hair, nuzzling.

You exhale, and feel all your tension leave with it, leaving you propped between Jake and the counter.

He hums louder, and the vibration makes his voice shiver with it as he asks, “Why’d you go?”

You squeeze your eyes shut and feel your fingers clench against his skin. “Sorry. It’s hard to explain.”

He nuzzles you harder, and you can feel the hum in his chest now, right up against your cheek. “Did you want to see Jane and Roxy? The pull of their company is strong as an ox, I can’t fault you at all, but I wish you’d waited for me. I would’ve ferried you back to camp.”

“It wasn’t that,” you tell him, and stroke your hands along his back. “But… yeah, I should’ve waited.” Nudging him away is difficult since he resists you, apparently wanting more time to muss your hair up. Even when he does, it’s not by far; his arms slip down to hold you around the waist. It’s… a lot to deal with, and you need a second to just take that in.

“I didn’t—” You stop hard, and try again. “Did I worry you?”

Jake chirps and hikes his shoulders in a brief shrug. “Not especially, no. What’s here to harm you? I just…” He looks down at your feet, his warm hue dulling slightly. “I expected you there when I got back. But that’s what I get for going on a meander. I didn’t mean to be gone too long.”

“You weren’t.” You rub from his shoulders to elbows and back again, listening to the increasing volume of that content sound, your eyes lidding as it hums through you.

Just before you shut your eyes and doze off right there, Jake steps back, leaving you to lean back on the counter as he looks around. He’s been in here before, but never when it was like this. Today, the cabin is filling with packed chests and packs, covering every surface you can manage. Later, the bigger items like the tents will have to come in here. You’re not looking forward to refitting them in the Acorn.

His feet make soft damp noises as he walks around. “Getting bit cramped in here.”

“Well,” you say quietly. Somehow, the situation demands quiet. “It’s only going to get worse as we get ready for the, uh.”

All of his spots shift, darkening to a sour green, distinctly unhappy as he looks around. “Should you be up and hefting all this shit around?”

You laugh. “Uh, yeah. I feel like if I stop, I’m going to fall the fuck asleep.” Dragging a hand over your face, you admit, “I’m exhausted. Pretty sure it’s your fault.”

“My fault! I left you tucked in and cozy to sleep!” He continues to peer around nosily, shoving his head through the narrow door frames to look into the tiny side rooms. “Here, then, this is perfect as portraiture, come here.”

Sighing, you traverse the rough terrain of stacked boxes and piled up crap to join him. As soon as you’re within reach, he wraps an arm around you and urges you inside.
This room is the same one you kept partly clear for people to sleep in on your way here. The narrow, flat bed is still flush to the corner, and yet still filling most of the room. “Hop in.”

“What, no,” you say, pivoting on your heel and frowning at him.

“Why, yes,” he chirps back, and puts his hands on the doorframe, filling the space pretty effectively.

“I’m trying to stay awake, asshole.”

“Don’t get all fresh fish with me. You look half-fried standing there, what’s wrong with a nap?”

What indeed. You shake your head, rubbing the heel of your hand against your eyes. “What’s wrong is that I’m supposed to find you-- or, christ, let you find me, Rox sure called that one-- and wait for them to get back so we can go... do something together.”

“Well, they’re not here now, are they? No knowing when they’ll be back.” He leans in, nudging his face against yours again, back to that warm, familiar glow. “Just a kip.”

God. Fine. If you’re honest with yourself, your body is aching to be horizontal again.

As you sit on the bed to take off your shoes, Jake hovers incessantly nearby, starting to make that sound again. The mixture of his hum with soft lorelay words, lilting and melodic. It makes your cheeks grow hot, and you’re relieved to slide onto the bed, turning to face the wall.

“You’re just distracting me ‘cause you don’t like me packing,” you mumble.

The entire bed shifts as Jake hauls his body up with you. The muscle memory is fucking eidetic, and you shift and move as needed to let his arms close around you, legs tangling. There’s no room for his tail this time, but it’s still a solid, warm embrace. You’ve missed it. It’s been all of one night, and you’ve fucking missed it so much.

“That’s a nefarious paintbrush you’re threatening me with,” Jake murmurs into your ear. “I want you to rest. I think rest is good right now.”

“You think?”

All around you, he squeezes. “Mmhmm.” One of his hands untucks from its little spot against your ribs to stroke fingertips against your arm. Following the feathered leaves of sage, the sharp crescent curve of the boline. Then, just his thumb stroking over your skin.

It makes your breath hitch. As he touches you, you are sharply reminded of just a few days ago, when you failed to draw yourself for the tenth time, and the gaping maw of fear that opened under you. It’s back again, as you rest in Jake’s grasp.

Fuck. *Fuck*. This is not the time to fucking panic.

You shift and move enough that Jake lets out an annoyed sound, an unhappy trill, as you roll over to face him instead. He still doesn’t say anything, just guarded noises. But he shuts up quick when you take hold of his face and kiss him, arching your back to shove yourself against him.

There’s just so little time left. Days, if that. He’s trying to get you to bed down and rest amidst all the detritus reminding you just how soon you’re meant to be leaving this place and covering up its entire existence so no one ever comes back, *shit*.

Jake yelps when you try to push him onto his back, the bed too fucking small and his ass nearly
slipping off to the floor. “Shit, sorry, dammit,” you say quietly, backing off and grabbing his wrist to hold him up.

“It’s fine! One sec, hold on.” He drops off the bed, and springs up to settle on it again, sitting further towards the middle before reaching for you. Balanced on your knees, you climb over, straddling his hips with his hands bracing.

You lean over him and kiss him again, more insistently this time. It helps, getting lost like that, in a small, dark room that feels a world away from both the island and the mainland. You can hold him still and kiss him until he gets it. God, you hope he gets it.

The pressure on your shoulders lessens as he pushes off your suspenders and tugs open your shirt. His hands spread over your chest, big and splayed wide, steady pressure.

Gasping, you lean harder against them, and let him hold you up as you unbutton your pants and take them off. Jake lets out a thrilled purr, and you laugh, almost delirious.

His fingers drum against your heart before moving, cupping your jaw.

Distantly: you should not be doing this.

Closer: you have no idea what you should do anymore.

If there is no correct course to take, there’s no point in navigating. Fuck it. Fuck everything about this, how you were pulled to this strange land of salt and warm water and sunshine, how this softer kind of life drugged you and addicted you, and how you’re meant to say goodbye to it now. To him.

And also: Fuck Jake.

That part is easy. You’re really practiced and skilled at that part. It’s been a long time since you rode anyone, and Jake’s fucking long, but slick as an oil lamp wick. The most difficult part is sinking down on him, feeling the sheer length of him acutely as you balance on your knees, muscles in your legs twinging with the effort to keep aloft.

Jake’s no damn help at all, gripping your hips and trying to urge you down, letting out a low, crickety croon of noise. With a tense huff of air, you smack one of his hands. With an offended chirp, he smacks you back, right on the ass, making you jerk and clench on him. The sensation of his slick dripping out of you is intense, and you groan.

With an interested noise, he slaps his other palm down, and you scramble to grab both of his wrists, holding on.

He’s a fucking fiend, and pulls until you teeter and land with your hands on his chest, his dick deep and cozy in you. Head hung, you shudder all over.

As much as you want it to be a desperate ride that drives the feral scared voice living in your head out, its… not. Instead, you rock against Jake, and he rises up to meet you every other beat. But you can feel his pulse under your palms, and its not the frantic needy thing you’re hoping for. Just steady. He’s steady as stone against the rolling waves of your body against his, and it’s nice. Even with your eyes shut, the glow reaches you, gentle as morning rain.

It’s not what you wanted at all. You crumble, sinking onto your elbows, and Jake cups your head as you shake and spill and settle against him.

This isn’t what you intended. Now, you lay there, bonelessly sprawled over him, breathing
heavily as he slowly pushes up into you, sinks out, and pushes again. It’s leisurely and easy with how wet he has you. Resting against him, you leave him to it, drowsier than ever and relaxed around the glide of his dick.

Sometime later, he’s apparently sated, and his dick tucks away neatly. Or, mostly. He leaves behind a fucking glowy mess like always.

There’s a persistent trickle running almost sideways down your leg. You twitch and rub your thigh against his side. He rumbles deep in his chest, and wraps an arm across your back.

And tips you right off him, onto your back against the mattress. “Now will you sleep? That’s traditional for humans, isn’t it? Post-coital naps?”

You say nothing, just tap your knuckles against his chest as you shut your eyes. Your fingers are lazily curled, and rub against his spots.

Jake enfolds you, like before. You can feel his hair brush against you for a second before he goes back to nuzzling you. With the worn out heat in you, it’s difficult to string a thought together, let alone stay awake.

As you’re slipping to sleep, you feel Jake prod you softly, nudging at the radiating heat low in your belly.

Yeah.

That should feel more important, but right now, the comforting heat is filling you, dousing everything except the urge to be still and rest and press your cheek against Jake. But you’ll have to deal with that later.

Morbidly, you decide you don’t want to wake up. Just sleep, safe and supernaturally cozy.

It’s a testament to how tired you are and how adamant your bodily hitchhikers are about resting, that when you do wake up, it’s to shouting.

Jane has a very distinctive shout. Nine days out of ten, her voice is pleasant and carefully modulated to suit her environment. She never shouts in noisy restaurants to be heard and when she needs to get someone’s attention, she may pitch louder, but only for a few words before she returns to her softer register.

In all the time you’ve known her, she’s only raised her voice a handful of times.

When you start to wake, she’s yelling.

It startles you, like a support line snapping midflight, and you sit up, only instinctively sweeping your arm to bundle the blanket onto your lap to save your meager modesty. And immediately, you take notice that the blanket’s covering up a pretty substantial golden glow. Blinking awake, you glance, wondering if you’re just an embarrassing mess from riding Jake like a stallion.

But no. That slight tackiness on your skin has already lost its luminescence, which would be a good sign. But something else is glowing.
You are glowing.

And Jane is shouting.

Oh shit.

When you tune back into what’s happening beyond the realization your lower abdomen is glowing like a lightning bug in a well-ventilated mason jar, Jake is shrinking further and further down, his height vanishing as he scrunches up, knees bending to lower him to the ground in the face of Jane Crocker with her hands on her hips.

“Oh do you have any idea how far we are from home? From any hint of civilized pharimalchemy or assistance?” Jane snaps to Jake’s face as he finally reaches her eye level. “It will take days to get him home!”

Jake lets out a miserable watery trill, all his spots gone vinegary green. “Home, home, home, do you have to carry on like that?”

“Carry on,” Jane repeats, twice as loud. “Will you for once think about the consequences of your actions, you-- you--” she claws the air in front of her before putting her fists back on her hips. “Everything is not hunky dory about this, Jake! Dirk is not a nereid or a lorelay or whatever the hell you are, and you can’t just do this!”

Practically melting into the floor, Jake’s fins prick up straight, his trill getting sharper. “Do what, do what, you’re acting like I’ve hurt him but I didn’t, and I-- I don’t appreciate this all that much, Janey!”


“Jane,” you say, trying to get a word in edgewise. “Jane, relax, it’s--”

“I will not relax and don’t condescend to me, Dirk!” Her fiery gaze shifts to you, and you hike up your blanket out of instinctive want for protection. Holy shit. “I told you, I told you one thing to ensure you would be fine, and you just ignored it in favor of-- of canoodling! Do you grasp that there are foreign magical eggs in you? That we don’t understand at all? That we especially don’t understand given your affliction? This is serious and I don’t think you’re as concerned as you should be!”

Jake chirps, loud and edged in annoyance. “They aren’t going to hurt him!”

“Jake, I know you like Dirk, but this is dangerous to him. And you’re not an expert here! Three months ago, you didn’t know humans even existed,” Jane informs him. “I spent more time on my term paper on the effects of implantation on humans in my second year of university, thank you very much.” A few dark strands of hair have come loose from her hair pins, and she flicks them away, cheeks blazing red. “I got top marks.”

Jake gapes at her, but shuts his mouth, looking upset. With a sideways glance back at you, he cricket-hums, low and juttering, before leaving the room in a hurry.

In his wake, Jane puts her face in her hands, her entire body moving with the deep breath she takes, holds, and breathes out slowly.

She takes another one. Muffled from behind her hands, she says, “I’m going to speak to Roxy. We need to grab some essentials, but the rest of it can stay here for all I care right now.”
You want to ask her to calm down. You can also see the fissure of barely-held anger in her frame. Biting your tongue, you wait.

She looks at you, and her eyes soften. “Dirk, I get it. You and Roxy, you love this place. I’m not blind to that. But I think…” She inhales again, and looks down, folding her arms around herself. “I think you’ve lost sight of a few things. I never imagined that would lead to something like this, but. That is what I’m here for.”

Shaking her head, she looks at you again, chin lifted. “We’re going home, and getting you proper medical oversight. And you are going to be fine. On my name as a Crocker, I’m going to make sure of it. Even if—” her voice breaks, and the muscles in her face tighten as she grits her teeth. “Whatever the cost.”

“Jane,” you start, and don’t… know what to say.

“Get dressed,” she says, kinder. “I’m going to get the balloon started and find Roxy.” Then, she leaves you there.

You’ve slept long enough that the sun is nearly setting, and clouds have rolled in. A faint mist of rain is starting to fall around the island, cotton grey clouds overtaking the sky like some sympathetic weather to the dour situation.

In the distance, you can see Jane marching towards the temple, presumably to go get Roxy.

Christ, the rug is gonna pull out from under Roxy. The expedition was coming up to its nebulous deadline for return, and preparations for that were slowly happening. Now it’s immediate. Now, you are already imagining an evening take-off, how you’ll have to bank the ship across the lake and pass between the pillars outside the island before gaining altitude. From here, you can see the balloon stretched out over the field; from here it looks like a giant lumpy pancake, but you can hear the faint hiss of air as it begins to inflate.

Roxy is about to have a rude call back to reality.

That idea settles. If there was some truth to Jane’s posturing as the last sound mind on this island. You step carefully down the egress steps, balance off, joints bouncing like rubber as you descend to the grass. Here, you’re going to ruin this for Roxy.

And, as you look out towards the lake, you realize you’re going to ruin this for Jake.

For once, he hasn’t disappeared into the water to hide, as he usually does when things get tense around camp. This time, he’s sitting on the edge of the pier, glancing over his shoulder. It’s expectant.

Swallowing down your nervousness, you walk out to meet him.

The pier is just a little slick under your feet as you walk across it. When you move to sit beside Jake, at the end, he reaches up to hold your elbow, steadying you silently as you lower yourself down.

Your body floods with relief as you get off your feet. Flying the Acorn like this is going to be a nightmare. You might have to leave the majority of it to Roxy and Jane, and just handle the take
off and landing. Not that they’ll need you for the return trip’s landing; the Crocker Trust will have people on the ground to help pull the ship in safely.

As you sit, you drop your feet into the lake. At your side, Jake perches, leaning forward braced on his arms. His tail is submerged, and while you watch, it curls up, up, the fin at the tip cresting the surface. Water drips off the fin and its thin spines, plinking against the lake, making a melodic noise that reminds you of little water fixtures back home. Contraptions of magic and carefully arranged metal, miniature water wheels spinning from aetheric power alone, just to make the same comforting sound Jake makes as he lowers his tail, bends it the opposite way, and lifts it up again.

Neither of you speak for several minutes. In the stillness, you can almost pretend…

It doesn’t matter what you’d like to pretend.

At long last, Jake lets out that almost ribbit-y humming noise on a sigh.

“It’s really damned vexing that no one is listening to me,” Jake mutters, low and plainly upset. “Jane going on about all this tosh, how everything’s so dangerous.” He looks aside at you, confusion in the tight bunch of his eyebrows. “Why didn’t… you didn’t say anything?”

All you can do is blink dumbly at him, surprised.

It makes the wrinkle between his brows deepen. “You know I’m not… I’m not hurting you. You know this is-- it’s fine, all that drudgery about her book learnings.” He exhales a growl. “As if I’ve never picked up a book in my life. I know about some of that! But all this is okay, and--” He turns to really look at you, locking eyes. “Why didn’t you tell her? That this is all green and good?”

You didn’t expect this, but you should have. Shutting your eyes, you rub your face. Fuck, you’re tired. “It’s complicated. Jane is… my friend, but also my boss. And the shit she says isn’t wrong. I mean, I haven’t…” Fuck, this is like pulling thorns. He’s staring at you. “I didn’t learn much about this shit like she did, just what you pick up by osmosis, but…”

You can hear his tail thrash irritably, the way it displaces water. “But what about what you do know! You know I wouldn’t hurt you! I don’t see you having a pitched fit about this, and you’re the one glowing like you’re topped full of nice thoughts!” He pokes your side with a finger. “That’s not an unhappy hue for you!”

“I don’t do hues, Jake,” you remind him, and open your eyes in time to watch his face fall and feel like an asshole. “God, I’m making a fucking mess out of this. This isn’t what I wanted.”

“What do you want?” Jake pounces immediately. “You-- you don’t want to go!”

“I don’t get to decide that,” you grit out, because you’ve done this before, and it’s no more fun this time.

“This is wrong,” Jakeblurts out, rushed and almost panicky. “This isn’t how things are supposed to go.” He nudges his forehead against your temple, words shaking as his chest hums desperately. “Why won’t anyone listen to me? Why won’t you, you know better!” He pushes harder, and you grab his shoulder, holding on. “We don’t have to be alone. I don’t want to be alone again.”

Fuck. Your eyes start stinging immediately. “I don’t either.”

That doesn’t seem to be a comfort. He hums louder, and leans against you like he could meld into you.

You owe him this. Take a breath.
“I don’t know much about magic, that ain’t my field. Hell, I don’t have a field. But this place is fucking magical,” you tell him. “And not in some shallow, bullshit way where they paint the walls with it and talk it up and try to make it so. This place is magic. Do you…” You close your eyes again, lean against him. “I never had this before. I literally breathed water like air thanks to you.”

“You’re not making sense,” Jake says miserably.

“I know. This isn’t-- I don’t like this either, Jake, christ. I have no idea how we’re going to do this now, because the second we get back to the mainland, Jane’s going to put me in a medical ward at the Trust, and we’re going to have to explain how this all happened, and then still come up with a way to ensure no one ever comes back here.”

At that, Jake jerks back, eyes wide, face glowing an almost blinding white-yellow. “No. No, no, no, you have to come back.”

You put a hand over your eyes and take a shaking breath. “That’s… not how this works. It’s not how things work back there.” You steel yourself, and grab his wrist. “Listen. If people find out about this place, they will come here, and they are not nice. They’re not safe.”

The fear ebbs into something darker. “And these are the people Jane wants to help you?”

“That’s different,” you say, tense. “Jane is an important person, she can make sure they take care of me.”

“*You’re* an important person!” Jake says angrily. “This is a pile of salty bullshit, that I’m supposed to give you up to mean people instead of taking care of you myself! *Why? For all I know you’ll come back to me in bits and pieces, from the sound of things!”

“I’m not coming back!”

It leaves you all at once, like a toppled glass, and it’s deafening in your own head, rattling between your ears and spilled into the space between your body and his.

He stares at you, eyes wide, but silent.

Fuck. The rain’s getting harder. You wipe your face.

“I can’t,” you tell him, whispering now, like all your sound and fury just got used up in one conflagration. “Best case scenario, we convince the Trust that this island is a waste of research money and they forget it exists. You’ll be safe.” For now, until whatever the fuck happens to this place happens but you literally can’t handle that right now.

“Mediocre case scenario,” you go on dully, “is the Trust does come. I’d wager everything I got that Jane will do her best to keep them in check. She cares. I know you’re mad at her, Jake, but she cares.”

He still says nothing, so now you just can’t shut up.

“But no matter what, I’m not going to be able to come back. We made a disaster of this expedition. If we come back and tell them we found nothing, that’s gonna be the end of my job at the Trust, I’ll fucking tell you that for free. And if we tell them the truth and they come… Jake,” you sigh. “They aren’t going to send a noble back here. Why the fuck would they? They have teams of obnoxiously well-educated witches and plenty of pilots who *don’t* make everyone into a superstitious paranoid shithead. I’m not coming back.”
“Don’t much want to meet these people,” Jake mumbles. You don’t blame him.

Now, you can’t look at him. It’s too much. Instead, his lax hand in his lap, just sitting there. You take it, hook your thumb around his and press your palms together.

In the distance, you can hear voices. Looking up along the pier, you can see Roxy and Jane returning to camp. Without a second of rest, Jane picks up her trident and starts levitating things. At her command, they float through the air towards the Acorn. Behind it, you can see the balloon starting to come to life. It’s slow, but it’s happening.

Roxy walks under the canopy and stops, turning to look out at you. Even from this distance, you can see…

Enough. You see enough, and tear your gaze away.

When all this is over, you’re going to have to disappear. How are you ever going to look either of your friends in the eye again after this?

Jake leans into you, nosing against your hair. It stirs as he says, “This isn’t what I wanted. I didn’t do all this to make you leave.”

At least that thought is worth following. You lift your head just enough to give him a bemused, faint smile. “Why did you do it?”

Jake answers quickly, like this is obvious. “So you’d stay. So things would be nice. I think it’s nice.” He pats your hip, chirping warmly. “I don’t know. Lots of reasons. But mostly ‘cause I just… feel it down to my bones that we’re not meant to be so sad and lonely.”

And if nothing else, that’s why you have to protect this place. This tiny hidden island in Southern Pacifica where you finally learned what the hell magic actually meant.

If it’s the last thing you do, you’ll keep them away from here. Somehow. Even if it demands applying oil and matches to the entire hangar. And the records room.

You do your best to memorize Jake’s face, the scattered glowing spots, his constantly damp, slightly curling hair, his sharp green eyes. As he stares right back, you wonder if he’s doing the same. Or, fuck it. He is. You know he is. Even if you never knew why you. What made you important.

You were the first he’d ever seen.

You might be the last.

When his nose bumps against yours questingly, you tilt up and kiss him. He cups your face, and you wrap your arms around his wrists, holding him there. You kiss him, and it feels like goodbye. He kisses back, and it feels like a crusade against all goodbyes.

It can’t last forever, because nothing does.

He’s reluctant to let you go, but doesn’t fight as you lower his hands into his lap. Putting a hand on his shoulder, you push yourself up, staggering a step at the headrush. Even your own body wants you to stay. It’s not fair.

It’s raining heavily now, but you don’t mind. It feels appropos, and you’ve long grown used to the feeling of damp clothes. You wish you could say you were looking forward to returning to a life without them, but you aren’t going to be looking forward to much anymore.
You are tired, and you ache, both from your audacity to be up and moving around, and from the throbbing pain in your chest. Everything feels like one enormous bruise, and you reach up to scrub at your eyes.

Drowsiness that’s been dogging you for days now solidifies into a weight like a stone pressing into your chest. Standing was a bad idea. All your body wants is to sleep.

There’s a familiar damp smack sound. You turn, and see Jake leaning on his hand, looking at you imploringly. “You said you don’t want to go.”

It stills you for just a second. You had said that. It makes your lips curve, that Jake cares so much about that when you know the truth: “That doesn’t matter.”

“You said you don’t want to go.”

“Of course it does,” he tells you desperately.

There is nothing more you can say, and your head is full of cotton and sorrow, a languishing stormcloud that clings and settles in. All there’s left is the walk away.

The pier is wet, and your attention is diverted for just a moment.

Your heel finds a puddle, and it’s easy to misjudge the depth. Overcorrecting tips you perilously, and your other foot slides just as swiftly.

There is enough time for you to catch yourself on the rocks, but it’s going to hurt.

Out of nowhere, you think: fuck, you are so tired of hurting.

And instead, you pitch sideways, off the pier.

Landing shoulder-first, you are underwater, flipped upside down in a world of dark water, obscured by the break, the reversed fountain of bubbles that follow you down. It’s pitch down here, or maybe it’s the inside of your eyelids. You can’t be sure. The exhaustion you’ve been pushing down upturns and floods your head.

Your head dims and spins, your mouth full of water. But you’re not afraid.

You are noble, and water is your only domain. The cascade that washes away a witch’s power is more of a home to you than any other place you have been. From your childhood visiting the Gulf, to summers spent on the beach, to this lake.

You trust this lake most of all.

That’s what it is: a trust fall. For one stupid, selfish moment, you decide you’re done standing tall in a cold world, and instead fall into safe, warm waters.

Something will catch you before you hit bottom.

Chapter End Notes

content warnings: .... i don't think any technically apply, this is just a guy riding his (frog) boyfriend?

/rubs hands together. Here we gooooo.
The truth is that you’ve never been a very deep sleeper.

There are mundane reasons for that. When you could afford the work, you were a workaholic, and poured yourself into tasks. Lacking the watchful presence of an open window to remind you of the hour often drove you through the night with your projects. There was no middle ground between disinterest and obsession.

In the times when you didn’t have work or employment, you were vigilant. It was a good quality for self-preservation, but was not conducive to restful nights. Catnaps and just laying down with your eyes shut, listening to the world spinning madly on around you.

Then, the island. You’ve never slept so deeply as you have here. You would know it from that alone. The still well of your mind, the depth you sleep at, and the feeling of almost insistent peace.

Even as far down as you are, you could sink further. It’s soft and dark, and even as you start to stir, it’d take nothing to return to vague, harmless dreams. Something deep inside is eager for that, encouraging you.

That, you realize, would be the eggs.

Your eyes open into narrow slits, so thin you can barely see. What’s even waiting for you in the waking world? Do you even want to know?

Taking a deep, slow breath, you take stock of what you can without vision. The air is cool, almost chilled, but something is keeping you warm. You rub your face against it; there is a pillow, and there is a blanket around you. Under it, you aren’t wearing much.

You bend your back, arching. As you shift, you feel the crisscrossed thick netting of a hammock. And with it, the gradual sway as it rocks.

Fine. You know where you are. You know what you’ve done.

You open your eyes, and peer around groggily.

It’s night. It’s easy to tell, from the lack of irritatingly bright sunlight through the roof to the pale blue glow of the lilies in the nearby pond. That illumination is offset by another hue, a low green cast around.

God, your head is heavy. You lay back down and lick your lips. “Jake.”

The faint green shifts to yellow, alongside the sound of scrambling movement and the telling damp sound of Jake’s feet against the stone floor. He’s by you in seconds, one hand grasping the support line of the hammock, the other hovering over your face and shoulder. He plucks at the blanket, hitching it up further and smoothing it out with a tremulous croon. “Well, ahoy there, sailor. Returned to the port of the wakeful spirits, have we?”

“Hey,” you manage in the face of his boisterous enthusiasm. He chirps at you, leans in to kiss your forehead, starting to rock the hammock. That’s lulling and you push his hand away to make him stop, instead sitting up slowly.
Immediately, you crack a yawn. “Fffffuck.”

“Hello,” Jake says, smiling.

Grunting, you look around. It’s quiet here. It’s always quiet here, Jake’s little inner sanctum hidden away.

“Tell me what happened,” you say, looking up at Jake. “Last I remember, I kind of tossed my fool ass into the lake.”

You remember the feeling at the time with some shame. The pure exhaustion that had taken you. Not just the heavy weariness in your gut, but something like a heavy stone sitting on your chest. It’d felt overwhelming at the time. Like if you’d taken one more step, you’d have been crushed. So you… didn’t.

At the time, it had made sense. Now, Jake looks at you with concern pulling his brows together, warbling faintly. “Uh, well! You went ass over teakettle right into the drink. But I was there, and I snatched you right up and loaned you some better lungs so you’d be alright. Brought you back here, got you out of your wet things since I know you hate sleeping in damp.” He plucks at the blanket around you. “Tucked you in all nice, and… and here we are!”

“You didn’t bring me back to camp.” It’s not an accusation. Just a statement.

Still, Jake’s merriment dims. “I didn’t think you’d thank me if I did.”

He’s not wrong. But if you had ever given thought to this during your long week essentially vacationing in Jake’s little haven, to how much you wanted it in a more long term sense, you never anticipated it happening.

In your lap, the blanket is bunched up. Pushing it aside coaxes that warm yellow light out. After soaking it in for a moment, you hike up the blanket again and let out a shuddering sigh. “God, the fuck have I done?” you murmur.

“I don’t follow,” Jake says, quietly.

“I…” You lick your lips. Thirst is creeping up on you again while you sit there, now that you’re conscious again. As it settles in, you think it might’ve been what actually woke you. “This is hard to explain.”

Beside you, Jake crouches down, his hands curled around the edge of the hammock. Slowly, he starts rocking it again. “You said something similar before explaining what a treacherous barrel of piranhas you had to go back to, then just swan dove out of that and… “ He smiles softly, shyly. “To me. Or, at least to the lake!” His head tilts to the side. “Is this like that? Important one moment, then…?”

You lean forward on your lap. Then, the pressure on your belly starts to ache unhappily, and you lean back again. “That didn’t stop being important, I just… I don’t know, fucking lost my mind for a moment?” You shake your head. “This is what I mean. I don’t know how to explain this part, and it’s the really vital shit. You don’t get that this place is magical, that you are obscenely fucking magical in a way I only know secondhand because fuck knows I don’t have the frame of reference. Because I’m not magical. Magical shit doesn’t happen to me, alright, that’s--”

There is a ripple of sour green that runs through Jake’s warm yellow spots, there and gone in two seconds. If you didn’t catch that, you would have caught the way he looks down at the ground and rolls his eyes.
Your eyebrows shoot up into your hairline.

When you don’t go on, Jake surreptitiously glances at you, and seems to notice he’s been caught up. He still blinks guilelessly and chirps.

“No, please,” you tell him with exaggerated calm. “You have thoughts?”

He stares at you. Seconds flow by as you hold his preternaturally green, faintly glowing eyes. This close, you can see the dark swirls of deeper greens in his irises. Maybe the larger, wet darkness of his pupils. Weird, how it never occurred to you that he wasn’t… a person. Jane’s early reports treated him like a creature. Maybe it was an aetheric thing.

Jake forfeits your little staring contest with a heaved sigh, burbling something in his own tongue as he springs up and pads around the den. His tail drags along with him, the fan tip lifted and flicking around anxiously.

You wait him out.

When it comes, it’s in a sudden flood. “Okay, right, now don’t be a sour sally about it, keep that cross little frown off your face, but…” He stills and looks over at you. There’s tension in his whole body, like in those moments before a dive. But he stands there, and crosses his arms over his chest, cricketing softly to himself. “You have all these little rules about how these things can’t happen to you, that they don’t happen to you. You’ve been downright insistent about your little rules. This is how the real world works, how being a noble works.”

He shrugs, going all guilty garden hues as he starts to struggle to meet your eyes. “I know I’m just a lone fella that doesn’t understand much about the mainland life but… all that shit sounds like the stuff I told myself when I was stuck on my own! All these kind little lies we use to make ourselves happy.

“But all those fibs don’t work! We weren’t happy! You’re not happy! You’re a damn misery any time you repeat them, and I’m-- I’m sick of seeing it, to be perfectly frank!” He lets out a trill that sounds like a curse, and plods back over to you, catching the hammock in both hands. “No magic, no adventure, nothing for Dirk because that’s how the real world works. Well, I hate to be the bearer of better news, but you’re in the thick of some magic! You can’t keep spinning a yarn about how it’s not happening when you’re fuckdeep in the stuff!”

The wind goes out of him, a typhoon quelling with a faint chirr. He stares down at his hands clenched around the kelp cords. “That’s all.”

Slowly, you lean back, laying against the netting again. By luck, your head hits the pillow.

Jake rocks you like he’s trying to keep a chimera cub asleep, and you let him, busy thinking.

The thing is.

The thing is that when he puts it like that, you almost see what he means. It’s entrenched in you, how being who you are, being noble has its demands. Eventually, it became easier to be resigned to them, to let certain things pass you by, if only to keep them from digging their claws into you.

Hope was a thing with talons.

While you lay there, Jake starts up again. This time, it’s softer. That song, hums and lorelay words folding over each other into something melodic, feels nearly like its own kind of spellwork as it weaves together. A cast spell that drags the tension out of your muscles, coaxes the line of your spine to go lax.
You are going to fall right back the fuck asleep if you’re not careful. When you speak again, your voice is already getting rough, rolling out from deep in your chest. “Let’s put aside the matter of… my agreement with all that.”

Jake chirps with a small nod. You still get the feeling you are being humored though.

“The shit Jane said wasn’t wrong. About…” Fuck, it’s hard to bring this up when you’re becoming increasingly aware of your situation. “Eggs sometimes don’t go well. There’s some species of dryder that put eggs in people, and the offspring hatch internally and get used as food. The host never lives.”

“Ugh.” He wrinkles his nose. “Okay?”

“Well, shit, how much do you even know about this?”

“I know the— the things aren’t going to have a nibble of you, that’s barbaric and pretty fucking gnarly besides.” He sticks out his tongue in disgust before shaking his head. “It’ll be fine. Don’t you worry your pretty head, I think the boat steers itself pretty well.”

“Kind of worried about the destination more than anything,” you mumble. “Also, point of interest along the itinerary: do you know why the hell I haven’t wanted to eat anything since you shoved your eggs in me?”

Jake scoffs and lowers himself down into a crouch again. His fingers find new places to hook in the netting and keep rocking you. You roll onto your side to watch him.

“That’s spurious and uncouth. I was very tender,” Jake protests.

“Sorry to cast aspersions, but not the point.” You reach out and tap a finger against Jake’s temple. “Hey. Not eating for days is bad for humans.”

“Oh. Hrm.” Jake lets out a contemplative hum. “Eh, I’m not worried. You’re taking care of them, so figure they’re taking care of you too.”

For just a second, something deep inside you might go that’s sweet. If it does, you blame it entirely on the eggs. Dirk Strider doesn’t think of things as sweet, thanks. “Another strong feelin’ about that?” you ask. You’re slurring your words, tired.

“Pretty much! I might not be some scholarly chum with a library of texts to guide the way, but I’ve got loads of feelings! All we have to do is wait this out.”

“Then what,” you ask.

“Dunno! But it’ll be fine.”

“Great,” you say before yawning.

At some point your eyes slide shut. You only notice when Jake starts stroking your hair. It’s such a calming feeling, you decide to hell with it. You can worry about this shit more after you sleep for a bit.
Waking up coughing because your throat feels like sandpaper is a uniquely unpleasant sensation. It’s a cavernous thirst that pulls you out of a perfectly calm slumber, and you sit up, hacking for a moment.

Disoriented and nauseous, you sit up, sucking in breaths of air until you can manage to choke out, “Jake.”

The wet flump to the right draws your eye. Jake was apparently sleeping on his little moss bed, and falling off it, his latest stack of mussel and clam shells goes skittering across the floor. “Up, m’up, what’s wrong?”

You try to wet your mouth, but it’s hard. Instead, you just cough again and tap your throat.

“Water?” Jake asks. “Water, water’s important, just…” He springs by you in a rush, and dives into the lake tunnel.

You glare after him, because what the fuck is he doing? And all the while, you’re trying to keep calm. That’s where the nausea is; the eggs sure fucking hate it when you do anything but laze around and sleep. You have to push down their feel-good shit, because no actually you don’t feel good at the moment.

Jake’s back in a flash, hopping back into the den, soaking wet and hurrying over to your side. “Sorry, was running a little dry myself!” he explains as he comes over, standing at your side. “Don’t have your handy waterskin, so…”

He folds up against your back, arms folding around you and one hand coming over your mouth. That’s enough to make you jerk, startled at the treatment, but Jake cricket hums against you, the vibration of it right up against your spine.

Parting your lips, water flows into your mouth, and fuck everything else, that feels incredible. It’s like dry cracks in dirt finally getting some rain, and you put your hand on his wrist as you drink. The water fills your mouth between each swallow.

You sit like that for several minutes, shutting your eyes to avoid the strangeness of it and just filling every parched corner of your body to the brim. Only then do you tug Jake’s hand away, and let out a deep, satisfied sigh.

“Wow, you were really thirsty,” Jake murmurs.

“Christ, that was weird,” you say, rubbing your face. You quite literally feel renewed and healthy again, but still. At what cost. “That was really weird.”

“Why? Don’t make a fuss out of nothing.” He pivots hard, patting your stomach with avid attention. “Oh, they seem topped up too.”

When you look down, you’re glowing like a cracked magelight, even through the blanket. This is obviously fine, the brimming warm feeling in you insists. Everything about this is fine and you should really stop working yourself up about it.

You sink back and put your arm over your eyes, sighing.

After a moment, Jake asks, “Can I… go back to sleep? If you’re all set and settled. It’s the middle of the night.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” you tell him. “It’s fine.”
It’s not the last time you need Jake’s help. He’s nearly always around; when you stayed with him before, he would occasionally leave to go for a swim, apparently needing time to himself. Now, he’s either ignoring that urge or he’s doing it while you’re deep asleep, because every time you stir, he’s there.

Keeping track of time is a pain in the ass. Most likely it’s the second evening into this ordeal when you heave yourself out of the hammock, and nearly fucking faceplant because your knees were not remotely ready for this horseshit.

You manage to grab the hammock behind you and keep from just completely falling and busting your ass by hooking one shoulder on the support line. By the time Jake makes it to your side, your legs have slid outward, and you manage to drop yourself safely on the ground.

“What the sweet beguiling fuck was that?” Jake asks, clearly laughing as he stands behind you. He bends forward to stare at you, inverted and burbling amused at you.

“You goddamn fault is what it was,” you grouse. “My legs are atrophying from all this sleep, I’m never going to walk again at this rate.”

“That sounds like a load of poppycock to me.” He steps back, and tucks his hands under your arms, lifting you easily back to your feet. Keeping a grip on your arm, he nudges his face against yours. “What were you up to?”

“Tattoos. Seals are all worked up. I just wanted to rinse, see if that helps.” They’re not moving a lot yet, and normally you would put off cleansing them another day or two. Three on the outside, even. But without a lot to do but sit and gestate or percolate or whatever, the slow repetitive movement along your skin is beginning to grate.

“I can carry you!” Jake offers brightly.

“I can walk,” you tell him, and then have to watch how he just deflates all over, dimming to green-yellow and slumping his shoulders and kind of leaning into you, letting out a sad purr.

When you walk over to the water along the edge of the den, Jake still follows. You hold onto him as you lower yourself down, just to make him feel better.

Without your bathing jar or anything else, this is going to be a pain. You tilt your head back to look up at Jake. “Hey.” He gives you a curious look. “You can move water around. Is that… a strain? Is it difficult for you?”

He smiles and chirps at you, not a real answer, but enough. He rubs his hands together and cards his fingers deep into your hair. In the same moment, he sweeps his tail around to shove the end of it into the water.

It starts as a trickle, warm water leaking through your hair, sluicing down around your ears and the back of your neck. You rub your collarbone when it drips down that way, but before long, a fair substantial sheet of water is coating you.

With a little effort, you ease into it, letting the flow of water take bites out of the pent up tension woven into your arms. As Jake starts amusing himself by running his fingers through your hair, petting and stroking amidst the magical rinse, you feel even more tension unravel from you. The
mix of warm water across your skin, the comforting yellow hum in your abdomen, and someone playing with your hair, you’re lucky you stay awake as long as you do.

The itching in your arm slowly abates. You reach up and pat Jake’s arm; he obligingly stops drenching you in water. Instead, he just plays with your hair some more, humming.

“How fortunate you stumbled upon a gentleman with a particular skillset to assist you in times of need,” Jake says, then kisses the top of your head.

On the tip of your tongue is some remark about how Jake’s lucky to have found a gentleman who doesn’t mind being loaded full of eggs, but you swallow it back. In part because it’s far more combative than you feel. And in part because it would make you sound more upset about everything than you actually are. Which in itself is a strange thing to realize.

Sitting there and letting Jake have his fun, you test out the thought. You’re not upset about the eggs. Some prior discussion would have been appreciated, but it’s not like you didn’t know about the possibility. Does that mean you’re happy about them?

You frown, thinking about that. It’s difficult, like deciphering the curved lines in obsidian.

It’s like a thought experiment. Start small: what do you think about the eggs? Mostly that they are really fucking weird, in that nebulous way where they aren’t real things yet, but you still feel a strange communicative thread with them. Vaguely, they remind you of Jake, early on before he could speak English but still reached out and tried to connect across the space between.

Except now you’re the space between, kind of? It’s hard to conceptualize.

You jump to a larger idea: eggs tend to hatch. What about that?

“Jake,” you start, breaking into Jake’s grooming. It’s starting to spread; he’s idly spreading oil on you, rubbing it into your neck, the line of your jaw, and even circling your ears in a way that feels pretty fucking great. “Are you… sure about all this?”

He lets out that little bvrrpt noise at you inquiringly, continuing his ministrations.

“You said you did this, the egg thing, because you wanted me to stay and it’d be nice. Did you… think about that? I’m just wondering what… about me…” You clear your throat. “I’m not sure I’m going to be good for this shit.”

In response, Jake pushes you forward until you prop yourself up, elbows on knees. His arms circle your waist, his chest pressed flush against your back, and he lets out a purr that you can feel absolutely everywhere, like a plucked chord.

You nearly ask him to use his words because a little further explanation would be nice. What the hell is the thing he sees in you? Is it the same thing he saw when you met him, that dragged him into your orbit somehow? Or something else? How can he be so sure? Did he really think it through?

But his humming is in your body, like a resonance point, and you take a deep, deep breath, and sigh it out. You imagine even that sound taking the same shape, shivering with a warm contentment.

That’s what gets you right between the ribs. Jake leans on you and is happy. You see it every time he bounds over to you, like he’s just excited that you’re still there with him.

And you came so close to leaving him.
Bowing your head, you reach down and put your hands over his, holding his grip on you steady. That hum deepens impossibly further, echoing deeper in the cavern of his chest, and his tail curls around you.

A word comes to mind. It’s too alien and bright and cutting for you to even contemplate yet. Like a mishandled knife, if could rip you to pieces.

Or, very carefully, cut through old knots that have tied you down your entire life.

For the moment, you let it pass you by harmlessly, and just sink back.

A final escape rope gets thrown at you.

And you let it fall at your feet.

In the morning, Jake is sprawling in the lily pool, a pod of cacao in his arms. He bends his head down, catches a doughy chunk of the pale fruit in his lips, and eats it. You can hear the nib inside as he crunches it between his teeth.

“Gross,” you opine as you watch him. It’s not the most pleasant sight, but it’s interesting in the way watching a lion take apart a kill would presumably be. Except less gory.

He eats another, then spits the nib out; it skips across the floor, skidding to a noisy halt.

“Even worse.”

“There’s no pleasing you,” he informs you gravely.

“I’d be pleased if you weren’t shoving your face into cacao meat like an animal.”

“That’s rude. When Apollo Suchet was commissioned to the Court of the Erlking to solve a murder, they ate raw elk right there in front of him, and Suchet took off his little hat and said, *When in Rome*, and dug in. I only know the approximate location of this Rome, but the lesson’s easy to translate across the great poison ocean.”

“Those books are terrible,” you tell him.

“I don’t have much for reference. It was that, Jane’s text books, and Roxy’s more risque selection. The latter of which were probably the most educational, when we come down to brass tacks.” He bends down to eat another clump, this time showing you the hard center between his teeth when he’s done.

You roll your eyes and look away. You only hear that nib getting crunched again. At some point, these eggs will be done cooking and you’ll be able to eat something again. For now, you take a sip of your canteen; digging it up from the corner of the den where you misplaced it has been a godsend.

The companionable stillness is so absolute, when something breaks it, you barely notice. At first, anyway.

Jake goes tense all over before the faint, distant sound resolves into something concrete.
“What?” you ask, before you catch on.

It’s difficult to hear; it’s outside the safe shelter of the cave, carrying through the small sunlit gaps in the roof by the tree roots. You turn towards the largest one, against the back of the room, as if that’ll help.

Jane is calling your name.

It’s unmistakably Jane, her voice ringing out more clearly as she apparently gets closer. This place is on the farthest side of the lake, almost diametrically across from the camp. She must be out here looking for you.

You have been studious in your determination to not think about what’s been happening back at camp, because on top of everything else, it’s been just too much. This entire thing has been… hiding. You are hiding, deeply aware that your friends would insist on your safety in ways you would never forgive them for.

But in the process, jesus fucking christ, what you must be putting them through. Especially Jane.

Enough that she’s come out to find you, apparently stomping around the island and resorting to calling your name, like a suburban parent out calling for an errant child. It’s humiliating, almost, but you didn’t really leave her with a choice; she’s got plenty of your shit, but since you’re noble, she can’t track you like she probably could with another witch.

So. You and Jake sit there in petrified silence as her calls grow louder with proximity. Eventually, there is enough clarity that you can tell she’s been searching for a long time; her voice is rough from use.

Turning back to look at Jake, you find him… sunk deep, low in his little pond, only the faint curve of his shoulders and his eyes up above the water line. He’s gone a deep, low green; it’s remarkable camouflage, with the way the blue light lilies cast over him and make his damp skin seem a part of the water itself.

But more importantly, he’s staring at you. Eyes wide and unblinking and… fearful. Unmistakeably fearful.

You nearly ask him why, but when your lips part, he lifts his head slightly out of the water, tension writ into every inch of his body.

Jane’s voice is loud, the faint calls turning into clearly spoken, “Dirk! Dirk, are you even out here? What am I doing? Dirk!” The tremor of exhaustion and frustration are obvious now.

And so is this: you could end everything right now. All it would take is calling back. Jane would find you and inevitably take you home, and that would be the end of it.

Jake’s staring at you still.

For all his easy confidence and bluster and tendency to push things into place through sheer obstinate force of will, he’s scared.

Weirdly, deep down, it’s reassuring to know that. You’ve spent so much time laconically terrified of the world. The turnabout is interesting.

But having him afraid of you, that you will leave him?

Fuck that.
Holding his gaze, you close your mouth firmly, and put a finger against your lips.

Both of you remain still, eyes locked, waiting as the sound of poor itinerant Jane reaches a peak volume, and then finally begins to fade. Even then, when the quiet returns, neither of you move. Minutes tick by.

Finally, you lower your hand and let out a long-held sigh. “That was close.”

Jake bursts out of the pool, nearly capsizing several lilies as he hurries over to you. He comes to an abrupt stop, standing over you, and seems at a complete loss of what to do.

He settles on circling you, winding his tail close against you, then almost flopping his body across your lap, his head against one of your legs. He beams up at you for a moment, then turns in, arm wrapping around you, nose just barely touching your navel.

He really is a ridiculously bendy creature. You rest your hand in his hair, stroking it back behind his ear. Like a big wet cat, he starts purring.

This, you realize, is your life now. Holy shit.

As time inches by, your moments of boredom turn into moments of being unconscious. After crawling back into the hammock post-Jane scare, you tuck your canteen under your pillow, but your head down, and are out.

For days, you’ve been hauling around what feels to you like a sun-hot lump in your body, the heat emanating from the eggs localized. It’s sort of relaxing to curl around them and rest. It’s a point to focus on through everything.

At some point though, the feeling grows and intensifies until your body is overtaken. A siege laid with no resistance, and your entire body is overcome with a more sincere heat. It radiates out from your chest, and a persistent flush seeps up, claiming territory until you are sunburn pink.

Before you go to sleep for the night, you kick your blanket all the way down, until it’s just hitched around your hips; even that much covering you seems uncomfortable, but if you don’t keep some of it, nothing will shield your eyes from the light coming from your abdomen.

Warm and soaked in relaxation like a comb with honey, you sleep. Even when you rouse to drink more water, you’re barely conscious again, mind soaked in the remnants of dreams of deep water and diving. As soon as your head touches the pillow again, you are out, as if there was no interruption at all.

It’s what you imagine spellwork would feel like. Stories of young witches dozing off in faerie domain and never waking again. It has to be something like this, like being rolled in warm cotton and left in a sunspot.

You remain in that place for a while before the heat becomes too much. And when that happens, the change is immediate and absolute.

Coming awake, you are uncomfortably warm. A sweat has broken out over your skin, and you hiss to yourself as you kick your blanket out of the hammock. Then, you toss out the pillow and
canteen because everything touching you seems to reflect your heat back into you, and it’s *unbearable.*

You try to get back to sleep, but it’s impossible. Even your heart is starting to beat faster, pushing through the density of your prescribed calm. Christ, even your own skin touching skin is awful, and you spread out as much as you can, keeping your legs apart and arms up.

Nope, no, you can’t. Groaning, you tip yourself out onto ground. Closest to you is the lake tunnel, but the lake water is *warm* and fuck that, no. But the separate pool might work.

Even the ground under you feels like a relief, damp and cool in what feels like the late night.

But it heats under you too soon, and you can’t hold back a whimper.

There must be some level of delirium to this, because you have no warning before Jake is on you, bending to pick you up and chirping in persistent worry. His hands are broad and hot, and you instinctively try to pull away from them. “Too hot,” you mutter. “S’too hot, fuck.”

As soon as he gets you upright, you push his hands away and stagger towards the pool.

“Easy, easy,” Jake says, before dissolving back into melodic lorelay speech. He takes matters into his own hands, bending to lift you clean off the ground. And, thank fuck, he ignores your incoherent protest and just carries you over, stepping right into the pool and lowering into it.

Water. Water is *amazing.* Water fixes everything. You nearly dislodge yourself from Jake’s grasp to get further in, but he catches you, flips you around and locks his arms around you, one around your ribs, the other holding your hips.

“Hot,” you tell him, pulling pathetically against the hold for a second before giving in and slumping against his chest. “Fuck. What the fuck, is this it? What do I do?”

“It’ll be peachy keen, just relax, I think.” He keeps wiggling around, and catches your legs on his knees. As he spreads his apart, yours are dragged along. Your toes skim out of the water.

Assuming the position, you think hysterically, and work one hand loose to cover your eyes. “Shit. Shiiit shit.”

Jake starts rumbling underneath you, the purr soaking in like water. It’s so strong, you almost want to look down to see if its rippling the water around you. But then you’d have to look and you think you’ll freak out. That’d be bad.

Because he’s amazing, Jake replaces your hand with his, covering your eyes. It’s great because you can now hold onto him as all the heat in you intensifies even more. It feels like something is melting without the pain, your spine going lax from the coalescing of hot pressure; bit by bit, all of the tension in your body is being taken from you, outright stolen until you go lax, head lolling. The relief is so perfect you groan.

You have no concept of where the heat is coming from beyond *everywhere* until it splits. Something separates, and rolls down your spine. There’s movement, and once it starts you can’t escape it. You jerk in surprise, from the sheer novelty of sensation as it takes firm control of you and makes you go loose and easy.

In a fit, you push your face further into Jake’s hand, almost hoping he’ll knock you out or something. No luck, he just cradles your head and tilts it back until all you can see is the dark ceiling.
The first egg is a daze. Just the newness drives you mad as you follow its molten hot journey down from wherever the fuck it was lodged. But you don’t have to do anything, there’s no doctor telling you to push, nothing. It drops, leaving its fellows, taking its heat with it, and before your brain is finished catching up, it’s pushing out, opening you up like you’re fucking easy for it, and…

It’s gone. It passes, lets you go, and you sag from the grateful loss, panting.

Hey. Shit. That worked. You’re not dead. Which had never really sunk in as a possibility, despite Jane’s warnings, until just now. But now, you huff out a strained laugh.

You try to lift your head, pulling against Jake’s hold. He gives you an admonishing chirp. You’re just about to tell him to relax, that you have this under control, when the second egg starts coming.

Some parts are the same. One piece breaking from the whole. But as it does, your breath catches in your chest; the core heat that filled you, that dragged you awake initially, it loosens its grip on you. You breathe in, what feels like your first gulp of air.

But now that you know what’s coming, you’re waiting for it. The egg shifts and moves through you, still drenching you in a relaxing heat, but it’s not as strong as the last one. You can feel it more acutely now, as the egg… its soft edges are catching slightly as it moves, and the weird slickness is coating your insides. You can feel it, and your back arches as you try to-- to get away from it, but it’s inside, moving.

You tense, and feel it stop, and curse between your teeth. “Nghh, Jake,” you manage, pushing against him. “I-- I-- shit, Jake.”

Jake purrs, his mouth directly against your ear, and you try to let it calm you. But while you clench on the damn egg, it does something. Like a bubble popping, you are hit with a flood, sticky heat seeming to climb up your spine. As it moves, you whimper, an unsure what the fuck before it hits.

You spin out like spilled coins, eyes lidding as every tense chord in your body is snipped. Bit by bit, you sprawl, moaning thinly.

The egg continues its path, heavy molten heat pushing into you more and more every inch of its path until it hits the barest resistance, just inside. With a wild thought, you think you can feel the stuff, the thick tacky wet substance you assume the eggs are made of? coated in? drips out and makes your skin light up. It’s intense but unbearable, and you push, feeling it nudge you open and fall down, away into the water.

All over again, you slump against Jake, wordlessly gasping for air. This is… much harder than you thought. Fuck.

The next one comes almost immediately after, before you manage to catch your breath, and you let out a desperate, exasperated, “Fuck,” as it starts again. Fumbling, you get your hands on Jake’s legs, almost slipping against the smoothness of his skin. Pushing, you arch your back, lifting up with a bit of franticness. But it follows you, stickily coming apart from the whole, and you fucking feel every goddamn nudge and shift of it. The outer membrane clings, making you uncomfortably aware of yourself with humming feelgood heat that’s no longer even close to enough to smother the clarity of sensation.

For a second, you forget Jake’s even there. Then he grabs you and drags you back down, arm folding like an iron bar across your waist and keeping you in place. Right on time for the egg to ease along and catch against your prostate and lodge.
Heat flushes up your face and you cry out, the first real honest to fuck pleasure slamming into it. The egg’s so fucking heavy and dense, and you can’t stop clenching on it, and the pressure builds like a steam engine until you’re writhing, trying to make yourself stop pushing on the fucking thing enough so it can move.

Thank fucking god it’s a soft, malleable thing. After way too long, it slides, and you suck in a lungful of air, going limp from the exertion, letting the egg drop out without an ounce of tension.

“I’m gonna die,” you manage between gulps of air.

“Don’t be dramatic,” Jake says, kissing your neck. You’ve climbed halfway up his body in an attempt to squirm away.

“Fuck you, I’m not.” The core of heat is barely there now. You can feel each egg discretely. Two. Two left. You’ll never make it.

“You’re doing a fine job of it, stop complicating it. Everything’s smooth sailing!”

You elbow him weakly, and without missing a beat he responds with a brisk smack of your thigh. You jerk, and feel the next egg start to dislodge and start its journey out.

Head back against Jake’s shoulder, you inhale deeply, steeling yourself. “Never again. You’re never putting your dick in me again, I swear.”

“That’s a load of wooden nickels, pretty.” He takes a more secure hold of you, a hand on each of your hips, and forces you down, back into his lap. Your toes flick out of the water again, and you let out a delirious laugh that fades into a groan. Your attention returns to the egg as it moves, faster than the others, retracing the path of the others.

You can track it so well, so intently, you take in a deep breath, sighing it out slowly as it rolls past your already oversensitive prostate. It moves past without catching, and you almost cry in sheer relief.

But you have to push it out. The stuff that has unwound your tension and limbs has almost completely drained out. Annoyed, you grit your teeth and carefully make yourself open up while also pushing. It’s hard, and you fuck it up twice before cursing.

“Stuck, goddammit,” you groan.

“Okay,” Jake says easily, and tucks one hand down your body. His arm rubs against your dick, which makes you jerk again, *fuck that’s good*, before his fingertips rub at your hole, tugging at it.

If not for the arm holding you down, you’d elevate off him and fly away probably. As it is, he has a stern hold of you as he fingers you open and lets the egg through.

“Son of a bitch,” you say with passion, gasping.

“I remember you being more eloquent than this,” Jake comments.

“Worst,” you mumble, laying your head down for a moment of much needed rest.

Or, that would be the ideal, but with dawning realization, you realize the last one’s moving. It already got with the program while the other was still a work in progress, you think, but it’s slow. Actually, it keeps stopping, getting caught along the way. You can’t keep from going tense every time you feel it shift, and it’s prolonging it.
“I can’t,” you tell Jake in something close to a whine. “Too tense.”

Jake hums. “We can work on that,” he says, and grabs hold of your dick.

The urge to deny him, just to kick up another oddly comforting back and forth, is strong. But you’re hard against his palm, and the heat of his hand is amazing after so long in the tepid water. And besides, he’s been practicing.

“Hurry up,” you tell him. Then, to be polite: “Please.”

That’s what gets him, it seems. He lets go of you, leaving you propped open across his lap, getting both hands down across your body. One continues to pet and squeeze your dick in a way that’s not gentle or kind but is focused on getting you there as quickly as possible.

Its compatriot and partner in crime slips further down, and Jake tucks two fingers into you without hesitation.

Yeah, you think that’ll do it. It’s not exactly an ordeal to get you desperate to come after everything so far. Already oversensitive and reeling, you just try to hold on, gripping Jake’s arms as he makes a race out of getting you to orgasm as swiftly as he can.

A half-formed thought rolls around your head like a lost marble, about Jake and how he said he’d take care of this, of you, and how he’s making good on that. No one’s done that before. No one’s cared that much about you.

Turning your head, you tuck your face against his arm. You’re tired and it’s making you sentimental. This needs to be over already.

Another half-formed thought: wow, you are fucking lucky it was only five. How many did you swallow that other night, before you understood what was going on? Would that add up to a full ‘clutch’? Who the hell could survive more of these?

As that queasy good tightness winds in your gut, you refocus. The slippery exploration of your hole as Jake gently strokes his fingers in and out, pulling at the rim and stretching you out is amazing. The quick one-two stroke of his hand on your cock is even better, and he works in tandem until you’re finally coming. Like your body had been waiting this whole time, you move with it, rocking up into his grip, back on his hand, holding on tightly. His fist remains tight around you, milking every inch of it out of you before you finally, gratefully collapse.

A far cry from the first time you did this, Jake lets go of you before it starts to feel bad. Instead, his palm presses against your lower belly as he keeps his fingers tucked in you.

Right. Showtime, you think, and let out a hoarse laugh. It worked, it worked perfectly, you are what Jake would likely call loosey-goosey.

“What’s a goose,” Jake asks you, cluing you in to the fact you’re running your mouth. But it’s fine. It was all going to be fine, you were fine, your trust fall worked, here you are securely held and caught. It was fine.

You lick your lips, realize you’re thirsty again, and keep laughing weakly as the egg hurries along your drained, tired body. When it reaches its exit, Jake coaxes it out, and you feel the faintly strumming sensation lingering in you where the eggs had been.

But you are finished. You did it, and have never felt so goddamn accomplished in your life.

Time for a victory nap, you decide with a silent internal cheer.
You sleep until morning, to your complete lack of surprise.

You don’t even dream. Just rest in quiet darkness for hours.

Then, wake up on the moss bed, curled on your side.

As soon as you stir, you try to roll onto your back and wince at it seizes. “You couldn’t put me in the hammock?” you accuse the room in general, before you even open your eyes.

Somewhere else, there’s an answering chirp. It’s dismissive, though.

Climbing off the moss comfortably involves just sort of falling off it, since your back is not up for something as simple as sitting up. You sink onto your ass on the floor, thankfully not landing in Jake’s collection of shiny things. While you’re there, you stretch, planting your hands and arching your back until something pops. Great.

If you take a little time to yourself, gathering your strength and composure, fingercombing your hair, that’s nobody’s business.

Jake is crouched across the den from you. Standing gingerly, you stretch one more time, pulling your arms behind your back and bending.

Then it’s time to man up and go over there.

The pool looks perfectly fine. There’s no sign of the rather animated round of egg laying you went through. The glowing lilies have spread out across the surface, as if courteously excusing themselves as they space out properly again.

You clear your throat. “Hey.”

Jake chirps again, still looking at the water with a faintly cautious expression on his face. When you sit down beside him, he finally speaks. “Morning, pretty. Sleep well?”

“You can’t make me like your mossy bullshit. My body can’t handle it. It’s a human failing, you got to accept that.”

He snorts, and smirks. “Alright, alright. Was a bit tired myself after all the commotion. Didn’t feel like lifting you that far. Next time, we’ll just curl up in the lake, how about that?”

“Fine. Don’t drown me,” you mention idly, leaning in, trying not to make a show out of it. “So.”

“Hm?”

“Are they… okay? Did I-- I didn’t fuck it up or anything, right?”

“Don’t think so.” He finally takes mercy on you and points. “They clumped up over there.”

With his help, you see them. A lump of faintly glowing spheres are tucked into the far side of the pool. With all the blue light in the way, it’s hard to see them. Alarmingly, they are much bigger than you expected. Each one is a little larger than your closed fist, which generally speaking is more than you thought you could handle. Maybe they puffed up with all the water. Maybe they
were just malleable enough to be easily laid.

You swallow, a flutter of anxiousness in your chest. “Are they good? Is there anything to do?”

Jake shrugs. “Imagine not. Wheel spins on its own axle from here.”

It’s an annoyingly vague answer. “How long do they… when will they hatch?”

Jake gives you a look of stark confusion. “How should I know? Does it matter?”

“Don’t you think we should keep an eye on them?”

“No… particularly?” He unbends, standing up and padding away. “There’s nothing here to gobble them up. They’re in their own little puddle. They’ll do what they ought.”

“Another feeling of yours?” you ask, climbing to your feet too. “You don’t have any sort of… paternal instincts? Towards them?”

Jake wheels around and rejoins you, staring at your face, leaning in close, then looking at the pool, then to you again. After a lone, contemplative hum, he chirps, “Nope! Nobody raised me and I turned out right as rainfall.”

Ooh boy. You shake your head, but decide to… let it slide for now. There’s other pressing issues at hand. As much as you want to hydrate and go back to bed for a week and a half, that’s not an option.

“Do you want something to eat? I could catch you something,” Jake offers brightly.

“Actually.” Yeah, some food would be nice. Not that you’re starving or anything, but you could use a bite to eat. What a novel feeling. “Instead, let’s go up and grab some of those starchy banana things.” Jake nods. “Then… Jake, we need to go back to camp.”

Surprisingly, Jake keeps nodding. “Best put on some clothes for that, lest you give the ladies a shock.”

“Wait, that’s it?” You prod a finger against his arm. “You pretty much kidnapped me, we hid out here, and suddenly you’re raring to go and see them?”

“I didn’t kidnap you. You are not a kid, and I gallantly rescued you from a tumble into the lake,” he says first. “And Jane was going to whisk you off because of the little glowing buggers. That’s all taken care of, so there’s nothing to fear!” When you frown, he taps your mouth. “Put that away! No need to be so dour! The crisis I accidentally threw us into is over, and we can all have a nice sit down and discuss where we want to go from here. It’ll be a cinch.”

Jake is not the only one with strong feelings. You have one right now that says that this is not going to be anything approaching a cinch, snap, or any kind of leisurely stroll including a cake.

That said, you have to go face the music. “Let me throw on some pants.”

The music goes something like this: sing along if you know the words.

You return to the camp after downing two bananas and enough water to quench your thirst. As you walk through the plain between the tents and the fruit grove, Jake’s stride becomes less confident. The space separating you both vanishes, his arm brushing against yours with every
step.

It’s more of a human gesture than anything, but you still tuck your arm through his and take his hand. His peacock fins are soft where they press against your skin.

Glancing up at him, you watch him hunch a bit, lowering to his bent stride. But he keeps hold of your hand. It feels like an anchor. You’re not certain who is holding down the other. But you wouldn’t let him float away, and you’re reassured he isn’t going to let you fly away either. So maybe it doesn’t matter.

You must trip some sort of proximity alarm Jane set up around the camp. Between one step and the next, the flap of her tent whips open, and out comes Jane. She’s barefoot, but storms across the grass, right over to you, hitching up her skirt with one hand.

“Dirk,” she breathes when she’s within reach, an exhalation of intense relief before she collides with you. Her politesse and manners are completely gone as she wraps her arms around you and squeezes.

You bend, returning the hug, your face against her hair. It’s out of the tight bun she’s been tying it back in for weeks, hair loose and tickling your face as the wind stirs it up. “Hey, Janes,” you whisper, tightening your grip on her for a second, then releasing.

She holds you for a few more seconds, then steps back. With a turn of her hips, she advances on Jake, one step that feels like a threat. She stabs her finger in his direction, as if it was her trident. “And you!” she says, seething. “If you ever pull a stunt like that again, it’ll be the last thing you do! Do you understand me, buster?”

Jake ducks behind you, hands settling on your back. An unhappy trill fills the air.

You reach back, patting him. “Jane, I’m fine. I promise, I’m absolutely fine. And I’m sorry for worrying you.”

Slowly, she straightens, lowering her hand and instead wrapping her arms around herself. “You-- you did. I was… Dirk, I searched for you! I have no idea where he took you, but I looked!” She bites her lip, inhaling sharply through her nose. “I…”

“It’s alright, it all worked out,” you start, trying to quell whatever is rising in her voice. “I’ll tell you about it. Well, some of it.”

“No, you don’t-- don’t understand ,” she goes on, shaking in her boots. So to speak. Lack of boots. “When you left, Roxy just-- just went off to that temple again, saying she was going to get to the bottom of this, and refused to help or even prep for flight, and…”

Jane’s face crumbles. You see one flash of anguish, a tear rolling down her cheek, before she covers her face.

“Jane,” you say, unsure what else to say yet. You shrug off Jake for the moment and take hold of her shoulders, rubbing up and down her arms. “Hey, Crocker, are you… shit, what happened?”

Instead of answering, she shudders, taking a few deep breaths. Each one is easier than the last, but it takes time before she gathers herself.

She knuckles away the trail of her tears and sniffs sharply. “Everyone was gone, and I… I didn’t know what else to do, Dirk, you have to understand that. After I did it, I realized it was perhaps a little rash, but Jake took you, and Roxy didn’t want to help me find you!”
“Did what now?” Jake asks, and shrinks back from the dagger glare she flings his way.

When Jake’s back to hiding behind you, she sighs. “I burnt one of our emergency rituals. So I could contact home. The Trust. They’re…” She looks down, suddenly unable to meet your eyes. “They’re on their way.”

Chapter End Notes

CONTENT: magical egg laying, full blown and graphic with all that entails. there are a lot of kinks and potential squicks wrapped up in that, so here is an out for people who *know* this ain't their jam.

When you reach As time inches by, skip to You sleep until morning, to your complete lack of surprise.

Now, all that said, I wrote myself into this corner. A few years ago, i wrote another fic that had ovi, and the egg situation was neatly resolved off screen. Not this time, folks. This time, we fucking write our way back out.

Anyway. /jazzhands. Lets wrap this up. Only a few chapters to go.
The entire way to the temple is beset by bickering.

“I frankly don’t want to hear an ill word out of you,” Jane says on your left, speaking either around or through you. “You left me with very little choice and I’m not to be made to-- to feel like I was wrong.”

“No one is saying that,” you tell her.

But she’s not talking to you, she’s talking to the lorelay on your right side. Jake’s adamant about keeping you between him and Jane, and keeps making distance whenever Jane comes in closer.

“But you were! Everything was fine! Which I said!” He exhales a shivery noise, frowning deeply. “I can’t believe you did that.”

Jane nearly stops to whirl on Jake. “You! You stole my best friend!”

Jake hunches, but replies in a low whine, “I was gonna bring him back!”

“Stop,” you say, rubbing your face.

“He fell into the water and you went in after him, and I saw neither hide nor hair of either of you for days! We should have taken off yesterday, and all of you just completely abandoned me!” Her voice is pitching higher, more upset, and you feel like an asshole. It’s as much your fault as Jake’s.

Jake inhales to have another go, and you shoot him a quelling look. He swallows it, letting out a low chirp, eyes downcast.

But Jane’s right. No. Try that again, Strider. “You’re right,” you tell her.

She looks surprised, eyes wide as she looks up at you before her gaze falls downcast as well. “Well, yes, of course I am. That was…” Jane looks out at the lake, tucking her hair behind her ear. Resolutely not looking at you.

“It’s not all Jake’s fault. I wanted to go. But because I’m a horse’s ass, I didn’t tell you anything,” you tell her. “Don’t much know what the deal with Rox is, but…”

“Nor do I. She’s particularly recalcitrant about her own feelings lately. Even after our… Erm.”

“Torrid pillowtime storytelling?”

“Yes, that.” She’s able to look at you again, though there’s still a flush to her face. “There might be… an upside to all this? If a team from the Trust is on their way, maybe… they could help with whatever is going on here? Maybe we should wait.”

There is no helping the stormcloud that crawls across your mind. “Let’s save that for a last resort. Explore our options first.”

Now Jane seems chided, which wasn’t what you wanted. The dour atmosphere is penetrating and insidious. It’s a strange thing, to breathe in the salt ocean air, enjoying the brisk temperature and
sun, while flanked by Jake and Jane and thus their tense, unspoken upsets.

But fucking hell, it’s threatening to sink into you. The imminent danger that now looms. There’s something unfair about it, how you only just figured out what you wanted, the life you could finally have. When you made the decision to cut yourself loose from the mainland, you didn’t expect it to give a shit, nor to reach out like this.

When you reach the temple and begin to climb the stairs, it doesn’t take long to notice Jake falling behind. He makes it up to the first landing before shrinking down, going still and lowering until his fingertips touch the old stone floors. He lets out a long, low watery cricket noise, his long pointed spines poking straight out, his peacock fins illuminating. For all his amphibious anatomy, he reminds you of a cat with its tail poofed out, thoroughly spooked.

“What’s wrong?” Jane asks, crossing her arms as she stands on a step further along and higher up.

Jake gives you a nervous glance and tries to tuck himself down further.

You hold up a finger to Jane, mouthing *Hang on*, and return to Jake’s level on the stairs. “Hey. Come on.”

He shakes his head, then leans forward to bump against your hip, almost hiding his face. “No, no no, I don’t… go into the big tower. It’s bad in there.”

Letting him hide, you put a hand in his hair, stroking your thumb against his forehead. “Alright. Why’s that?”

He crickets louder for a second, and the noise segments his voice weirdly. “I had a wander around inside when I was a small puddle hopper. Right ’round when I figured out how legs worked. It was…” He presses harder against you. “It was *empty*, there’s no one in there!”

You remember Jake talking about what amounted to his youth. Being smaller, simpler. You don’t know if that necessarily means the same thing for him as it does to humans. But it’s not hard to picture a small, scared Jake trying to brave the deep, echoing hollows of the temple.

And what that would mean, if he never went back and wrote it off as empty. To someone who grew up absolutely alone and aware they were alone, it’d be a shock to learn you were wrong. More than just a shock.

You tap your hand against Jake’s arm. “Come on.”

He chirps and shakes his head against you.

“No, seriously. Come on.” You drag your nails through his hair. “I trusted you, right? I need you to trust me.”

Jake shudders, and slowly leans back. His face is a flush of tart yellow-green, like uncertainty given definite hue. He doesn’t look at you, but when you tap his arm again, he takes your hand. His palm is smooth and warmly damp against yours.

And hell, you’ll take that. That works.

It’s slow-going, leading Jake along. He doesn’t quite stand up, just follows with awkward hops, the unhappy hum in his chest a constant. But you ascend the steps, rejoining Jane, who looks at you with some brand of quiet surprise.

“What?” you ask her.
“I… nothing! It’s nothing. Let’s just-- yes, let’s go.” She pivots on her heel and leads the way inside.

As you step out of the sunlight and into the cavernous shadow of the temple, Jake staggers to a halt again. Patient as you can, you wait, not even pulling him. After a moment, he sighs and steps over the threshold.

Inside, a few of the braziers are lit, but barely cast enough light to brighten up the dim stonework.

At the altar and pews, Jake slips out of your grip, settling his ass on the stone by the pulpit, his back against the stand. Which is fine. You can handle that, so long as he doesn’t run away. You aren’t unsympathetic to how difficult this must be.

Leaving him to… do whatever to gather himself, you walk towards the big lotus bowl.

You have two seconds to get an eyeful before you look away, up at the ceiling with a long exhale through your teeth. “Rox.”

The bowl is, like before, half-full of glowing rainbow slime, what serves as Kaleidos’ body in the temple. That’s fine. You can deal with that.

Roxy’s clothes are piled just outside the bowl as she lays on her stomach on top of the water god’s body, arms folded under her head, but definitely thoroughly naked.

Jane approaches, taking in your pained expression and looking past you. With a sigh, she says, “Roxy, really?”


“There are no kids,” you say towards the ceiling. “Can you…”

“Can I…? Why, Dirk! Didn’t you give me some whole schlock about how lack of interest wasn’t disgust or fear or whatever?” She’s laughing at you.

“I’m not disgusted, just… fuck it, fine.” You turn and make an effort to look only at Kaleidos’ glowing body and Roxy’s face. Her eyebrows are lifted, grin rawkish and smug.

“If we’re all ready to be adults here,” Jane says, the sourness clear in her voice. “Could you explain what you’ve been doing? Since you left me at the camp.”

Roxy somehow props her chin up on an elbow despite floating on a malleable surface. “Hm. Wait, do you mean after you dragged me back to camp goin’ on about how we had to drop everythin’ and leave? After that?”

Jane puts her hands on her hips, eyes narrow.

“Well, if that’s what you want to know,” Roxy says brightly, “After Dirk bailed out, I figured someone should go ask an expert what’s happening. Like, if Dirk was no joke in the danger zone.” She pats her hand against Kaleidos. “Who better than the momma of all lorelays!”

“Who indeed!” Jane snaps, flicking her wrists in the air. “Did you feel like sharing that with me?”

“When I came back to do that, you were gone!”

“I was probably out looking for Dirk, no thanks to you! Tracking down a noble requires legwork!”
Roxy flaps a hand through the air. “Anyway, the point is that Callie told me that the egg thing was totally normal, nothing to worry about. It happened all the time back in her heyday. Lorelays are super into humans, more than each other.” She lapses into silence for a moment, eyes slipping away from you. Slowly, she grins. “Yeah, I know, I know,” Roxy says quietly, clearly not to you.

“The-- the lorelay,” Jane says, which gives you a pang, hearing her use that term and not her own. It’s a capitulation of something. “They… implant eggs in humans? That’s okay?”

“Yeah! Lorelay don’t got places to put eggs in each other!” Roxy shifts and moves against the slime, until she’s sitting up. Her hips and belly are well obscured by the slime, but there’s not an ounce of shame as her breasts just… it’s fine, really. You’re an adult. They’re good breasts, you’re sure. “Man, wait until you hear just like, all the ways lorelay only work with humans! They’re custom made for it, to be all enticing and tempting and stuff. Lorelay and humans fall in love all the time—” that fucking word makes your stomach swoop nauseatingly, but she just keeps going like it’s nothing, “—and used to be they’d form little triads, that was the most common hookup. But regardless of the familial unit, they get mating urges and a hellacious craving for seaweed and kelp, and then!” She snaps her fingers. “Eggs!”

She points at you with a waggling finger. “Really, Callie’s totally shocked you were able to drag your fine ass back to camp. Apparently most humans turn into little sloth demons when they get egged, and just sleep until its time to lay ‘em.”

“Didn’t get a full… clutch, or whatever,” you inform her.

“Oh?”


Which doesn’t seem to bother Roxy, who just shrugs it off. “Well, glad to see you up and at ‘em. Also…” She plants a hand on the rim of the bowl to lean, looking past you and Jane. “Hey! Hey, mudskipper!” She waves. “Come here, Jakester!”

You all turn and watch Jake slowly unfold from his spot by the altar. He’s still walking hunched, his hands tucked together in front of him as he approaches. “Yes? Hullo, Roxy. Nice to see you.”

As he comes close, you reach back, and feel him immediately take your hand, grasping you tightly. “What’s that then?” he murmurs, looking into the bowl.

Roxy wiggles closer, carried and moved by the slime until she’s close to Jake. “This is Kaleidos. She’s been alone for a long, long time, pretty boy. Just like you.” With due care, she reaches out too, towards Jake’s free hand. “She’s super excited to meet you, and has missed you.”

Jake chirps, lowering down as if hoping he could disappear into the ground. “How’s that? Can’t miss something you don’t know.”

“Bullshit,” you point out as gently as you can.

Curling her fingers, Roxy says softly, “It’s all good. She just wants to say hello and know you’re okay. She’s real sorry you grew up alone.”

Jake’s fingers feel like a vice around yours. After one solid squeeze back, you loosen your grip.

He doesn’t let go immediately. Instead, he holds onto you even as he takes Roxy’s hand. She leans back, and he stretches forward a step, until he’s pulled taut between you both. Only then does he let go, feet curled around the edge of the bowl.
Roxy doesn’t say anything, just lets him fidget for a moment, tail flicking and nearly knocking you over. Eventually, he stretches one foot out, and follows when Roxy pulls him. “There we go! Come in, the water’s fine!”

“Is it,” Jake asks, sinking down into the bowl, his tail slipping and hitting the slime with a loud wet slap that makes him jump.

Roxy holds both his hands. “Relax. It’s all good, just relax.”

Even you can barely breathe for a moment. You remember the singular weirdness of being in that bowl, and Jake doesn’t seem much happier about it. But he settles, Roxy sitting with him and rubbing his shoulder.

Then, something entirely new happens: the drab green of Jake’s spots changes. Not to a brighter green and not to yellow, but to blue. A chipper sky blue that shifts in a smooth gradient to indigo, then after a second, to violet, then magenta, then swooping through a full prismatic spectrum. His spots, his glowy fins, they shift and tumble through the rainbow as the tension in his face drains.

Lavender is a weird color amid his green skin, but it lingers as Jake shudders all over and lets his eyes close. As splashes of red and purple and orange and navy ripple through him, he lets out a warble of lorelay speak and calms.

Roxy beams, holding his hand and giving you and Jane a thumbs up.

Then it’s quiet. It’s a type of quiet you don’t want to break. You’ve never been a particularly spiritual man, but there’s something sacrilegious about breaking the silence or interrupting Jake’s first connection with Kaleidos. All you can think of is the intense well of emotions she had for him. Before she even met him, Jake was the most important thing to her.

You meet Roxy’s eyes, then Jane’s, before stepping away, back to the pulpit to sit on one of the stone benches. From here, you can barely see the bowl, just Roxy’s sunwashed pink-blonde hair and Jake’s dark, almost black hair. You want to be ready for a commotion, for anything that requires your attention.

But you’re surrounded by capable people and you’re not actually worried about Kaleidos. If the aforementioned capable people weren’t around, you might be willing to go into the bowl yourself and connect again. The novelty of the feeling hasn’t begun to wear off.

For now, you wait, arms slung over your legs, bent and… still a little tired. Not like before, when hot comfort was flooding your body for days. But you could still shut your eyes for a bit.

Before you can give serious thought to that, Jane breaks from her position standing sentinel over the bowl and walks over to sit at your side.

She smooths down her skirt a few times, then links her fingers together, resting her hands on her knee. Something’s coming; you only have to wait a few seconds before she asks, “Are you… really okay?”

“Me? Yeah,” you tell her.

“Even after… all that happened. Even after the-- the eggs and Jake whisking you off, you’re…”

“I was just thinking I could use a little shuteye, but it’s nothing I can’t fix by turning in early. Otherwise, I’m fine. It all worked out.”

What you mean is to reassure her. Instead, Jane’s lower lip wobbles before she covers it with a
hand. “I thought… I just thought you might get hurt.”

Oh, shit. You weren’t actually prepared for this. Clearing your throat, you try to catch up. “It was good. I spent most of it sleeping and making Jake get me more water. I was out of it for probably eighteen hours out of twenty-four. Then they…” You have to hedge here. Christ, you hope Kaleidos didn’t give Roxy any of the sordid details of how that all went down. “Came out, and I was done.”

“That’s great!” Jane says, sounding pained. “You were always going to be fine and I just went and…” She sniffs noisily, and wipes her eyes.

“That’s not what I meant. Jane.”

“No, of course not. But I don’t know what you mean anymore, you know? I thought I-- I thought we were on the same chapter if not always the same page, but now I’m just all turned around about it all!” Some pent up frustration is leaking into her voice, into her hands as she gestures emphatically.

You’re not sure what she’s asking of you, what she means. All you can think to do is put your arm around her back, like you have dozens of times before. And like every other time, she leans in, shoulder tucking under your arm.

Jane’s entire body moves with the deep breath she takes. “I’m supposed to take over the Trust someday, you know?”

That’s… not the direction you expected this to go in. You look askance at her, feeling your mouth curve down in your confusion. “Right. Yeah.”

“I’ve grown up knowing that’s my future. That I had that future right ahead of me, just waiting.” She thumbs her eyes, rubbing away more dampness. “I’ve been preparing for it since I was a little girl, making my dolls have little board meetings and go on excursions. And I did that! Isn’t that just peachy, I’m on my own excursion now?”

“Couldn’t have hoped for a better one, really,” you murmur. You’re having difficulty figuring out where this is going, so nonspecific demurs are the best you got. “Glad you dragged me along.”

“But you don’t… you don’t like the Trust, do you?”

Which: what? It’s a Trust dedicated to the research and profiteering of new magic minutiae in various fields. To you, it feels obvious that you don’t like the Trust. The place barely tolerates you, and often at Jane’s behest. But it has to exist, it and all the places like it.

You are puzzling out a reply when Jane leans away from you again, looking off at the far wall of the temple and smoothing her hair out uselessly. “Right. It’s stupid, isn’t it? You’re… you’re a noble, I know that, but you’re my friend, so I just thought--” She lets out an enormous sigh like a bellows. “Do you have any inkling what it’s like, to have prepared your whole life for something, only to find your friends are afraid of it? That’s what it is, isn’t it? You and Roxy are afraid of the Trust coming here, aren’t you?”

It’s like watching a runaway trolley careening down a sloped street, and you’re not certain how to stop it. “No, I’m not afraid of them, Jane. It’s-- it’s caution, it’s knowing what they do. Might do. We can’t sit here and act like that’s not a possibility,” you tell her, even as she smiles wryly and shakes her head.

“I’ve been so looking forward to taking the helm of the Trust. I was going to discover incredible things and make new patents and be respected by my family and peers. All the things people
dream of as kids. Now-- now I can’t stop thinking about it! Being the leader of, what? What do you think it is? A black flag ship come to plunder?"

“Jane,” you try to cut in.

Her voice is pitching higher with every other word. “It’s like watching something you-- you built your life around being flipped like a card table!”

You are saved and/or kept from coming up with a compelling response to that when Roxy walks over to you, and loudly shushes you both. She’s dripping slime but has put on her shirt and work pants. Her feet make the same damp mp noise that Jake’s usually do on hard floors. “What are you two shoutin’ about, damn.”

“Nothing,” Jane says quickly. “What’s the verdict, how is…” She gestures to the lotus bowl. “How’s all that going?”

Leaning forward, you try to catch her eye, but she refuses, politely staring up at Roxy instead. Goddammit.

“Okaaaaay,” Roxy drawls, and flicks her hair out of her face. It lands against her head with a wet noise. “I left Jake and Callie to it. Sort of gettin’ all emotional in there. And really hard to follow. Like, in a weird way, when someone’s in there with you, it gets easier to understand, but also a lot faster? Callie’s really excitable, it’s adorable.” She shrugs and busies her hands buttoning her shirt properly.

“Great,” you grunt, still trying to get a read on Jane. Everything happened so fast, you’re not sure what is going on with her. But you have the distinct feeling you fucked up there somehow.

“Janes, what’s up, your eyes are all red and leaky,” Roxy asks, leaning into Jane’s personal space without compunction.

“Roxy, it’s been a stressful few days!” Jane snaps back. “Both my friends vanished on me, and our timeline is running out, has run out actually, and everyone’s getting close to this demigod that we don’t understand, I just feel like--” She stops hard, and puts her head in her hands, making her words muffled. “Can I please just have a few minutes to think?”

“Whoa,” Roxy breathes. “Okay.” Despite that, she sidles closer and gingerly begins to rub Jane’s back. “You take all the minutes you need, sweetie, we’re here. And hey.” She scratches lightly at Jane, sweeping a clawed hand up and down her spine and between her shoulder blades. “You don’t gotta say nuthin’ but listen. I’m sorry for bailing on you. That was not good best friend material, and I shoulda kept you in the loop. But don’t you ever think you’re actually getting rid of me, Crocker, okay? Hm?” Roxy pats her. “Okay.”

Jane doesn’t say anything, but reaches up to hold Roxy’s wrist in a loose grip, making Roxy grin.

With Jane still bent forward, apparently gathering herself, only you are there to see the relieved look on Roxy’s face. Or the flash of contrition when she notices you looking.

“Rough coupla days, huh?” Roxy says lightly.

The quiet sound of everyone’s breathing after that seems confirmation enough. And yeah, it feels like the last two weeks have lasted months, so much has happened. You avoid itemizing it all in your head, worried about confronting the sheer amount of fuckery going on. A lot of which is absolutely your fault.

Jane sits up after a few minutes, giving you both a wan smile.
Then you wait, until there’s a squelching noise as Jake lifts himself out of the pool, glowing and covered in slime. Standing on the edge, he sweeps his hands over his skin, sloughing off a bunch of the stuff into a puddle at his feet. When he takes a step, his tail runs right through it, and he trills indignantly, bending to clean his tail for a few seconds before seeming to give up and just walking over.

Roxy laughs. “Yeah, there’s no dignity to that.”

“Jiminy fucking christmas, no kidding,” Jake mutters.


Surprisingly, Jake frowns, contemplating before answering you. “I’ll… get back to you on that. It’s a bally lot to roll around in my head. I…” He shudders. “Can we go back to camp?”

“Sure, pumpkin,” Roxy says. “Sounds like we could all use a wind down, huh?”

You can’t help but agree. The simmering tension following everyone around feels ready to break into a boil, and if you can delay that until after you get a solid forty winks, that’d be the most you’d dare to hope for.

The procession back to camp is shrouded in weary silence. Four people picking their way along the southern shore, back home. Jake walks closest to the lake, and when the dark beach starts smudging the edge of the water, he follows it closely, knee-deep with his tail swishing along.

With no one willing to speak up, you’re left to just stand a few feet further in land, watching his profile as the sun sinks behind him. He doesn’t look at you even once, his head hung, body dropping into that instinctive comfortable bend. There’s a lot in his face, flickers of emotion there one second and replaced the next.

You hope he’s alright. You’re afraid to break the silence to ask.

Upon returning, Roxy declares it, “Totally pajama o’clock, everyone get changed.”

The girls head into their tents, but Jake catches your attention with just a softly uttered, “Erm, actually.”

When you turn to him, he’s still looking down, at your feet. “If it’s alright, I’m going to… go have a swim and turn in for the night.”

“Oh,” you say dully. “Are you sure? Do you want to talk about… whatever happened back there?”

He nods adamantly. “I do! I do, abso-tively-lutely, yes. But…” He hums softly. “Before that, I need to let it all steep. It’s a lot to sort through.” He glances up at you, up through his lashes, shy. “Just for a bit.”

“If you’re sure.” You step forward, then falter. Maybe it’d be best to just let him go. No call to be a clingy bastard when he clearly wants some time to himself. He’s taken off to be alone before, you should just let him go.
That doesn’t make you any less relieved when he sways in, his hum deepening to a purr as he kisses you. You clench your fists behind your back to keep still, but it’s good. The kiss is chaste but lingers for longer than you’d expect before he steps back, easing off with another fast, follow up peck on your mouth.

“Rest up. See you in two shakes. Or, maybe a few more. Three or four.”

“Later,” you murmur, and stand there. As you watch, he plods off to the lake, casting only one backward glance at you before walking into the rising tide. Soon, he’s submerged, gone from your view.

You wait a few more seconds before retreating to your tent to change. Honestly, pajama o’clock sounds great to you. A revolutionary idea from Dr. Lalonde.

The evening slips tiredly away. Under the canopy, you, Jane, and Roxy sit, taking an easy meal of fried up fish and small oniony things like sweet scallions and leafy greens Jane assures everyone is perfectly edible. All of it goes decently with the ‘notatoes’ you cut up and toss into the pan. They heat up and brown faster than potatoes, which is just as well since they’re not potatoes. Hence the creative moniker per Jane.

“Jake gonna come in for his portion, or…?” Roxy asks you softly.

“No. He’ll be back later.” You don’t specify because you have no idea when he’ll be back.

“Guess the honeymoon’s over, huh?” Roxy teases you with a sly smile.

It’s a remarkably tame sort of ribbing, especially from her. You appreciate it, even if the question makes you feel hot all over. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” you reply.

“Got the lowdown from Callie, but I’d love some firsthand accounts. She was cagey on some of the details.” Leaning her chin in her hand, Roxy flutters her eyelashes at you.

You roll your eyes and look to Jane for potential backup.

She’s already looking at you, though. Her brow is slightly wrinkled in contemplation, though her eyes widen when she seems to realize you caught her out.

“What?” you ask.

“Nothing! I’m just… there’s a lot on my mind.” She looks away, down at her hands folded in her lap. “I guess I didn’t realize how much… It’s a little obvious in hindsight, given how much time Jake spent following you around like a puppy.”

“What?” you ask again, now even more confused.

Roxy snorts. “I know, right. It’s sweet.”

“Stop talking around me,” you tell them.

Roxy sticks her tongue out at you. Jane, on the other hand, takes you more seriously, standing and nodding along. “You’re right, sorry. I might turn in early. Have a bath. I have a few things to think over.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Roxy says. “I mean, I’m the one with slime up in places slime got no place being, but you still look like you need it more than me.”
“Thanks, Roxy,” Jane says sardonically. “But yes. It’s been a long day. Goodnight, everyone.”

Excusing herself, she ducks into Roxy’s tent first. When she exits, the bath tub follows along after her, floating some inches off the ground as she leads it into her tent.

When you’re alone, Roxy leans in closer to you. “Soooo. How was it, really?” She gives you a dramatic wonk, her entire face moving with it.

“I think I’ll turn in early too,” you say, standing.

“Aww! No fun.” But she bounces to her feet too, and before you realize what’s happening, her arms are around you in a tight hug. She’s up on her toes, and you belatedly bend to make the reach easier for her.

She squeezes you, rubbing her cheek against your shoulder. “Glad you’re okay, Dirk.”

“Me too,” you admit, startled. “And you.”

“Heh, thanks.” You get a kiss on the cheek before she releases you. “And I’m teasin’ but I mean it. I hope it all went well, and if you gotta talk…”

“I’m really fine,” you assure her. “But if the urge to kiss and tell hits me, you’ll be my first port of call.”

“You’d tell Jane before me,” she says.

“Prob’ly.” You offer her a smirk. “Night, Rox.”

“Night, handsome.”

Once again, your body seems to almost rejoice in being in bed. Laying down is such an intense relief it’s a physical sensation rolling over you. Life has been fucking mayhem for a while now, and you know in the morning it will continue again.

But tonight, you sleep hard. The weird decadent depths of slumber you get on here are one of your favorite things about this island.

You sleep, and are only interrupted when you are deep in a watery dream. Movement pulls you just barely to the surface, like driftwood coming ashore.

The bed is dipping. Dense, wonderful warmth shifts in close to press flush to your spine. Arms fold around you.

“Mmrgh?” you ask.

“Done thinking,” he says before tucking his nose against your neck.

Grunting something equally insensible, you go lax and fall back into your dream, right where you left off.

In the morning, though.
In the morning, you wake late, and roll over onto your back. Rubbing your eyes, you look around, expecting… something. Something other that the sunlight illuminating the tent with muffled light.

But last night had been a great night sleep, and maybe you just imagined it. It would not be the first time you dreamt of him. It was some nocturnal associations going on. Sleep and comfort and being wrapped up in a damp, warm embrace.

Dressing, you’re relieved you woke up on your own this time, without someone trying to call you awake. That’s always embarrassing. Before, back on the mainland, something like that would never happen. This island’s made you lazy. But with that newfound laziness, it’s hard to give a damn.

Stepping out, breakfast is already in progress. On the remaining table is a wide array of fruit, a little bit of everything from the northern grove. It’s a colorful display that would fit in well with a pricy stall in the weekend bazaar.

There’s also Jake, standing with a knife in his hand over a large fish. His tongue is pressed to his upper lip in silent concentration as he drags the blade against the scales, pulling them off in strips.

“This is really hard,” he tells you after you watch him for a moment. “Life would be a breeze if humans just bucked up and figured out how to eat the rest of the fish too.”

“You’re back,” you tell him.

“Course I’m back. Suppose you don’t remember. You were plum tuckered out last night, I think you offered up two incoherent syllables before falling back into the sleep sands.”

So it was him. You nod, not trusting yourself to say anything. That he came back to you instead of to his cave makes a heat curl in your chest that has nothing to do with the usual toxin-induced arousal.

Jake lifts his eyebrows at you, smiling softly.

It drives you up the damn wall, how he makes you feel. Contentment should not dog you like this, closing in on you like a stalking pickpocket on your trail.

Also, you should probably stop anthropomorphizing things like contentment as villains. Get over yourself for ten seconds. You love him. It’s unnerving, something new building a home in your ribs and settling in roots, but tiptoeing around it forever isn’t going to help. You have to deal with it.

“This is precious,” Roxy says from her chair, beaming at you as you feel color wash over your cheeks. “Hey, you’re blushing. Jane, Jaaane, look.”

“Does someone want to help Jake with the fish?” Jane asks instead, pointedly not looking at you. She’s a merciful soul.

“I’m nearly done! I’ve got it!” He leans in further over the fish, as if you were about to steal it from him. Letting out a sharp whistle, he jerks his head to the side, towards the circle of chairs around the fireplace.

“Fine. I know when I’m not wanted,” you sigh, and go to sit down.

When it’s ready, breakfast is good. You’re already used to the prospect of raw fish; now you get to eat quietly and watch Jake peddle his uncooked wares to the witches. Predictably, Roxy caves with little cajoling. It’s only after watching both you and her eating it that Jane tries a very small
bite. Even then, she sticks to the fruit.

Small talk is sparse. You keep glancing at Jake, who keeps his head down as he eats. No one’s going to get into a big discussion while he’s there, while you’re all waiting for him to say something.

Roxy’s leg is bouncing anxiously, and you can tell she’s about to break this unspoken pact of patience to ask, when Jake puts his plate down. The sound of him clearing his throat is almost a croak, but pulls everyone’s attention regardless.

For a brief flash of luminous green, he meets your eyes. Then, he stares back down into his own lap again. His fingers toy with some of the peacock fins around his waist, idle fidgeting. “So… she said— that is, Kaleidos. Obviously. She said a lot of stuff, and I’m still sorting through some of it. Bunch of stuff I don’t really know…”

“It’s overwhelming at first,” Roxy says softly.

“Very, cripes.” He shakes his head. “But I’m… a green handed guardian. I’m supposed to protect this place. If there’s outsiders coming who’ll hurt it, I have to stop them.”

“Do you… have to fight them?” Jane asks, nearly whispering.

“No. No, she’s not really a patron of the combative arts.” You can see the relief in Jane’s face at that. “There’s ways to protect the island. The whole island.” Jake lifts his head, and still avoiding everyone’s gaze, he points out towards the ocean. “Those tall buggers out there you’ve been fussing over the meaning of? They make this sort of whatsit that covers the whole place. Closes it in nice and snug and shifts it three seconds to the left and cockeyed.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Jane asks.

“Erm. Not sure…” He taps his head with a finger. “It’s all up here but I’m still untangling the threads and winding them up into something solid. But it was the Shell.” The proper noun is audible in his voice. “It was… how we hid from dangers. Like people. Like storms.”

The light in him dims to tepid green. “Terrible storms out here. There was… a big one. A real tempest with murderous intent blowing in. Came on fast, and…” A low unhappy rumble rattles out of his chest and he stares more resolutely down at his own hands. “Apparently the skywatcher was laid up sick that day, and everyone was caught off guard. Someone was sent up to the volcano to put up the Shell. The— the doohickey to get it going is up there, see, but the wind came on too fast. They must not have made it, so the Shell didn’t go up, and everyone…”

That hangs there for a moment. No one speaks to break it.

“Seems the other lorelays were out and about, trying to help. S’not hard to sort out what happened.” He breathes in deeply, and lets it out slow. “Anyway. My little egg was all that made it through, she guesses. Or the rest of the clutch didn’t, anyway. I took my sweet time hatching, and by the time I was grown enough to know right from left, everything was already atrophied and dying.”

You have questions. It’s the first hint you’d gotten about any of this. This, and the tidal force of Kaleidos’ emotion moving through you. It’s enough to instill something in you, a loaned desperation to know how the hell this all happened. Just how it’d fallen apart.

But Jake looks fragile as glass, so instead you think about what to say here. What will make it better.
You’re beat to the punch: Jane asks in a kind voice, “How can we help?”

Jake looks up, and finally the cloudy expression on his face brightens as he smiles. “Glad you asked.”

Chapter End Notes

We're in the home stretch.

Sorry this one took so long. Holiday season is hellacious for me, so update will slow down a bit until it's over.
You ask:

“What is the Shell?”

“You ever find one of those insect critters in your abode and decide you don’t want to smash them, so you just put a teacup over them and carry them to safety?” Jake says. “It’s like that. The Shell is the teacup, and when it comes on, the whole place just moves to a safer spot.”

At the table, Jane’s busy unrolling one of her maps of the island, using smooth lake rocks at the corners to hold it open. Maps are expensive, both in the financial sense and the aetheric work needed to make them, so she doesn’t even look up from carefully smoothing the map out when she asks, “That sounds like it could be metaphorical or literal, given the scale of the power on this island. Do you know which it is?”

“I don’t think the island is up and moving to float on a different bit of ocean, no,” Jake says. “More that it’s moving to… a different ocean? The whole smudge of land just won’t be here for any nosy newcomers or storms to hit.”

“Are we seriously saying that it’s easier to slide to some… other realm than to move the island?” you ask.

“Yes,” Roxy and Jane answer in unison.

“Somebody’s never run afoul of a sidhe,” Roxy says with a grin. “I mean, for humans alone, it’s super hard to do that dimensional hop. But human magic can call upon outside forces to do the shift for them. Especially when they’re powered by a fuckin’ volcano.”

“We need to know how that works too,” Jane says. “What do you know about the generator? How close is it to catastrophic failure?”

Jake draws his tail into his lap, drumming his fingers against it as he cricket-hums. “Well. Kaleidos, she taught the humans how to build it a long time ago. It’s never been left alone like this, so it’s been building up and up and up.”

“It’s gotta store it all in the stone, in the earth. So, it generates power from the fire. Lava’s about as pure of a source for that element as you can get,” Roxy says. “And earth’s the best for retaining that kind of storage charge.”

“Now, that is a matter of some debate--” Jane says.

“Nope, no, nope! This isn’t Elemental Theory And Practice, Jane, zip your lips!”

You roll your eyes and look at Jake. “Go on.”

“In a perfect set of circs, the Shell would be thrown up more often. Storm, high winds, shifty stuff on the horizon, choppy seas. They slapped it up as needed, few times a year. In typhoon season, it’d only last a day, maybe less, since it’d not have time to gather much of a charge,” Jake explains.
“Uh, wait,” Roxy says. “What? That can’t be right.”

Jake gives her a wide-eyed look, but shrugs. “Well, it is!”

“You’re sayin’ the longer it’s left to sit without putting the Shell up, the longer the Shell lasts? Like…” She blows out a breath, sitting back in her seat, head tipped back to look at the canopy above. “Ooooh my god, it’s like the-- the bubble I put up for that storm a while back! You-- so the locals could put the Shell up, but couldn’t take it back down?”

“Hm, no. Not as such, no.”

Jane and Roxy share a look that you can only think of as scared shitless. “So,” you venture carefully. “The generator’s nearly overflowing with pent up power, and either it’s going to destroy itself or… we put the Shell up and run it down. That doesn’t seem too bad.”

“We’re not talking about days here, Dirk,” Jane says. “We’re…. talking about a lot longer.” Her voice is small, volume crushed under the weight of worry.

“Still, it’s our best option, isn’t it?” Roxy asks. “That’s what Callie wants, right? For us to put the Shell up?”

You nod. “Makes sense. It'll, what? Hide the island? Move it? Protect it somehow, and it'll cool off the volcano.”

Jane finally leaves the map alone and rejoins your little circle around the cold coals. “As nice as the encapsulation of the situation is, we’re dealing with a grave matter.” She looks at Jake. “How is the Shell summoned?”

He thinks about it for a moment, drumming his fingers more animatedly against his tail. “How indeed… how how how… Oh, there’s a chamber halfway up the volcano! Someone’s got to go in and set it off. But that’s only after we fix up some of the pillars out there.” He nods vaguely towards the ocean, to the pillars standing out of the salt water. “They’ve been left without any keepers for so long, she figures some of the prisms need to be replaced.” Frowning, he leans his face into his hands. “I know I’ve got the how-to up here in the noggin, she filled it up with so much stuff! I’ve just got to find it…”

“But still! This is some extremely dangerous thaumaturgy! We’re talking almost pure fire magic, translating it to some kind of water magic, moving a ton of energy through these basalt structures, and letting loose a conjuration we don’t even understand!”

“Then, there’s the generator itself,” Roxy mutters.

“Exactly! If the way to set this off is in the mountain, any mage who gets close to that is going to risk their… their aetheric connection at best and their life at worst,” Jane goes on, tense and unhappy.


“Dirk,” Jane says, awed and nervous all at once.

“The lake water!” Jake crows, straightening up. “I’m pretty sure we make the shiny discs from the lake water. It’s… not something I really understand myself, but I think it’s human magic anyway, so!”

“This is not filling me with much confidence,” Jane says.
“Stop being a negative Nancy,” Roxy says.

Immediately, Jake perks up. Wordplay is his primary language some days. “A Debbie downer.”

“Hmmm… Oh, oh, I got it! A Calamity Jane!” Roxy leans over, hand extended for Jake to clap triumphantly. “There it is. I knew it was there.”

“Congratulations, both of you,” Jane says.

“Thanks. Anyway, like, we can’t let anything bad happen to the island, so this is the plan. Jake will tell us how to make these prisms to fix the pillars,” when she points to him, Jake smiles and waves, “then fly out and put them up where they need to be. And Dirk, being most likely to survive it, will go turn on the Shell.”

That sounds like a plan to you. Even if it involves walking into a volcano, you’re willing to do it if it saves the island.

Jane doesn’t look so convinced though. “That will make our big getaway difficult…” She presses her hands together and taps them against her mouth. “We’ll need the Acorn ready to go, fully packed with what we need, and get that done before initiating the Shell.”

Without thinking about it, you glance at Jake.

He’s already looking at you, expression placid as the lake at dawn. As you look at him, his lips curl up, just a little.

“We don’t need it all,” Roxy says. “And we’re on a mega time crunch, with the Trust on their way and all. Given how long it takes to get here… shit, we need to…” She stands up, looking around the camp, then out towards the temple. “Figure we need to get all the prep done today, and in the morning we get the Shell up first thing. Any longer than that, we’re risking them seeing the island go poof or whatever it’s gonna do. We wanna leave no trace.”

“That all… sounds fine to me,” Jane says slowly, still tapping her mouth anxiously. “And you’re right. We can leave some things…” She looks at Jake. “If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all!” He grins, and it’s boisterous and cheerful in a way that’s going to tip Jane and Roxy off if he’s not careful. You try to send him that message with a subtle glare, and immediately his gleaming expression tempers and dims. “I-- I think, when it all comes down and the chips are counted, it’ll be nice to have something to remember you by.”

“I knew that garden was a good idea,” Jane says. “Anyway, let’s go pack up what we really need, then reconvene for… making prisms out of lake water, I guess!” She offers up what’s a tenuous, shaky smile. “We can do this. I’ve never done a-- a daring getaway before, but between the three of us…”

Roxy knocks the back of her hand against Jane’s leg. At the same time, Jake looks cautiously up at her, lips parted around a quiet watery chirp.

For a moment, you clench your hand to resist the urge to reach out. It’s habit, the need to keep things private, secret from your friends for fear of what they might do about it or think of you. Then, you remember that ship has sailed and hit rocks and sank to the ocean floor already. Nothing stands in the way of you pressing your palm over Jake’s shoulder.

Jane’s never been strong in the face of peer pressure. “Of course what I meant was the four of us. Far be it from me to imply Jake did not have a substantial role in this.”
It doesn’t exactly sound like a compliment, but it’s good enough for everyone to split up with the intention of gathering things up. Cookpans and the chilled ration box are left out, determined to be the last things stowed. Roxy shrinks down the tables and chairs with a few brassy taps at her stenotype, and Jane picks them up to put them into the sectioned box with the rest of the dollhouse furniture.

It’s easy to argue to leave the canopy and tents themselves; with the Shell up, there’ll be no danger of them blowing away in another storm. Jane takes this as sound logic, to your relief.

Roxy catches Jane’s hand and tugs her off into Jane’s tent to see to essentials there. The break is a relief, and you take the opportunity to duck into your own tent.

As you do, you stop and hold the flap up for Jake, who is predictably right on your heels. Letting go, the canvas falls and lands on his tail. He spins, and chirps at you.

“Sorry,” you murmur, and go to sit on the chest at the foot of your bed. A sigh unfolds out of you, and you slump.

You must look pretty dejected, because Jake pads over to you and gives you a completely unsolicited hug. His arm pats your back briskly, tap-tap-tap, before he leans back and lets you go.

It’s an unpracticed gesture, but heartfelt. Which sums up Jake pretty well, you think. Excited but uncertain. The feeling isn’t completely foreign to you; lately, you’ve been far out of your element but nonetheless drawn in. Everything feels new after a life of settling for the realities of your existence.

He has to be going through something similar, caught up in the novelty of it all.

That’ll wear off eventually. Then what?

You try to think about it, quantify it. When will Jake stop being a goddamn marvel?

The tent is filled with the familiar pitch of his idle humming, and you feel it like sunlight in your chest. Loaded with more sap than an entire pine forest, you can’t imagine ever tiring of that. The sound does something to you, rings through you in a way that you can’t imagine getting used to, even after glowing fins and a long green tail and double dicks become commonplace.

You lift your head to watch him as he examines your bed with a furrowed brow. His hands bounce against the mattress as he bats at it, then he lifts the entire thing up from the wooden frame, weighing it in his hands before dropping it back down.

“Having fun?” you ask.

“Thinking.” He pats the bed again. “I bet we could move this into my cave. It’ll just take a damn week for me to drain it down. It’ll be a sodden mess before then, but it’s doable, and I’ll put in the work if it gets you to put a sock in it about my fine moss bed.” He taps a finger against the bedframe. “But do we need this bit, I wonder? That’ll be an absolute pain in the ass to fit in unless we take it apart somehow.”

Things are suddenly very real. You wet your lips, trying to calm the way your heart starts racing.

“So, we’re… doing this,” you say quietly.

Jake stops messing with the bed and looks at you. “Oh. Well.” He climbs up onto the mattress, and reclines across it. His tail drags onto the floor, tip flicking. “It’s not nice to assume, but…” He smiles, candid as dawn light.
“Yeah.” You want to throw up all the worried, half-crazed what ifs and guesses that are fluttering around and multiplying in your chest. You take a deep, steadying breath instead. It catches a few times in your throat. “Fuck.”

Jake lays down, his head resting on the blankets, his eyes tipped up to watch you. “It’ll be alright. Better than, actually.”

“Yeah, for now,” you say. “But if they’re right about the Shell, it sounds like this is going to be a long haul. Are you okay with that? You’ve been here on your own for your whole life, but this…” You pause to suck in another breath. “Jake. If I stay here… That’s not a bell we can unring. You’ll be stuck with me, and I-- I can wing some of this. My life has been a lot of making shit up and getting through rough situations. But living here? Long term?”

“I’ll help you,” Jake says with simple conviction.

For how long, you want to ask. You swallow it. Jake’s watching you, eyes green and bright and unblinkingly focused on your face. God. Picking your words carefully, you tell him, “I’ve never had to depend on someone else before.”

He rolls full on his back and reaches up to touch your face. His thumb strokes your jaw down to your chin. “Me either.”

Right. God. You nod, and watch him smile up at you, upside down.

“My pretty thing,” Jake says, glowing pale yellow for you. “I’m so glad I found you. This is much better.”

You put your hand over his, pressing his palm against your skin. Holding him there, you kiss his wrist. “That’s how it is with you. You’re just… Damn, aren’t you a smug asshole about it. Always getting your way.”

Jake purses his lips for a second, but snickers at you. “All those words sounded quite mean, but you’ve got a smidgen of a smile there, Dirk. So I think I’m doing alright.” He lifts his hand and gives you a brisk pat on the cheek. “Now come on, we best pretend to pack up something for your alleged daring getaway!”

Everything is a team effort, which feels duplicitous to you, considering how this is all going to end.

Jane and Roxy both levitate the remaining essentials and guide them up the hill to the Acorn to stow them away. Jake helps, carrying the chest from your room and trilling irritably at anyone who tries to take it from him, insisting he “has two hands and grit to spare.”

You follow along, carrying comparatively lighter shit. All and all, the Acorn is packed in two trips, and no one is the wiser. Your trunk was mostly empty, with you stashing most of your possessions that you bothered to bring in with the items deemed worth leaving behind.

The airship had been packed to the metaphorical gills when you’d flown to Southern Pacifica. Now, with so much left behind, it’s not nearly as full.
You figure the Trust can add it to your tab.

While Jake and the witches head down to the lake for the next task in getting things ready, you remain in the shadow of the ship. It’s been months since you really did a proper maintenance check on the Acorn. Now, it’s more important than ever. You trust the girls to manage the return flight, but you’re the only one with real pilot’s experience. If you’re leaving them to the Acorn’s mercies, you’re gonna wrangle them to be as tender of mercies as absolutely possible.

The balloon by now has filled, the ship anchored but gently drifting with the breeze. There’s enough levity for you to crawl partially under the hull, checking the ballast, ensuring it still moves smoothly. The wood that makes the body of the ship is treated to endure the elements, but you still check the siding for any signs of warping. Then, inside, the most important of the ribs. No cracks, no worrisome creaks.

As you’re surveying the ship, you remember that fucking whistle that drove you mad on the way here. There’s sealant in with the ship supplies, and you take a few minutes to spread it around the windows in the cockpit. If they’re flying back alone, you don’t want to inflict that goddamn sound on them.

Finally, you place the map of the island, Jane’s prize that brought you here what feels like a lifetime ago, into the brassy grasp of the navigator. It looks over the southeastern shore of the island, and the bottle ink blue ocean beyond. The horizon is a flat delineation between water and sky.

Somewhere in the crisp line, if you were to pull it apart like the sections of an orange, would be the mainland.

You don’t know if you will ever see it again.

You don’t know if you care to.

When you’ve finished meditating on that distant horizon line, you finally let yourself down from the egress hatch. There is a salt-tinged wind rolling off the water, and the sun goes in and out between sparse clouds. It’s enough that gooseflesh pops across your arms. Stroking your skin, you stand there and watch how the lake moves with the wind, and the three figures down by the dock.

This, you think, is home.

By the lake, Jake stands in waist-deep water, hands akimbo, watching. Sitting on the stone pier, Roxy and Jane are already at work.

Jane has her trident clenched in both her hands; it stands tall between her knees, the forked pitch high over her head. Slowly, she spins it, a few rotations to the left, a dozen clockwise, then back again.

Between her and Jake, the lake water pulls upward. Up, like a reverse drain, a tendril reaching upward. As it extends, its shape wobbles terribly, and Jane’s hands freeze on her trident. Concentration writ clearly on her brow, she draws up water, a rising peak.

As it reaches eye level, there’s an avalanche, and the whole slope drops back down, so suddenly it kicks up a single ripple of water.

“Fffffffudge custard,” Jane says bitterly, knocked her forehead against her trident. “Why does it have to be water? Water is such a f-- an anathema to my magic.”

Jake shrugs, and bends. His fingertips lower into the water, and his hands swish around a bit. In
the wake of Jane’s ruined watercraft, a dripping sphere lifts, out of the lake to hover in the air a foot up.

“Well, why can’t you do it then!” Jane asks, exasperated.

Jake stands, and the sphere hangs for two seconds before dissipating, its form falling apart and splashing back down. “Can’t. It’s human magic. That… transmorg. Thing.”

“Transmorgithing, that’s it. Top marks, mudskipper.” Roxy grins, before finally catching sight of you. “Hey. How’s our ship?”

“It’s ready to go. How’s our prisms?”

“Hush up,” Jane says, tapping the end of her trident against the pier.

“Great,” you say. Taking off your shoes and socks, you roll up your trousers above your knee and wade out as far as you can without getting clothes wet. “Manipulating water still a pain in the ass?”

“It’s like trying to apply paint to ice. It just slips right off!”

Jake sighs loudly and hunches down, only his head and shoulders out of the water. “I don’t know how to help you there. You have to do it yourselves.”

“Your turn,” Jane tells Roxy.

“Aw, shit, all my talents are like… theory and shit. Fine.” Roxy picks up her stenotype and sets it on her knees. When it’s situated, she grabs a handful of Jane’s skirt and uses it to rub down the metal bar, ignoring Jane’s squawk of annoyance.

“How’s that work, the typewriter?” Jake asks.

“It’s like a simplified typewriter,” you tell him quietly. “She has symbols that resonate with her on the keys, and when she presses them in specific patterns, the typebars hit the brassy piece where the paper should be, and makes a noise. And that makes magic, I guess.”

Roxy snorts. “Not an awful simplification of my very interesting and strange focus. I use it to tell the world what I want, and then believe really hard.”

“And your payment to the firmament for its favor is your hearing, apparently,” Jane says.

“Sorry, what?” Roxy jibes, then starts typing.

It’s a strange process almost completely dissimilar to your own work on the typewriter. She presses keys together, her fingers positioning themselves between each press. The bars strike the metal backing with rhythm, first gradual, then picking up speed like a locomotive. The collision of metal on metal is loud, but eventually the notes overlap and become something palatable to the ear.

You’ve always had an ear for music, and are so busy trying to pick out a melody in the mayhem, you nearly miss it as the water starts to ripple and pull upward.

Roxy gets to about the same point of pulled water that Jane had before she seems to miss a note, and it instantly breaks form. All her process is gone in half a second, and Roxy growls in anger.

“I got it! I got this, okay, I just need another shot.” She puts her stenotype aside and starts to
stretch her hands, her fingers. “Just gimme a sec.”

“Cracking your knuckles is bad for you,” Jake says. “I read it in one of those books.”

“Shut up, Jake,” Roxy says briskly, finally shaking out her hands before trying again.

The air rings with the abrupt TANG! of each key press, but right from the start they are faster. The haphazard melody comes quickly, and now that you’re paying attention, you can watch as the surface of the lake almost bubbles, affected upon by the sheer determination in Roxy’s focused, grimacing expression. She doesn’t look up from her banging and clattering, drawing the water up until it peaks. Then the peak widens, filling out like a bubble being blown.

A sphere, like Jake’s before, floats in the air, and after a few seconds, the peaked wave lowers, leaving the sphere in the air.

Without pausing for a second, Roxy lets out a strained, “Aaaaahhhhh!” noise, pure distress.

“Okay, good, hold it there, Roxy!” Jane climbs to her feet, squaring her shoulders and pointing the tines of her trident at the sphere.

Beside you, Jake grins, watching it all like a show.

From there, you’re not certain what’s happening. You have the distinct impression you’re not seeing something that everyone else can. But you can see the water convulse and ripple in strange ways as Jane directs it. It slowly flattens out, a wobbly oblong shape hovering there.

It shrinks, further and further, the water almost freezing. But it’s not ice taking over, but a transformation to glass. Or, to resin. Color swirls and darkens the clear water as it begins to lose its fluidity, going hard and rigid in degrees.

Between the two of them, they create a discus.

As soon as it’s fully formed, Roxy yelps and misses her beat with another loud clang, and the discus falls into the water.

“Oh shit!” Jane yelps, jumping back in shock.

Roxy puts her hands on her face and falls back on the pier with a hoarse cry.

“That was brilliant,” Jake says, and frog-hops over to where the thing fell. His hands drift around in the water for a moment before lifting. Across his palms lies a perfect, shimmering discus, like a rainbow lens.

“Devilishly good work, you two!” he says brightly. “Gonna need a few more though.”

Jane sighs, and starts walking down the pier. “I’m grabbing a drink. This is going to take a while.”

From where she lays on the stones, Roxy flings a hand into the air. “Two handsome boys layin’ hands on? Hell yes, I should overexert myself more often.”

With a gasp of delight, Roxy sits up. “Two handsome boys layin’ hands on? Hell yes, I should overexert myself more often.”
Making the resin discs takes the rest of the day. Each one seems more difficult than the last; the time between Jane beginning to form the flattened plane and its completion gets longer with each attempt. On the fourth, Roxy loses control halfway through the process and they lose the entire thing.

You expect them to snap at each other for that, but both witches just sit down in dull silence, catching their breaths.

That’s when you decide to go make dinner. There’s nothing you can do to help here, and watching Jane and Roxy struggle isn’t aiding the process in any way. Instead, you crack open the ration chest and empty the entire thing, resolving to spend all of it for this last night. The last time all of you are together.

Jake has a habit of following you around like a stray, but for once he sticks around. When you look back to the lake, you see the girls taking a rest, and Jake floating in front of Jane, his hands on her knees as he talks to her, well out of your earshot.

Roxy’s head moves in that way you know means she’s rolling her eyes, just a second before Jane pushes Jake off. But he resurfaces still glowing warm gold, so you think it’s alright. Lacking the bite of their earlier interactions.

It’s good, that they’ll part on better terms. It’d be rough, if Jake and Jane ended this still angry.

By the time they’re done, it’s getting truly dark. Jake carries four discs up to the canopy, laying them in the grass. Jane carries two herself, and does the same.

Roxy beelines for you and slumps onto the floor, sitting by the fire. As soon as she’s seated, she falls on her side, groaning. “My arms are absolutely killin’ me, Strider.”

“I never want to hear,” Jane says to her, “another word about my focus being boring. It’s sure more functional in the longterm than yours.”

“Well how fuckin’ often do we gotta work on a strenuous spell for hours on end!” Roxy replies, whining. “Jaaaane, be nice. Say my focus is cool.”

Jane dusts off her hands and joins you, sitting more primly at your side. “Anyway. If we need more than those, we’ll have to make them tomorrow. It’s just too much exertion right now.”

Roxy whines again, louder.

Jake closes the circle, sitting at your side. “We might not need all of them! I’m sure it’ll be all copacetic once we get started tomorrow.” One of Roxy’s arms flops against his arm; without blinking, he links his fingers in hers and pulls her closer, rubbing the heel of his hand slowly up and down the inside of her arm. “What I’m not completely clear on is how in the great green globe you’re going to get them in place.”

“Flight,” Jane says sourly. “We’ll swallow down all the remaining energy tonics we have and fly out.”

“Don’t wanna,” Roxy mumbles.
Jake blindly pats her hair as he looks at Jane. “Can you fly? That’d be a funny trick.”

“And a fiendishly difficult one. We don’t tend to do it outside of emergency situations. Which, we’re sort of in, so.” Jane shakes her head tiredly. “One thing at a time. How about dinner?”

Dinner is about everything you could fit into the skillet, left on the fire as you diligently stirred it. There are carrots and taro chunk, browning alongside blackened fish doused with as many spices as you could feasibly apply, and more of the greens Jane brought back from the jungle cooked down. It smells like a savory mess, hopefully in a good way, and you section it off into fourths, pushing piles of steaming food onto everyone’s plates.

“Use a fork,” you tell Jake as he reaches out to use his fingers. “It’s hot as a Texan sidewalk and you won’t enjoy that on your skin.”

He chirps at you, but listens nonetheless, picking up a fork.

“Oh, oh, hang on! I can’t believe I forgot!” Jane picks herself up and ducks into her tent. Through the canvas, she shouts, “I saved something just for tonight!”

Roxy sits up. “Oh shit. Is it what I hope it is? Because I can use a fucking drink.”

Jane returns, her hand clutched around a bottle. “As a matter of fact, Dr. Lalonde, you may have a drink!” She lifts it. “Celebratory wine? It’s… I meant it to help us close out our expedition, but assumed it’d all be under better terms. Still…”

“Sounds good to me,” you say. “I’ll grab mugs.”

All in all, it’s definitely not the worst meal you’ve had, though the only indication from your friends are muffled sounds of enjoyment through big bites of food. Which was the idea; you know big magic makes for big appetites.

You eat as much as you can before setting your plate aside and watching them, sipping your generous mug of wine.

Fuck. This is really it. Maybe you should… tell them. But the fear that somehow they will stop you dominates, and you don’t know how to risk it.

Instead, you take another sip and say, “Right. Tomorrow, we get up bright and early. Pack up the last things we want to bring. Then, split up. You’ll repair the pillars. Jake and I will go find the Shell mechanism.”

Jake bobs his head. “I know where it is! Just got to worry about overgrowth in the path, but otherwise it’s just an annoying trek up the volcano.”

Jane pauses to swallow her bite of food, two fingers wiping her mouth. “I really wish you didn’t have to handle that part of the plan. Even with the mitigating factor of your nobility, it could be dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“But it’s a logistical nightmare. We’ll have to put all the glasses in place, then prepare for takeoff without you.” She chases that statement with a gulp from her mug. “I haven’t a clue how to do that!”

That’s something you’ve been thinking about. “Take off is easy,” you tell her. “Haven’t I always said that? Anyone can take off in one of those puddlejumpers. They’re light, so they only need the
one anchor to stay grounded. One of you has to pull that line, then you can coast off.”

“What, right into the sea?” Roxy asks. She’s got her own mug held in both hands, the heavy stoneware cradled against her lap as she looks at you. Her gaze is intent in a way that belies her exhaustion and earlier antics.

“No,” you say, meeting her eyes. You don’t know what else to do. “You pull up, obviously. Gradual ascent until you’re at coasting altitude.”

“Yeah? Then what?”

Jane sighs, refilling her mug from the bottle. “Does it matter? Dirk’s the better pilot anyway, and I don’t think tomorrow will be the best time for you to challenge that, Roxy.”

But she’s still looking at you. For a moment, you think you’ve been had, that your small piece of subterfuge is about to hit a wall.

She keeps looking at you, waiting.

So you explain the hypothetical. If Roxy were flying, what would be important to keep in mind. That the trip back to the mainland will be longer than the trip here but that there’s a better chance of a backwind propelling the airship along. That if the balloon should malfunction, a featherfall charm will activate to bring it down safely to the water. That it’s the landing that’s the hard part, really, but even if shit flies off the handle, all she’d have to do is wing the ship over the Trust’s airfield and let the magitechnicians draw it down. That it’ll be easy. Even without you, it’ll be easy.

You don’t say that last part out loud.

When you run out of advice and reassurances, Roxy smiles, sways towards Jane. “You still awake there, Janesy?”

In the meantime, Jane has unearthed her journal. She’s laid back against a pillow, reclining with her book open on the ground in front of her and her mug half-full a few inches aside. She’s scratching at the page and chewing her lip.

“Jane.” Roxy reaches out and prods her leg. “Jaaaaney.”

“I’m counting, thank you,” she says, blowing out an annoyed raspberry at Roxy before continuing.

“And here I thought we were bondin’,” Roxy says. “Silly ol’ me, huh?”

“Shh!” Jane writes something in her book, and circles it. “Three years!”

“Hooray! What’s three years?” Roxy asks.

“Based on our obserations and on the… the data and what we learned from Kalay-- Callie.” She coughs and takes a sip of her wine. “Three years and a handful of months, given a certain margin for error.” She sits up and gives you a wink. “Also just some good old fashioned feeling things out.”

“What’s three years, Jane?” you ask, echoing Roxy.

“The approximate time before the Shell comes down.” Jane lifts her hands and beams. “I don’t really need to know about the airship given I have you two! So I focused on something…”
interesting!” Her hands drop back into her lap. “It’s a very vague number, of course, buuuuut… I mean, if this buster here,” she points at Jake, “Makes sure he goes and uses the monoments… monoliths in the jungle, that’ll speed things up.”

“Are you…” Your heart’s in your throat. “Thinking about coming back?”

Her smile vanishes like a candle blown out. “I dunno. I’m… trying not to think about what we’re going to face back at home.” She glances at her journal. “How much work it’ll take to keep the island a secret. I don’t…” Shaking her head, she sighs. “What do you miss about it? I-- I miss the coffee cakes from the bakery on the corner, down Wilmina Lane? Did you all ever get breakfast from there?”

“No, god,” Roxy says, laughing and reaching out to tuck Jane’s hair behind her ear. “Uh, my breakfast is coffee, no cake. But I loved the carts outside at noon? They got the best grub. Sometimes literally, when the trolls are out with their grub-and-slaw on a hot bun.”

Jake goes vinegary green and sticks out his tongue. “I hope that’s not what it sounds like.”

“It’s not that bad,” you tell him.

“Miss Vodka Mewtini,” Roxy admits with a sad smile. “My neighbor’s been watching her. And if anything happened to me, they’d take her in. Not that it will, but… you know.”

What will you miss, besides the obvious, besides them?

“Diiirk,” Roxy prompts.

You drag a hand through your hair, trying to pick a decent idea. You have to say something. “The basement speakeasies. Sound of seagulls. Picking fights with hotshot university duelists on rainy days.”

“Dirk!” Jane titters, head back as she snickers. “You never.”

“Comets and cantrips, Jane, he does. That’s how we met!”

“You met in Ithaca!”

“Yeah! After watching him lure some hothead firebrand out right into a downpour before clocking his card!” Without further ado, Roxy starts from the beginning, telling Jane the story with several major embellishments. You don’t correct her, just enjoy the story.

As you sit there, something presses against you. Glancing down, you see Jake’s tail curling around you. When you look at him, he’s listening attentively to Roxy’s story. But his tail presses more firmly to your side.

The fire dies out slowly. The evening has passed into a full night. As you blow out the last two lamps left off the ship, Roxy helps Jane to her feet.

“Noooo, no no, wait. Jake. Jake. ” Jane reaches past Roxy to take Jake’s hand. “Listen. This place. It’s the most… wonderful thing that’s ever been mine. Even jus’ for a little while. And you!” She shakes his hand for emphasis. “You can’t go hide in the lake, Jake, you have to go do stuff and keep it safe and help the flowers and things!”

“Oookay, come here.” Roxy gets Jane’s arm over her shoulders, another around her waist. “Bedtime, Miss Fussypants. The island’s gonna be okay.”
Jane mumbles something, but lets Roxy lead her away to her tent.

You are still thinking of what to say to Roxy when she comes back out and walks right up to you. Before you can catch up with what’s happening, her arms are around your neck, and you have to brace yourself with a step back to avoid falling.

“Rox--”

“I know,” she says breathily in your ear, “what you’re gonna do. And if Jane knew, she’d stop you.”

Shit. You go tense all over, sucking in a gasp. “Roxy. I don’t know--”

“Yes, yeah you do, Dirk.” She tightens around you, her face pressed against your shoulder. All the pink has bled out of her hair, and it’s just frizzy blonde getting in your face now. You carefully blow it away from your mouth. It makes her laugh, and she lets go, sinking back onto her heels, her hands against your chest. “She’d try to stop you.”

Your brain catches up with what’s being said to you. “But you won’t.”

She laughs, tight and shaking. “No. Fuck no. God, what do I tell you, Dirk? No, man, you gotta come back to the mainland where we’re all probably gonna lose our jobs and be in deep doo-doo besides? And you, shits gonna be way harder for you than sweet moneybags drunk girl over there and my fine, super-employable ass? Nah, I… I get it.” She gives you a watery smile. “I get it. You got that back home, or… this, here. Here with your froggy beau.”

“But you know, it’s not because…” You put your hands over hers, rubbing her knuckles softly. “It’s not that I don’t want to be there. Or, christ. I don’t, but not without you two. Right?”

“Don’t hurt yourself, Dirk.” She slaps your chest once and steps back, pivoting cleanly on her heel. “And you.” When she crooks her finger, Jake steps in cautiously. She crosses the distance, leaning up into Jake’s space and jabbing his chest with her finger. “You! If you don’t take care of him and keep him safe, pretty boy, I swear to the stars, I will come back someday, somehow, and I will turn you into fashionable footwear, you hear?” She inhales, her sharp poke becoming a stroke along Jake’s collarbone. Under her fingers, the spots gleam and glow. “This man… I have never loved a man like I love this man, do you understand me?”

Jake only nods, and leans down to rest his head against hers. Like this, her back is to you, and you watch her shoulders shake for a moment, the abortive little sounds in her throat. Moving in, Jake wraps himself around her. With his long arms, she is nearly engulfed, her head tucked under his chin, golden light surrounding them and a low hum filling the air. For her part, she lets him, and seems to sink into the embrace.

Roxy takes a breath, the noise stuffy. “And! And, you better get over yourself and go see Callie. Don’t leave her ‘lone, you scaredy-frog. She loves you too.”

Jake nods and plants a kiss on her forehead. “It was a treat to meet you, Roxy. I’ll miss you like the dickens.”

This is it. Goodbye. Even if you can’t say the word.

Roxy rubs her face free of tears and gives you a last kiss on the cheek. She doesn’t say the word either. Instead, she just says, “Goodnight, boys,” and retires to bed.
In your own tent, you undress slowly. Jake upends a canteen of water over his head, rubbing it in until he’s damp.

It’s dark, and quiet. The sound of your own breathing is the loudest thing to your ears.

You take the time to smooth out the blankets, mussed from when Jake sprawled on them earlier. There’s a tap on your hip, and Jake’s low inquisitive chirp.

“Yeah,” you whisper, climbing in. “Long day tomorrow.”

Without a pause, Jake fits himself in with you. This part, you’re used to. It’s muscle memory as you lift your leg to let his tail in, relaxing into Jake’s hold, wrapped up tight and warm. His mouth presses lightly to the spot between your shoulder blades. You can feel his relieved exhale fanning over your skin.

Tomorrow will be a long day.

You shut your eyes.

Chapter End Notes

/sniffles

We come to the end.

Oh, for the curious, I wrote a bonus post about TWYCC and its magic system. A lot of the workings are obscured by the POV and Dirk’s understanding, so I wanted to write out how it Actually Works. You can read it over here if you are curious.
You wake on the dawn of what is meant to be your final day on the island.

Which, alright, if the whole volcano thing breaks bad, it might technically be your last. But in actuality, you rouse when Jake crawls out of bed, freeing you to roll onto your back and stretch out across the mattress. Immediately, you regret this, because Jake forgot to sap the damp out of the sheets, and they cling uncomfortably to your skin. Ugh.

You must make some sound of annoyance, because Jake returns to your side. “What are you grousing about already, you recalcitrant nightingale?”

“Wet sheets and your goddamn vernacular choices.” You put your hands over your face and sigh deeply. “Is it morning?”

Jake crouches down, folding his arms on the bedside and resting his chin there. “Hm. Someone’s already up and about. Not sure which of them. It’s probably close to time for breakfast. I was going to gather some food up in a few shakes.”

You loll your head to the side, looking at him. “Yeah. It’s going to be a day.”

Jake lifts an eyebrow, pressing his cheek against his arm, holding your gaze. “I know. It’ll be terrible to see them off. But if Jane’s inebriated hold over maths is right, there’s a chance we might meet again, I think? Just a fair bit of waiting for that day.”

Three years, maybe. While you lay there, the idea finally unfurls and shows itself. Three years is a long fucking time. You’ll be thirty-one, past that arbitrary but affecting milestone. You’ll miss birthdays and holidays and the small pieces between. A stretch of life with your friends you’ll never get back.

You let out a long, slow breath. None of this is new information.

But also, three years on this island. And that assumes it’d only be three years. You have no intention of leaving, and even so the opportunity to leave might not come, depending on how things at the Crocker Trust shook out. A noble sure as hell wasn’t going to build an airship in the intermeaning time.

“Are you sure about this?” you ask Jake, unable to smother the doubtful voice in your head fast enough.

“Sure about what?”

“About this,” you say. “This day gets started, we’re going to set off the Shell and the girls are leaving, and it’s goin’ to be just us after that. Have you thought about that?”

Jake lets out a huffed laugh. “Have I…? By the salt-blasted sea, Dirk, I’ve thought of little else for weeks now.” You blink at that, and the candor. Oh. “What, did you think I hadn’t?”

You try to recover. “No, fuck, obviously. But like, have you…” Jake is staring at you with something almost smug in his expression, like he’s caught you out. Which, not inaccurate.
“But have I really thought about it?” He’s such an ass, smirking at you while you flounder.

“Fuck off, yes, have you? You’ve been alone all your life, and you’re going to be stuck with me, Jake.”

He sits up, doing that cute headtilt thing at you. “Are you worried I’m going to regret that? That’d be a nasty trick, leaving you holding that bag.”

“Fuck, nevermind. I’m just…”

Jake sighs, loud and dramatic, before getting up and climbing back onto the bed. There’s not an excess of room for him, so he just frames your body with his knees and leans over you, his tail dragging off the edge and onto the floor. You instinctively reach up, hands against his chest, bracing.

“You quiet down now,” he says. It’d be a little irritating, being scolded like that, but he takes hold of your arms, pulls until you sit up. There is no room, and you wind up tugged against his chest, forced to wrap your arms around him and press your palms against his shoulder blades lest you fall. It seems he wants to situate you like so, tucking you against him, his chin resting on your head. As soon as he’s satisfied, he wraps you up and hums.

It’s struck brass hanging in his chest, loud and insistent as it vibrates into you. Like always, there is a second where the hum is uncomfortable before you relax and let it wash through you. Then, it’s just nice. It’s always nice, like this, how it melts away your tension.

For a moment, you wonder if that’s purposeful. Now that you know so much of him is by some strange, avid design, that the way he fits with you is almost ordained, maybe that includes the very sounds he makes. You have no idea, but it wouldn’t shock you in the slightest.

“See?” Jake asks breathlessly.

“Hm? See what?” All you see is a few of his spots where they press against your cheek and nose.

Above you, Jake snorts. “Maybe not. That’s the funny thing about stealing your odd mess of language. It was eye-opening to be sure, with all its little boxes and labels and dichotomous hailstorm of ideas, all the this but not that and that but also the other.” He rubs his nose into your hair. “But you can’t tally up and outline this with all your fancy words, can you?”

You almost shove your foot in your mouth asking what before realizing it’s humming into you right now. His own strange tactile declarations.

Jake nuzzles into you. “Maybe time for some turnabout, pretty. Because I am sure as spades that your tricky vocabulary can’t line up right to say it.” He pauses, then admits. “Or, not in any way I can finagle. I’m never going to be a poet.”

“You do fine, if a bit colorfully.” Indulging yourself, you press harder against him and breathe. “Alright. So we’re doing this.”

“It’ll be alright. I’ve got a feeling.”

“Oh,” you intone dully. “A feeling. I remember the last time you had a feeling.”

“A good time was had by all, last time I had a feeling! My feelings are swell!” He pushes you off him, back down onto the bed, and chirps indignantly at you. “Come on, you lackadaisical worry stone, we’ve got one hell of a day ahead of us.”
“Nothing you say makes sense,” you tell him gravely. “But fine. Let’s go.”

Outside, Jane is putting her dollhouse furniture into her backpack when you finally dress and step out from your tent. You’re hooking your suspenders into place as she fights to shove more things into an already over-full bag, leaving just her trident laying out on the bamboo mat.

Despite all his humming and talking, Jake looks between the both of you and without further discussion announces, “Well, we can’t carry out this drudgery on empty stomachs! I’ll go scrounge up something worth breaking fast over.”

And then he just leaves, plodding off with his tail dragging along after. In his wake, it’s just you and Jane.

Jane, who looks up to watch him go. “Well, good morning and goodbye to him too! I suppose I’m glad someone is thinking about how pressing everything is and getting things done.” She tips her head back to smile at you. “I’m going to miss that, if I’m perfectly honest. How he hops from thing to thing. Which, given his progenitor, is fitting!”

You walk over to her side and drop down to sit, one leg bent in front of you, draping your arm on your knee. “Definitely not what we expected. Even with the enormous goddamn statue, who could have guessed the locals were such big fans of frogs they turned into them?”

She sighs, her smile lingering as she nods along with you. “If there’s anything I’m going to regret about this, it’s giving up publishing about this place. Honestly, the tales we could’ve told were both magically pertinent to the field and ripe for storytelling.”

“You had a bit too much to drink last night, and everything got a little funny after dinner. I remember doing a lot of math while you were talking about piloting or something.” She pulls the drawstring of her bag shut and rolls the great overstuffed pack away.

Eventually, Jane asks, “I know I had a bit too much to drink last night, and everything got a little funny after dinner. I remember doing a lot of math while you were talking about piloting or something.” She pulls the drawstring of her bag shut and rolls the great overstuffed pack away.

“No one will believe me,” Jane says. “But that’s maybe for the best. Though I’m certain Jake and Kaleidos would disagree. It does feel awful to leave them like this.” She waves to the temple. “I think Roxy’s gone to… make some final goodbyes. She’s been missing since I woke up.”

That makes sense. In her shoes, you would want some privacy for it. You still have the echoes of Kaleidos’ emotions, lingering like Icarus getting off with just a sunburn for his troubles. There’s some sense that Roxy’s stronger than you are, for going through with it, for letting go.

But, jesus, if that’s strong, you’d take weakness any day of the week. And you are, you are so goddamn weak, sitting next to Jane as she repacks her bag for what’s probably the third time, trying to crush all her belongings into place. Not saying shit.

Eventually, Jane asks, “I know I had a bit too much to drink last night, and everything got a little funny after dinner. I remember doing a lot of math while you were talking about piloting or something.” She pulls the drawstring of her bag shut and rolls the great overstuffed pack away.

“But did you and Roxy figure out the logistics of our departure? Since you’ll have to be the one to set off the Shell.”

No, you did not. “Yeah, we have it all laid out. It’ll be fine.” She gives you an expectant look. “I explained the basics to Roxy; just leave the piloting to her.”

Now you’re lying to Jane. Even if you knew it was coming, nothing prepares you for how shitty you feel.
Jane’s attention shifts, thank god, and she points past your shoulder. “Speaking of, look what the cat finally dragged back in.”

You turn to look; Roxy’s closing in on the camp. Her hair is a mess in that way it only gets after being wet. She must’ve taken some time to commune with Kaleidos.

But, she’s smiling. It strikes you as strange.

“Mornin’, you lazy bones,” she greets. “Finally up and at ‘em, huh?”

“I was awake at a perfectly respectable hour, thank you,” Jane says. “You must’ve been up at dawn light.”

“Sure was. Had some stuff to talk to Callie about. Lots of things to figure out.” She comes in close, standing over you both and looking between you. “Have you talked about all that yet?”

Shit, you think while Jane asks, “About what? We were just discussing the plan for our escape, if that’s what you mean.”

“I sure don’t.” She drops down to join you both, falling right on her ass with a grunt, legs kicked out in front of her. “And I don’t seriously think you believe that, Janes, if’m real with you.”

“Rox,” you start, because christ, this is not how you wanted to do this. You don’t know how you wanted this to go, but gentler than the Lalonde Standard, that was for certain.

Next to you, Jane’s gone statue-still, her eyes unwavering on Roxy. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean--” Roxy starts.

“Roxy,” you say again, louder, your pulse rushing in your ears.

She carries on like you didn’t say anything, damn her. “--how the dominoes are gonna fall today. You and I are gonna go fix the pillars, right, then head for the Acorn. Jake and Dirk are going to hike up the volcano and do the thing and make the Shell come down. Or up. Whichever.”

“We were just talking about that,” Jane says. “How we’re going to pick him up after.”

“Well, we aren’t. Obviously.”

“Roxy, could you pull the brake line for a fucking second,” you snap, frustration boiling over.

“What, and leave it to you? So you wait until the eleventh hour and then just don’t show up for our pleasure cruise across the sea? Nah.” She flicks her wrist dismissively. “Rip off the plaster, Dirk, she deserves to know.”

Now Jane turns to you, her eyes wide enough to show the whites as she stares. “Dirk? What’s she talking about? We’re not going to just-- just abandon you, I would never.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” you tell her quickly, mentally cursing Roxy as much as you can. If you were born with the ability to hex someone, you’d sling one her way for this. “This isn’t about the logistics. It’s about… me. I’m staying here. On the island.” She starts shaking her head, so you go on quickly. “No, I’m staying here, Jane. With Jake, for as long as that lasts. So he’s not alone.” You wince. “And so I’m not either.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jane says, voice pitching an octave higher. “You’re not alone, Dirk, you have
me and Rox— I mean, Roxy and I, and-- and your home, and your brother, even if you’re not close, and…”

“But not his loverboy, Jane,” Roxy says.

“I… But… yes, that’s unfortunate, but let’s be reasonable here, he can’t just drop his entire life to stay here!”

“I can,” you say. “Honestly, got more of a life going on here than I do back there. I wouldn’t mind not seeing it again.”

Jane grasps one of your hands tightly, her nails almost biting into your skin. “I know you’ve never been a fan of how… how some people treat you back home, Dirk, but it’s still home, and what about-- Roxy? And me? You might never see us again!”

“Well,” Roxy drawls, “not for about three or four years.”

That clearly throws Jane, who frowns in confusion at Roxy. “Sorry, what now?”

“Oh, you prob’ly don’t recall. That was your math on it. The Shell and all, it should last about three years.”

Jane rolls her eyes. “Roxy, I was drunk.”

“And I totes trust your drunk math over my sober math.”

“That’s still a very long time to be stranded and alone here!”

“I’m not going to be alone,” you point out. “Jake’ll be here.”

“Me too, actually,” Roxy says, and clears her throat. “I’ll, uh. I’ll be here too.”

Now it’s your turn to take a right hook to the jaw. “Say again.” In case you misheard.

“Yeah. Uh.” Roxy laughs, awkward and nervous. “Hope that’s alright with you, having an unexpected neighbor. Didn’t really mean to break up your little love nest or anything, I know that’s rude as hell.”

“That’s rude as hell?” Jane asks, voice ratcheting even higher, strained and cracking.

“I know, I know I know I know, but listen.” She reaches out and takes Jane’s hand; for a second, Jane resists, trying to twist out of her grip, but Roxy persists until she links their fingers together. “Janey, sweetheart, listen.” She goes on, even as Jane shakes her head. “I have to stay. I just got to. I had a long talk about it with Callie, and I can’t just up and leave. Not after all this!”

“Roxy, you can’t be serious,” Jane hisses quellingly, as if trying to coax her into not saying another word.

“I am as serious as a heart attack. Listen, Callie?” She flings a hand back, waving in the vaguest direction of the temple. “She lost everyone and everything. She was witherin’ and damn near gone, and I can’t bear that, okay? I really can’t, I’d rather swallow hot coals than leave her to that again.”

“But Jake will be here! And--” Jane flicks her eyes at you, then away again, ashamed. “Why is this happening, first Dirk, and now you?”

“Because those two numbskulls are going to be so busy having a mess of frogbabies and Callie
deserves more than being a third wheel.” Roxy nods to you. “No offense.”

“Plenty taken,” you shoot back.

“Anyway. Yeah. I want to help her rebuild. There’s a lot she wants to share and teach and do, and I’m gettin’ real good at understanding her.” Roxy pauses to inhale sharply through her nose. “And I care about her. So, she wants a new disciple, I’ll do it. I’m fuckin’ honored she asked, really.”

Jane lets you go and yanks her hand out of Roxy’s, rocketing to her feet and stepping back.

“Three years! Three years without seeing your family or friends! Without seeing me!” All at once, the anger in Jane’s face falls like a pillar of sand hit by a tidal wave. “What about me? You two, you’re my best friends!” Her mouth trembles around her words until she covers it with a hand.

“Are you… are you mad at me? Because I called the Trust?”

“No, Jane.” You get up and follow her, taking hold of her elbow. “That maybe put us on a stricter timetable, but that’s not why, I fuckin’ swear on my life.”

Roxy joins you, but keeps a step back. As she speaks, her hands clasp together in front of her, grip tight and anxious. “And ‘sides, what’s the point of doin’ all this to save the island if it just keeps dying regardless? If we’re going to save it, I don’t wanna half-ass it. I want a full booty workin’ overtime to bring this baby back from the brink, you know? You do know! You’ve seen how much it needs us!”

Jane shakes her head mutely, eyes shut.

“Jane. Janesy Janey babe.” Roxy hurries in and wraps her arms around Jane’s shoulders. “It’s not forever, Jane. You’ll come back for us, right? You’ll shake off whatever stupid nosy investigation gets thrown our way, adopt my cats for me, water Dirk’s plants or whatever, then come find us again!” She shakes Jane gently. “Rediscover this place.”

Jane takes a shaky, despairing breath, and looks to you. There is fear in her face, but a growing resignation.

You swallow down your own fear, ignoring how it tries to lodge in your throat. “I want to try this. Life here.”

To your surprise, she nods, wiping at her eyes. “Right. Of course you would. I... I’m sorry that life back home wasn’t enough.”

“Jane,” Roxy says.

“No, I know. I get it.” She bows her head, hiding against your shirt for a moment. “You want to be happy. Who would I be if I tried to stop you? No friend worth having.”

Roxy leans in and kisses Jane’s cheek, working her arms around you both. “It’s not forever, Janes. If anyone can dodge the Trust and come find us again, it’s you.”

Jane just nods, sniffing audibly. Both of them are crushed against you, so you give in and hug them both. You’d been prepared for this to break bad, to break really bad. The guilt’s going to dog you for a long fucking time, but this is still good. It’s still better.

You all stand there and hold onto each other, until someone clears their throat.

“Is this a bad time?” Jake asks.

Roxy laughs, and tugs out of your grip. “Depends. You bring us some food, mudskipper?”
As it turns out, he did, and you all part, settling down to have breakfast and talk about the new plan.

Jane and Roxy’s supply packs have been emptied since yesterday in preparation for this. It takes some doing, but you split the pile of resin discs and slide them carefully into the packs. They are heavy and squashed together, three in each bag. Lifting them isn’t easy, even for you.

When you help Jane get the straps around her shoulders, she nearly falls the second you let go, landing right back against you with a yelp.

“Easy, Crocker,” you say, steadying her.

“No kidding! What would I do without you, Mr. Strider,” she expounds, and then immediately looks stricken. “Well, anyway, thank you.”

“Jane,” you sigh.

“It’s fine, Dirk.” She keeps one hand on a strap, preventing it from slipping further down her back. “Could you hand me my focus?”

It’s lying in the grass; you stoop to grab it, and stand in front of her. The metal is cool against your fingers, and you don’t want to relinquish it just yet. But her hand is extended, waiting.

As you both stand there, her lips twist, as if she’s fighting to control them. “Dirk,” she says, warningly, a tremble in one syllable.

Her hand is warm where it touches yours as she takes the trident. It lingers for just a moment before you part.

“Be safe,” she tells you with a watery smile before she turns away. “Roxy, are we ready?”

“Provided this doesn’t break my damn back, we’re set!” Roxy says. There’s a potion vial in her hand that she’s taking sips of. For energy, apparently. They both have a lot of magic to do. “I’ll take the far shore and work clockwise. You do the same and we’ll meet up back here as soon as we’re done.”

“How are you getting the ship airbourne?” you ask, wanting to make sure there’s a plan.

“I’ll handle take-off,” Roxy explains. “It better be as easy as you said. Once it’s up, I’ll featherfall myself and hop out. Easy-peasy.”

Jake smiles. “Then we’ll see you soon.”

Yeah.

The four of you stand together for a moment.

And then you part ways. Roxy walks along the shore to where she’ll start repairing the pillars. Jane cuts across the field, past the Acorn to the closest shore, ready to begin.

Jake tugs your sleeve, and you follow him along to the fruit grove curving around the lake’s edge,
towards the waterfalls beyond.

This is a path you’ve walked many times. Today, Jake steps off it, into the thick vegetation and through the enormous trees, into the jungle itself. Immediately, his nose wrinkles in distaste at the terrain, the sudden density of undergrowth and uneven ground.

“There was once a path here,” he tells you. There is a wet, loud slap as he draws up his tail, winds it around himself, and throws it over his shoulder. You take a fast step to the side to avoid it. “Not the best path, but at least a useable one. It wasn’t designed for people with tails.”

You have never heard Jake speak like this, with a sense of history beyond his own immediate past filled with loneliness and quiet. As you follow a pace behind him, at his side, you split your attention between navigating the jungle and looking at the sour apple green of his spot glowing in the dim light.

“So your… the lorelay. They never took this path?” you ask as you walk along. The vegetation is abundant, but you think maybe you can find the path in the negative spaces: where the trees are spaced just a little further apart.

“Don’t think so. The ginormous mountain doohickey isn’t really made with me in mind.” He lets out a low warble, glancing aside at you. “Apparently I shouldn’t get too close to it, especially in the state it’s got itself in.”

Which makes sense. All of your understanding is purely academic, stolen from reading doctorate papers and overhearing students drowning their sorrows at the bar, but you know some types of magic don’t interact well with others. And what you’re headed towards is a type of big magic you can scarcely comprehend, some epicenter of interwoven human machination powered by some of the purest elemental force, ready to bubble over.

It’s the kind of magic that apparently warps and changes the aura. Which, if you remember the technical works on the topic and use it to conjure up an intellectual explanation, is really bad.

You reach across yourself to rub your arm, finding the very slightly raised marks that form your tattoos. The wards writ into your skin are still, your wheel moving at a snail’s pace.

Holding your breath for a moment, you give into a flinty-sharp thought you have avoided touching: fucking hell, you hope your nobility does you the first solid favor in your entire life and helps you survive this shit.

Your journey cuts closer and closer to the mountain, where the slope starts in earnest. The incline is subtle at first, but before long you can feel it in your legs as you traverse the phantom path. You try real hard not to think about it as a march to your own uncertain fate.

You blow out a long breath. “So, Kaleidos told you about this?”

Jake hums. “Something like that. Not really in the way of tongue wagging and hashing things out in a verbal sense. It’s all loaned information somehow. Like someone took my own mental map and wrote in some extra bits.”

“How are you handling that?” you ask him. “Kaleidos?”

Ahead of you, Jake springs up a steep slope of rock, then turns to you, crouched. His arms outstretched, and you take hold of them, let him brace you as you scale the slope, joining him up higher.

Once you’re on solid ground again, he pats your hips reassuringly and leads on. “Sorry, what?
How am I handling it?"

“Well. The fact you grew up alone, or thinking you were alone, only to find out she’s here and been here. How’s… that going?”

Jake’s steps falter for a moment, and he fixes you with a steady look. “How… hm.” His face scrunches up, nose wrinkling. “Well, I know a fine gentleman who grew up thinking magic didn’t want a thing to do with him, only to come along and find a friggin’ lot of magic wanting to do with him. How’s that going?”

The answer is quick and easy for you: “Mostly trying not to think about it too directly.”

“Well, and there you go,” Jake says, nodding, and plods off again.

Fair enough.

The path gets both more perilous and more clear as you start to curve up and around the mountain. Here, the incline is too much for the jungle’s reach, the trees giving way to scattered ferns and bushes, and stubborn pointy grass that juts out of the rock itself. Under your feet is not just dark earth, but remnants of sedimentary rock, like pulverised paving stones, broken in so many places they’re a ruin. But there is both the dark loamy sand of the lakeshore and the sugar-white of the outer beach, distinct even after all these years.

Maybe long ago, they were well-kept stones to mark the path for the people before. Now, you are climbing through them, bracing yourself with your hands with Jake frequently stopping to turn back and bodily lift you past uncertain footing that threatens to throw you down the steep slope.

At some point, you wind up just holding onto his hand to steady yourself. And when the path evens out again, Jake doesn’t let go.

You hear the waterfalls before you see them, and you remember wondering about their source, whatever was feeding them from higher up the mountain. The answer becomes clear: the path terminates at the edge of a wide basin, an outcropping jutting out from the mountain and filled with water and verdant life. It wraps around like a crescent slice, and along the outer edge is the flung spray as it falls off the edge and to the lake below.

Up here are finally some more trees, standing up straight from the basin with wide fanned roots that peak out from the surface.

On the closest one to you, you can see a band of a deeply weathered rope wound around the trunk. You reach out, stepping onto one of the protruding roots to touch the old rope.

“Oh. There used to be planks here to walk on,” Jake mutters. “No worries, we can swim.”

You step out, off the earth surrounding the basin and onto the roots. It’s fairly steady under your boots. “Might be able to traverse it anyway.”

Jake chirps in annoyance, and you sigh. So much for that. You give him a look, then step off the roots and fall straight down into the water.

After a moment, Jake joins you in the basin. His tail untangles from around him the moment he’s in the water, stroking to propel him forward to grab you. At his urging you climb onto his back and feel your head break the surface.

Jake floats up until he surfaces as well. “Should be hereabouts. Sort of just need to… follow the feeling.”
“The feeling?”

He goes vinegary green all over. “It’s not a good feeling.” He swims forward, weaving between the trees, deeper into the basin.

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Consider yourself lucky, then, pretty. It’s like…” He sticks out his tongue, making a gagging noise. “It’s pretty close to that time I tried to have a jaunt in the big poison water. Something just not right. Sickly.”

You rub his shoulder, as if you could soothe the green out of his spots by touch alone. “The girls did say it was dangerous.” Hopefully the fact you don’t feel it is a good thing.

Both of you are searching for some obvious indication of what you’re looking for. It’s difficult knowing, with all the years since anyone has set foot in this place. Outside the tied braces around the trees, there’s not much you can work with. It becomes a matter of following the traces of where the bridge might’ve been. That, and the aura or aetheric flow or whatever it is as it affects Jake. It’s an imprecise and uncomfortable compass.

The trail of marked trees ends, cutting in towards the side of the mountain, away from the waterfalls. Here, there is one more cascade of water, pouring down from some hidden wellspring even higher up, falling in a strangely perfect sheet.

Through the waterfall, you can see light. And here, all around you, the water is not just warm like you’ve grown used to with the lake water, but edging towards true heat.

“That’s it,” you say, and let go of Jake. You sink into the water again, kicking to stay afloat, looking at this hidden entrance with trepidation.

Jake rumbles unhappily and drifts to the closest standing root, wrapping his arms around it. “Yurgh. Yes, it certainly seems that way.”

“Are you alright?” you ask.

“I’ll be fine. I’m more worried about you.” He peers at you, eyes flicking over your face. “Even now, you don’t feel it.”

The instinctive, tart denial is on the tip of your tongue, because no, you’ve never felt magic shit before.

But that’s not exactly true.

Before, when Jane took you and Roxy to the basalt monolith in the jungle and Roxy set it off, you felt something. Or, you experienced something adjacent to feeling, like observing the effect of the thing without the thing, tree branches moving but no wind.

Now, you don’t quite feel it again, but you know something is here. Some powerful force that is more metaphorical than tangible, but still real. The golden ratio exists without proofs, and the hand of the empire has a fist even without a king in sight.

So: you feel it. Kind of.

For a moment, you float there, letting the falling water cast misted drops into your hair and across your face. The reprieve is only broken when Jake’s tail finds your leg and curls around it. You turn towards him and let him pull you over until you can hold onto the old tree next to him.
He leans into you, resting his face against yours.

“It’s going to be fine,” you remind him.

“You could still go home,” Jake says, sudden and fast, his face pulling tight with shame. “I didn’t want that, but I— I’m not good at letting go of things, haven’t had much practice, see, but it seems terribly cruel to be so damned determined not to let something go it gets crushed in my clumsy mitts. You could still leave, and not do this.”

You know. You’ve known for a while now. You nod once, acknowledgement of the offering, the out you are never going to take. “Yeah, but this is home. Now boost me up.”

Jake presses his lips together, clearly upset, but nods. Nods, then cups your neck and pours all his worry and fear into your mouth, kissing you with a new type of desperation you’ve never felt before. Someone who cares about you. Who would let you go if need be.

But you’re more selfish than that. You try to reassure him, kiss back and hold his face between your hands. It lingers as you try to settle his fears.

You don’t think it quite works; Jake still looks wide around the eyes and tense as he helps you climb up onto the tree roots. His hands hover behind you, ready to catch you if you fall.

You reach up, grasping a low branch to steady yourself. Turning towards the waterfall, you see the line through it, where there must be a ledge to land on.

When you’ve gotten your footing and feel as ready as you’ll ever be, you focus on the ledge and get ready to jump.

Below you, Jake sinks into the water, letting out a frustrated stream of bubbles. His mouth lifts just enough to tell you, “I’ll wait here. Be careful, please. And hurry back.”

You don’t trust yourself to speak. Instead, you throw yourself at the entrance.

By some fucking miracle, your feet find solid ground. If you weren’t already soaked from your swim, you’d be drenched now; the waterfall is not just a thin barrier but a wall crushing down on you. Its onslaught is so strong, you are nearly held in place by the pressure that beats into your shoulders and down your back and against your crown.

You open your mouth, feel thick rivulets rain off your nose and lips and chin. It’s hot, just under what you can stand, and almost… nice.

It’s not a bad feeling, standing there and letting it beat against your body with wet heat, and with it carry away some of the tension lingering in your body. You push against it, lifting your hands with more than a little effort until your fingers find the slick rock that frames the entrance.

It’s a downpour, but you’ve never been afraid of water. In a world of witches and mages who treat it like an intruder or a barely tolerated obligation, you love it.

When it’s washed over you and cleansed you from skin down to sinew and bone, you finally stagger forward. It’s another two steps before you break out the other side and take a sucking gasp of air.

You walk out of the water’s embrace, and are slammed in the face with heat. The air inside the mountain reminds you this is a goddamn volcano, the rush of it so strong it overwhelms you with the temperature spike and the smell of sulfur.
You nearly gag, unable to even see until you drag your shirt off and wrap it around your neck and mouth. It’s imperfect, but deadens the worst of it, frees you enough so you can at least look around.

Stretched out before you is a long tunnel. The mouth of it is lit by sunlight that fades just a few feet ahead of you, supplanted by a new kind of light. It’s the color of familiar firelight, but with none of the lively flicker. Just a pulsing orange light that extends and retracts like a hunger wave. Where you stand, you are out of its reach.

Sucking in a breath of damp, cottony air, you walk forward.

The tunnel is only a little taller than you, and its form is imperfect. In places, you can see old chips and rocky gaps where it was carved, hewn from the volcano, the ceiling rising and falling erratically.

At eye-level, though, following you as you walk, there are smooth stripes of basalt. They stand out against the rest of the tunnel in how obviously transplanted they are. It’s like a memory of the temple in an inhospitable place.

Laid into the basalt are letters. Runes and symbols that make up the language of the island, stamped in with their uniform rows and columns. Each one is exhaustively inlaid with the splintered gold volcanic glass, their shapes vividly reflecting even the amorphous dim light cast ahead of you.

You don’t even know what the language is called.

But you can read it.

It’s scattered and each morsel of meaning fades almost the second you taste it. Suddenly you know what Jake means by loaned information. Everything is slotted into your mind haphazardly, breaking apart as soon as you focus on it.

But they are protection. Entreat in the water and earth to hold the fire at bay. The words don’t stick with you but the tone sure does. It’s less of a commandment of safe passage and more the work of a people asking really nicely for the volcano not to swallow them.

Which makes some sense. It’s hard to make demands of a volcano. Best to ask real nicely instead.

You reach out to touch one, and jerk your hand back. The Algiz rune shimmers over your skin, sinking in and out of place like a teetering ship, and you can feel the pinprick of the ink as it moves.

It takes some heavy aetheric lifting to keep this place from crumbling under the heavy gait of the volcano. The kind of magic that isn’t great for you.

You tear your attention away from the protective script and hurry along the tunnel.

It’s getting hotter.

You’re trying not to think about it, but it’s impossible to ignore, even with your incredible ability to compartmentalize. You literally feel the heat drying your clothes and hair, wondering if you’re steaming slightly, before your hair’s dampened all over again from the sweat. It collects and beads, running down your neck and temples, along your back and arms. It’s hot. It’s hot in a way that growing up in Texan summers never prepared you for.

Your goddamn eyeballs hurt, traversing deeper and deeper into what feels like Satan’s asscrack.
You take long blinks and rub some of the lingering dampness of your shirt over your eyelids to help. It’s too hot in here. You walk a little faster, squinting ahead.

The light grows with the heat, from dim to vividly lit. You see the opening ahead, awash with a mirage haze of shifting vision. Walking into it upsets your hindbrain with instinctual fear, but that has to be your goal.

The ground under your feet stings as you hit the threshold. The air displacement here is strong, a furnace’s bellow rushing into you as you stagger into the core of this thing.

You squeeze your eyes shut for a long moment to refresh them, then force yourself to look around.

The core here is a round chamber. It’s not terrible large, but unlike the hewn stone tunnel, it’s made entirely of placed basalt, parqueted bricks laid, the gaps between fitted with more glinting volcanic glass that looks to be the source of the light. Every stripe and line glows brightly like it’s fresh blown, like it’s not even cooled and would ignite you with a touch.

Some bricks arch out from the wall, towards the middle of the room. Four buttresses press against the centerpiece of the chamber: an enormous gleaming sphere of resin glass.

It’s frankly astonishing it’s even here, given the temperature. You’d assume it would melt, but there it fucking is, as tall as you and perfectly formed. Wrapped around its direct middle like a belt is a band of basalt, this one perfectly smooth with no runes or glass woven in.

Okay, Strider, now what.

Before you can puzzle anything out or look for instructions, your hand slaps against your bare arm, reacting to a pain slow to set in. You press your palm against your skin, letting out a hiss as the lingering pinpricks start to truly ignite into a fiery curse.

You pry your own hand up to look underneath to see what the fuck is happening, and you witness your safe haven wards going haywire.

The honeycomb is shaking and growing to encompass more and more of your lower arm. The salt shaker is tipped and pouring out more and more granules that join the incensed constellations as they turn your skin into a contrast map of dots. The crow’s skull opens its beak, furious, overgrown sage and rosemary spilling out of its maw and spreading out. The icosahedron is lost amid the multiplying connection lines, and the boline’s curved tip vanishes as if cutting directly into your wrist.

And the Sixth Pentacle of Mars spins with the force of a locomotive driving it on, the spokes a blur raising red along your skin.

After a moment of assessing, the shock of it starts to settle in, taking over the pain. Which, you think, is not actually a good thing.

You need to figure this out, now.

You have nothing but a big round ball of rainbow glass. So, you walk up to it and try to figure out what to do with it.

This close, it’s clear there is more to this thing than just a lot of resin shoved into a sphere mold. With all the light in here, the resin is backlit from all around you, and through the polished smooth surface you catch a glimpse inside. There is a labyrinth of prised lines inside, the image of the prison of Crete writ into the glimmering oil slick angles. As you take a few steps around the
circumference, everything shifts and reforms into another image of delicate, precise lines.

If you overlaid every seal in the Book of Solomon, it would not come close to the complexity here.

But what do you do here?

Hoping it’s that easy, you put a hand on the sphere. Then, you put your other hand against it and your cheek too, because it’s cool. It’s blissfully cool like a gulp of water from your canteen, it’s the greatest relief you can imagine here in the heart of Vesuvius.

And that. Is something, isn’t it.

Your canteen is still hung on your belt at your hip. You unlatch it and hold it tightly. Roxy always used water on resin. She used it even on the small bubble that saved you all from the storm.

But you can’t reach the top of this sphere by any means, and there is no flat plate to place the water. You can’t imagine the people who made this careful marvel of lake magic would just splash the fucking thing to set off the Shell.

You’re missing something, and you get in closer to try and figure it out. It’s not a hardship; the air around the sphere is just slightly cooler, and every little bit helps as your tattoos ignite your arms with inkstained friction burns.

There is nothing but the smooth surface of the resin, and the basalt belt around it.

You hook your fingers onto that, in case you can pull it out and reveal some mechanism to interact with. It doesn’t move, but your fingers catch in a gap between the belt and the glass.

There is no give when you pull, but as you assess the structure of the thing where it sits against the sphere, you find a gap set in the space between. It’s deep, further than your fingers can actually reach. You check the other side, underneath, and find no matching gap, just a flat plane.

You take one circuit around the room, just in case you’ve missed something. You’re unable to get closer to the walls, the heat is literally so intense it feels like a flash sunburn.

It’s the fact you can’t stay here that decides you.

You unscrew the cap of your canteen and set the spout of it against the basalt ring, tipping it. Lake water pours from inside into the gap between, and when you plant one hand on the sphere and lift up onto your toes, you can see the water spreading through the ring. It stretches out from you, flowing like a stream.

As you watch it carefully, the water shimmers. It fills with light, transforming into a glassy colorful thing, like pouring a liquid prism into the ring. And you hold the canteen steady, letting its Nearly Bottomless charm do its work and fill this fucking thing to the brim.

The ring is large. You know that. But it’s not so large that it shouldn’t be filling up by now. You’re just beginning to wonder if you inexplicably didn’t bring enough water when you happen to look up.

Inside the sphere, all those sacred geometries of crystal and shadow are filling. The water flows in like a flood unleashed on a labyrinth, following the angular paths. It defies gravity, spreads up as well as down, a density of water infused with the power of a local god taking over the sphere.

Your canteen runs dry. You step back slowly.
A new light fills the chamber. It dominates the hellish volcanic glow, the prismatic array you recognize from the peaceful relics of the island. It grows brighter and brighter until you can’t see, blinded.

Now, you think, is a good time to get the hell out of here.

You stumble out of the chamber, your hand grazing the glass and brick wall. Whipping back, you wince at the hot sting. It’s way too hot. Your body hurts, and now, with your wards overloaded and driven to madness, a deep nausea is filling you.

It’s definitely time to go. You hurry down the tunnel as fast as you dare, eyes shut against everything, the feeling of magic moving around you, the heat and light overwhelming. Somehow the return trip is worse as everything goes up like a lighthouse on fire. Eventually, you have to brace your hand on the wall, let it guide you along. Even if you know it’s a straight shot, you’re afraid of getting lost.

That would be a shitty way to go. Lost in a straight corridor right after you saved the damn island. Jake would be upset.

You know he’s right outside, and you hold onto that as you stagger along, speeding up and nearly tripping over your own feet as you go. You have to be almost there. It has to be close.

You are so focused on getting back to Jake that you forget about the damn waterfall until you stumble right into it. It pours onto you, and you gasp, getting a mouthful that you nearly choke on, sputtering. But you’re finally here, at the end, and like you’ve done half a dozen times already, you throw yourself forward into the safety of water.

You fall into the basin headfirst, and the relief in you is intense. It’s cool here, compared to your jaunt into the volcano. For a moment, you are perfectly happy to hang there and enjoy the balm of the water.

Strong hands take hold of you, turning you around in the water before you’re tugged in tight. One of your arms hooks around Jake’s shoulder, and you hang there as he swims, towing you like driftwood to the shore.

Jake hauls you out of the water in a feat of pure determination and strength. Fuck knows you are not helping him at all as he gets you out of the water and sits you up on the edge of the basin, your feet still sunk into the water. In an act you will likely regret later, you kick off your shoes and socks, letting them fall away, and wiggle your toes against the water.

“You’re back,” Jake says breathlessly, shoving his nose into your hair and hugging you tight. “You’re back, you came back, you’re here.”

Ow. Ow. Ow. “Ow, shit, fuck,” you grit out, and shove him off you. He lets out a pissy chirp as he falls the fuck over onto his side, recovering to stare at you in confusion.

You lift your arms, and just gasp at the way that alone pulls your skin and hurts like a motherfucker holy shit. “Water. Douse me, I need water, now.”

His eyes are open and shocked as he gets a look at you, a burble of incoherent noise leaving him as he rolls, hops up and gets in close again. This time, he only touches your head, and like back in his private little cave, you feel water stream over you.

You tense all over in your effort to not move. It’s like the adrenaline’s wearing off and, fuck, it stings like you punched a hornet’s nest. But slowly, way too slowly for your liking, the wards in
your skin calm the hell down, and you sigh in outright desperate relief.

“That was the worst shit I have ever done,” you tell him, earnest in your exhaustion. “I may throw up on you.”

Jake just pats your head as he eases off on the water. You open your eyes and take a look at the state of yourself.


At that, Jake grins, wide and gleaming, all suffused in yellow light. “Can you stand? C’mere, we gotta shake a leg to see, I think.”

With his assistance, you manage to get upright, moving your arms as little as possible. He takes your hand and pulls you around the basin, outward away from the tunnel entrance to the edge where the water flows down into the lake below.

The Shell is not up, which gives you a feeling of panic so acute and strong you nearly vomit from the whiplash. But once you can see beyond the trees, you find this vantage point lets you see everything. The entire island is spread out for you, from the furthest shores to the temple and the blue ink horizon beyond. You would estimate you’re about as high up as the frog statue itself.

Beside you, Jake pulls up his goggles and snaps them on. Once they’re in place, he points. “Take a gander at those pillars.”

Every one of them is lit like a beacon. The glass lenses in their hearts are burning with prismatic light, the mirrors of the light you saw in the core, and in the temple, and from the monolith.

They burn brighter than the midday sun and throw beams of light upward, into the sky. The glowing lines arch, and you shield your eyes with your stinging arm to see their apex. Each one meets at the same point, a radiant nexus high over your heads.

For a moment, you wonder if that’s it. Movement draws your gaze back down to the pillars. Between them, up from the ocean, comes a wall; a translucent shining veil pulled taut between each one lifts slowly, coming to the tip of their basalt crowns before in one swift motion the veil streaks into the sky.

The dome is built up, reaching for the nexus.

It slows at its peak, until the gap in the wall is nothing but a circle. It fills with the same light streaming from the pillars, coming to a perfect completion.

And all at once, it fades. The light flashes once, filling your eyes with a green afterimage of the shine as it dims. The spectacle ends, and in its wake is just… a bubble. An enormous film that domes over the entire island. At the edges, near the ocean, it’s faint enough to be invisible, but further up, the sunlight catches the faint hues, giving it away.

The Shell is up. The island is pocketed away like a marble tucked away in a shell game, whisked off to safety.

You lower your arm and wince. “Shit,” you mutter. The urge to itch your arms is already coming on.

But Jake’s not looking at you. He’s squinting out towards the shore near the camp. “Huh,” he says
simply.

You follow his eyes and see the khaki dots of your camp, the surrounding field, and the Acorn sitting there.

“Huh,” you echo. Because what the fuck? “Let’s get down there.”

Immediately Jake shines a gleaming excited yellow and turns to you, practically bouncing in place. “Well, my pretty human beau, we could take the long arduous and frankly pretty shitty path back down through the horrible mean jungle, or!”


That is how you wind up coaxed up onto Jake’s back again. It’s the first time you’ve done this out of the water, and it feels much more precarious. Jake helps you, shifting you up higher and hunching forward so your weight rests properly on him.

“Hang on,” he tells you. “Like, really, really hang on, alright?”

You grasp your wrist with your opposite hand tightly. “Go, Jake.”

He does. Jake bolts forward full tilt, leaning into the sudden sprint. He moves faster than you’d imagine any creature with a full grown human clinging to their back could, let alone with that tail, but he drives forward, right to the edge of the basin outcropping.

A few yards from the ledge, he jumps, lands on the exact edge, and dives outward.

It’s one suspended moment while you are in the air. It feels more like flying than piloting ever did, the spray of the waterfalls hitting you all over for one instant before you are untethered and what feels like a nautical mile above ground.

Below, you see the rocks where the waterfalls terminate, standing up at you like jagged teeth.

Then, they pass by, and you are truly diving, right towards the lake.

Jake points his arms. You tuck your body as close to him as you can and hold your breath.

You both cut through the water, so smooth you barely feel it for half a second. Suddenly, you are underwater and still diving. The worry becomes not hitting hard deadly rocks, but hitting the bottom of the lake.

But you slow, and Jake curves upward, pulling away from the treachery of impact. As he does, the speed melts into nothing, until Jake’s tail starts stroking to propel you the rest of the way up to the surface.

You take a gasp of air. “Jesus!”

Jake cackles happily. “That was good, wasn’t it! That was pretty fucking stellar, I think!”

“Besides all the ways we might’ve died, sure!” You heave in a deep breath. “Pretty cool. But let’s get to shore.”

He tucks his face down and smacks a kiss against your hand where it sits around his shoulders. “Right-o! Hold tight, then!”
Jake takes his time bringing you in to the camp. It’s a relief to be kept above water, able to just lay across his back and breathe. For once, you don’t really have it in you to handle holding your breath for his faster, submerged swimming.

It also lets you see who is sitting on the edge of the pier as you get closer. Roxy you expected. Jane sitting next to her, pressed against her side, is more of a surprise.

As you get close, you relax your grip on Jake and drift into the water, holding on with just one hand on his shoulder as you close in.

Once you are in earshot, Roxy starts clapping loudly. “Mudskipper, that was some death defying showmanship! Very impressive, the crowd goes wild!”

“Thank you,” Jake says with perfect sincerity.

Jane smiles, much more subdued as you float over. Her eyes land on your arm, however, and she gasps. “Goodness gracious, Dirk! Are you alright? What happened?”

“Later,” you say. “I’ll keep for the moment. What the hell are you doing here? Was there something wrong with the Acorn? I checked it over, what did I miss?”

“Relaaaax, Dirk,” Roxy singsongs at you, wrapping her arm around Jane. “Ship’s fine. Somebody just had a change of heart.”

You float there, unsure what to say. Or, really, what to feel, given how scared Jane was of the sequestering of the island before.

She smiles and reaches down. You give her your hand and let that keep you upright in the water. “I thought about it, Mr. Strider, I assure you. I thought very hard about the prospective paths laid out before me, and…” She falters for just a second, clearing her throat. “The idea of leaving the two of you behind and returning to my cozy life at the campus while you rough it out alone, doing all the work to keep this place alive, I…”

Roxy squeezes her, rubbing Jane’s arm soothingly. “It’s okay, Janes.”

“I just don’t know anymore!” Jane fairly bursts out. “I don’t know if I want to be heiress of a company that my friends are so fearful of! That has the capacity for such harm!” She shakes her head and wipes at her eyes with her other hand.

“You love the Trust,” you remind her. “We know that. We understand that, Jane.”

“Oh, hush up. I love… what it could be more than anything.” She lets out a deep sigh, slumping further against Roxy. “I mean, when you think about it and weigh the options… staying here is a very advantageous choice, honestly!” Her words come faster, more animated and keen. “I can complete my research here and take a little time to examine the best course for the Crocker Trust, really plan out how I’m going to turn it around when I’m at the helm. It’s no small task, planning for the future of a very powerful body like the Trust!”

She nods along with herself, confidence visibly returning to her. “In three years, we can all fly back to the mainland as a… a lost expedition returned home with the prodigal daughter, not three idiots who got in over their heads and me slinking home after losing you both! It’ll be much better standing for maneuvering, once we get the story straight, and three years is plenty of time for
Jake chirps, lip jutting out in a pout. “This sounds downright Machiavellian, Jane.”

“Oh, you hush up too,” she says. “You don’t even know who that is.”

Roxy lets out a guffaw of a laugh. “Jane! Janey-Jane holy shit! I thought you were staying because you love us! You’re already plottin’ and schemin’ like this is all part of your grand design!”

Jane flushes, embarrassed. “I don’t see how those are mutually exclusive! It pays to think ahead. Someone here has to!”

“Wow,” Roxy says, still laughing.

Jane rolls her eyes, leaning away from Roxy. But she looks to you, her hand tightening around yours. “I do care. I couldn’t bear leaving you behind. Or… being left, maybe. I want to help, and I’ll figure out the rest later. We’ll certainly have the time.”

You squeeze back, nodding. “I would have never asked you to give up something so important to you. But I’m glad you stayed.”

Jane smiles like a warm sunrise. “Me too.”

Beside you, Jake bursts into motion, flipping backward into the water and swimming a half-lap around the pier before coming back up on your other side. “All of you are staying! All of you! Aren’t I just the luckiest fellow on land and sea!” He chirps again, loud and cheerful. “We’re going to have the best time, I bet! Gadzooks, I’m just… pleased as cherry punch!”

“Hooray,” Roxy drones, and snorts in amusement. “That sounds cool, but I’m ready for a nap.”

“Oh, I’m going to have to unpack the Acorn again,” Jane says, biting her lip. “I really anticipated leaving, and all my stuff’s in there.”

“Ugh, okay, nap postponed.” She sighs and looks at both of you. “Man, this is gonna be…. like, a looooooots work, now that I think about it. Get the island up to snuff again, build some better shelters--”

“We can harvest some of the trees and use some equivalent exchange rituals to reinforce the tents,” Jane offers.

“No, we deffo have to build something new. I don’t want to hear Jake and Dirk going at it through the walls,” Roxy says, ignoring the sound of outrage from Jake. “And we need to set up for the little ones!” She bounces in place, beaming. “Gonna have a bunch of critters underfoot eventually!”


“The eggs, Jake,” you whisper at him, feeling your ears turn red.

“Oh.” He frowns, thinking about that for a moment. “Well, I doubt anything will come of that, really!”

“Uh, anyway,” Roxy says, giving you an incredulous look. “We have a lot to do, folks.”
Yeah. Now that the worst is over, now that this place is safe, you can mark that off your mental list. The fear and worry can be put away, and in their place something new can settle in. All those things that made you so eager to stay. The things that made this place home.

You look askance at Jake, and see how he lights up under the sliver of your attention, and feel something inside you uncurl. A tired, worn thing that’s spent so long making itself small, making itself impervious to all the harm around you.

Here, there’s no harm. Here, you can start again, can work to do more than just survive, leave your old life behind and take only what you can carry here to the edge of the sea.

Chapter End Notes

what do i even fucking say

this was supposed to be just a silly experiment. it started when my discord buddies asked for oviposition fic, and I said "sure!" and proceeded to write 140K of fic around that very simple idea. because i gotta be me, y’all.

thank you everyone who supported this venture, with kind words, with enthusiasm, with art and music and theories. it was a huge shock, how invest y’all got, and it fueled my own investment in this ridiculous story.

you can follow me @callmeacturus, if you want to see some of the amazing stuff people made for this, I keep it in a tag, and as per request, I'll post the full outline of this monster in a few days on my tumblr.

I'll see you all with the coda. once i figure out how the hell to structure it. then, for the next story, whenever I finish the goddamn outline.

/fingerguns and a wonk

ETA: ALSO. I WANT IT ON THE RECORD THIS ENTIRE STORY WAS CONCEPTUALIZED AND OUTLINED BEFORE THE FIRST TRAILER FOR "THE SHAPE OF WATER" DROPPED. WHERE MY ROYALTIES AT, DEL TORO. WHERE.
CODA: Year One

Chapter Summary

its time for the coda are you ready

Chapter Notes

ETA: 23 Sept 2018, edited with large rewritten sections to tighten up the writing in anticipation for finishing the coda.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You've arrived at the first week of the rest of your life. It's a point where something ended, maybe even died, some old vision of yourself put to rest. So relieved, you can finally start something new, uncharted and unfolding like a secret as you finally sort through what lies before you now. For the first time, there are new complexities to your world, everything narrowed down to something much smaller than before but immeasurably denser with potential.

But all that aside, no one is letting you do anything, and it's driving you up the goddamn wall.

The Acorn has been fully unpacked and grounded with stone pieces placed against its belly to keep it in place. Ensuring it remains air-worthy for the next few years will be a long-term task, but for the moment, it stands as a monument to Before as you all work towards the Now.

Or, that is what you would like to do. It's what Jane and Roxy are doing. Jake is helping, loping around and equally making a nuisance of himself as an asset.

Still, it's more than you are allowed to do.

Living on this island long-term demands more permanent shelters to live in. There's no reason not to get started. Frankly, having tasks to do makes you feel better just in general.

Jane is in the process of some tricky transmutation. The tents had served everyone well so far and were fairly spacious living quarters. With a little effort, they could become homes. To that end, the witches work together, turning the canvas walls into wood harvested from the jungle. You'll have to reinforce and strengthen the structure later, but that's not pressing yet.

Here, under the shimmering membrane of the Shell, there's no fear of the elements. No storms will reach you, only rain and sun and salt-twanged breezes.

You stand around the site of the first of these little structural experiments; Jane’s old tent is the first up for this spell. You watch as the khaki canvas of the tent is sloughed off in ribbons, planks of rich reddish jungle wood taking its place, the remnants piling up in the grass.

“Go sit down, Dirk,” Roxy says when you stand over her. She is making the boards, turning raw wood into something useable with the enchanted machete she pilfered from the airship.
“I’m fine,” you tell her for the eleventh time today.

“We super do not need your help,” she singsongs at you, shoving another finished plank away from her. “We got this, right Jake?”

Jake takes another hunk of wood and lays it out in front of Roxy, ready for her to morph and mould into shape. As he straightens, he smiles at you, circling around Roxy to you.

His hands catch yours, and pull them up between your chests. He turns your wrists, your arms following. It’s not long before you are fighting down a wince as your skin pulls under your bandages. “Hrm. More aloe? Would that help?”

“I’m fine,” you say again, impotently as Jake snorts and lets you go. He prods the cap of your shoulder and you hiss. “Knock it off.”

“You’re still fried like an egg,” he says blithely. Leaning in, he kisses your forehead, before leaving you to return to his work. “Go have a kip or a dip or whatever you like! We’re all copacetic here.”

You can see that. Still, it rankles.

Every attempt you make to help them is gently but firmly rebuffed. Or, Jake is gentle. Roxy just starts hissing at you like a cat until you back off.

“Christ, fine, I know when I’m not wanted,” you grouse.

Roxy ignores you, already refocused on her task. Jake, on the other hand, takes your complaint to heart, apparently. He flops onto his back in the grass, tipping his head back to look up at you, smile parting as he lets out a melodic warble.

You look away, face warming, and decide to take a walk. Really, sticking around is just going to lead to you bugging the shit out of everyone, and they’re busy. And they are now stuck with you. This island is only so big, and there’s no escaping your bullshit.

So, you head off along the southern edge of the island. As you walk, you consciously keep your arms from swinging, not wanting to agitate your burns.

‘Burn’ is probably not the best term. Once the adrenaline of the volcano and the Shell wore off, your arms fairly exploded in pain. Your tattoos protected you from the worst effects of the volcano’s mechanisms and magic, but not without leaving new marks in recompense. You looked like someone had taken sandpaper to your arms, and it felt about that shitty too.

Luckily there was some super aloe growing in the jungle. Jane kept it liberally slathered across your arms before winding bandages around you. It felt gooey and weird, but ultimately much better than nothing.

Still, you have no hope of conventional pharmalchemy or healing magicks, so you have to just kind of deal with the pain and wait to recover naturally.

The urge to scratch at the prickling itchiness of your healing skin is a curse on your life. Rubbing over the bandages just doesn’t sate the urge to dig your nails in and get it to quiet. But as you’ve been told by your local witches, that’d be bad and you shouldn’t do it. Instead you keep dragging your hands through your hair until it’s probably a mess.

Before too long, the temple is towering over your path. The enormous stone frog casts a shadow across you, its reach tremendous at this time of day. It’s an intense relief, stepping into that shade;
you reach up and back to rub the sweat off the back of your neck and stop midway as your arms viciously protest your movement. Fuck, ow.

It’s as good a place to kill time as any. And just maybe the local god will be more amenable to talking to you than your friends and-- Jake.

You wonder about the language of this place, what kind of words they used for relationships. Maybe they have something less embarrassing than what English has.

Taking a moment to fill up your canteen with water from the lake, you ascend the steps, carrying it inside. It’s cool and quiet in here, and you make your way to the altar with its small resin bowl.

Pouring into the small bowl is part of the ritual upkeep of the temple, but it seems a lot more expedient to you to just walk over to the giant lotus bowl and dump it out there. Maybe you’re not really priest material. What a shock.

In the bowl, the big glowy slime of Kaleidos shimmers and ripples. Taking off your shoes and rolling up your trousers, you sit on the edge and take one big swig of your canteen before upending the rest right onto her. It’s a beautiful lightshow, watching the transformation as the water magically becomes part of her, how she moves as her mass grows.

“Mornin’,” you say.

The slime rolls up the side of the bowl and catches your heels, tugging.

Well shit, why not? No one else wants to talk to you.

You push off and land in the bowl. Or, try to; your fall is arrested by the slime as it resists and holds you aloft, keeping you balanced and helping you settle in and sit.

The energy curls around you like steam, so intense even you feel it. It’s weird, but you sit still and try to relax, and for your efforts, you feel that tether in your head catch against something like metaphysical rope, like a taut piano string that hums so strongly it turns into words. You grit your teeth against it, the sense of Other that is so hard to deal with for you.

But it settles like a sigh, and you rest your head back against the resin bowl.

“Well, what a state you’ve gotten in! Kaleidos’ voice hums through you, through that taut line. Are you alright there, lovely? You seem to be in quite a bit of pain.”

You nod slowly. “Nothing I can’t handle. Side effect of the volcano.”

Poor dear, it looks dreadful. Have they done anything for you… No, no, that wouldn’t work. Oh, if only I could muster up a little more oomph, I could have you restored, up, and at ‘em! You feel some of the slime seep into your bandages and resist the urge to swipe it away. It’s a vexing thing, to be unable to help in these little vital ways.

“From what I understand, you’re just coming back from a near death experience, so I promise not to hold it against you.”

Give me time and I’ll make it up to you all. Just… She sighs in your head, the exhalation filled with sympathetic emotions. You feel her frustration and her weariness in equal measure. It gives you a phantom of sensation, tired to your bones.

Oh, I shouldn’t be taking you along with this. You with all your own aches and agonies you’re recovering from yourself. I hope that’s going well for you, Dirk. Nothing would make me happier
“Than what?” You think you’re sinking a little more into the slime, up to your ribs. It makes it easier to relax backward, reclining. Jake did mention a nap. Is it rude to sleep here? You have no idea how this works.

You can put in a little shut eye if you need, dear. But what indeed. You are quite determined to not look at the specter of strife that has stalked your shadow for so many years. But that old ghost can’t survive in the sunlight here, and you’ve naught to worry about anymore, alright?

“Right. Thanks?” You yawn. “I’m pretty okay, honestly.”

Honestly, she parrots back at you, a little sardonic. I mean every word of it, but fine. Before you nod off, Dirk, could I bother you for a smidgen of information or two?

“Well, shit, that depends. One smidgen or two?”

Oh, you are a contrarian, you are. Could you inform me where you left the eggs?

Hm. You open your eyes and find yourself tipped back, your legs elevated on a lump of rainbow slush like a friendly ottoman, your gaze leveraged towards the distant ceiling. It’s so far away, you wouldn’t be surprised to see some clouds up there near the top.

Right. The eggs. With the more pressing matters ticked off your mental agenda, you could finally consider oh yeah, the eggs. Those were a thing.

Normally I would just feel out where they are but… I’ve not regained enough of myself to do that. Most of the waters are still too distant for me. See, once upon a now distant time, I could know everything in the waters of this island. But now… There is a soft, concerned hum.

You swallow against the turbulent rumble of emotion from Kaleidos that fills your spine like shotgunned smoke; it’s too intimate to sit well in you, but you’re starting to figure you’ll have to get used to it eventually.

“There’s a little wading pool in this… cave Jake has under the water, eastern side of the island. Last I saw, they were there. Jake said they didn’t need, uh. Oversight or anything.”

No, they take care of themselves quite well at the start, that’s true! Or, traditionally, I would take care of them… A long pause, then a sensation like a throat clearing. I’m sure they’ll be fine for the time being. I’ll see if I can’t focus and reach them. Do you mind telling me… how many?

“Five, I think.”

The only response to that is a bubbly wash of giddiness. You smile instinctively, then realize it’s not you and stop.

Splendid! I’ll try to reach them and do what I can. It’s been so long since I’ve had any little ones to take care of. Not that I don’t enjoy caring for the big ones like you, hee!

You nod, unsure what that entails. There’s a sneaking worry that’s been dogging you for a while now, that you should be doing something for them. But you don’t know what, and it’s a fucking big terrifying thought.

As you consider it, the grip around you folds and almost rocks you. It makes you frown.

Oh, stop. Who are you trying to impress?
“Shouldn’t I want to impress a water god who’s got me in her clutches?”

*Only if you think I would retract my favor so pettily!* she scoffs. *Have a sleep, Dirk. I’ll send you on your way before sundown.*

“It’s not going to get weird, is it? Can you… see my dreams or something when I sleep, that kind of thing? Through my weird noble connection?”

There’s an almost guilty silence. *Well, I don’t have to.*

You snort and shake your head. “Right. Whatever. I don’t recommend poking around up there. Nothing good up there.”

*Watch yourself, poppet. I’ve got you for a fair time, and by the stars and depths, I will teach you what a good person you are.*

“Good luck there,” you mutter, and shift into a more comfortable position.

You’re not certain what to call the structure that Jane’s tent becomes in the intervening weeks.

For the time being, you and Roxy are still in the same camp tents that you brought with you for the expedition. They won’t last forever, but they still work perfectly fine for now.

Jane’s, though. Jane’s has become a small little… lodging, like a lump of bread dough left out in the sun. It’s hard to think of it as a house because it’s so stout, and you still have to duck a little to fit through the canvas door. It remains in place, weird and incongruous, while Jane studiously avoids dealing with figuring out an alternative.

Instead, she’s arranging furniture inside. This strikes you as extremely optimistic given the state of the place.

You are not about to offer up that unsolicited opinion. You’ve only recently been released from your probation and allowed to do anything to assist. Granted, you’re not allowed to do any heavy lifting, but magic’s better for that anyway.

Instead, you are sitting underneath the canopy that’s still erected over your little common area. At your side is a huge pile of silky fibrous threads, courtesy of some plant living in the jungle apparently. It’s good raw material, soft under your fingers but strong when you pull against it to test the tensile strength.

You are braiding it. It threads together tightly, and the resultant cord sits in your lap.

The supply of rope you brought with you from the mainland is not infinite; really, nothing is. Figuring out basic sustainability for life is vital now that you’re stuck here.

And besides, the cord will be immediately useful. Keeping shit dumped in chests is a pain, and every time you need anything, it’s inevitably under a bunch of other stuff. With the hammock in Jake’s cave in mind, you think woven nets would be great for keeping everything off the ground but easier to grab.
A wide net to hold gear. Another to hold fruit while it ripens. Maybe even some traditional uses, like fishing. As much as he tries to handle it alone, you can't leave Jake to to all the hunter-gatherer work around the camp.

Speaking of, Jake often gets wound up by all the busywork happening around him. It's obviously an adjustment, the reality of having people here with him, every day, with all the exhilaration and frustration that comes part and parcel with that. You're watching him learn to deal with it day to day, sometimes hour to hour.

Right now, Jake is dealing by sleeping on you. After a long morning hopping around and helping the witches, he's what Jane would probably call 'tuckered out.'

Jake sits behind you, laid against your back with his chin hooked your shoulder to watch your meticulous spinning and braiding. Or, he was watching before. Now, when you glance at him, his eyelids are so low, they might be shut. It's hard to be certain.

With his chest pressed flush to you, you can feel how deep and even his breathing is, his head tucked against the back of your neck, his arms draped around your waist, fingers lax and still.

You could push him off and tell him to go sleep in your tent.

But what you’re doing is studiously pretending this weird gentle thing isn’t happening. No, constable, no silent physical affection here. Just a noble fucking with some plantstuff until it looks like rope.

Roxy seems to have missed the memo, but you have to admire her restraint; when she walks up, she keeps her “Awwwww!” to a hushed stage whisper. “That’s fuckin’ adorbs.”

All you give her is a weak glare. This is not a fight you would win, anyway.

“What’s this stuff?” she ducks down beside you and strokes her hand through the pile of the fibers. “Holy shit. We need to call this like. Persian Strings. Something. Feels just like a kitty cat.” Her mouth twists downward. “I miss cats. I wonder if Callie can magic me a cat, if that’s how it works.”

“Not anytime soon,” you murmur, terminating another long line of cord. A knife is just barely able to get through the fibers, but it works, and you tie off the end in a knot so it won’t come loose.

Jane leaves her interior decorating for a moment to step back out under the canopy. Seeing your work, she gasps. "That's excellent, Dirk!" It's too loud, and in unison you and roxy both hush her. Christ. She nods, face pink, and lowers her voice. "It's great. When you're done with that, I can grab you more floss if your up for it.”

“Floss?” Roxy twirls a little of the glossy strands around a finger.

“Oh, it’s Crocker Island Floss. There’s a whole species of flowers here, they sort of dangle down from low hanging branches-- I could show you later.”

Roxy snorts, and straightens to stand. In her hands, she ties the floss into a loop and starts working it between her fingers until there’s a cat’s cradle bridged between her knuckles. “We are not calling it that, Janes, oh my god.”

Jane rolls her eyes. “I don’t know why not! I thought it was… cute, you know. It’s flossy! Like candy floss you get at market?”

“Oh, no, I’m with you on that , this looks so much like that junk, I want to put it in my mouth.”
Roxy keeps looping and weaving until the image of a very geometric butterfly sits spread in her hands. Then, with so little care it’s ridiculous, she clicks her fingers together and lets the string go.

Instead of falling, it… magically animates into a shiny butterfly, flapping in the air and around your heads. As it circles, it starts to break to pieces, the thin lines that make its body snapping under the strain of its own movement.

Jane sighs and waves a hand at it, and it falls apart like toothpicks. “Then what’s the problem?”

Roxy grins. “Crocker Island. Really?”

“Oh for goodness,” Jane starts, and stops, turning away and walking back towards her once-a-tent. “It needs a name, Roxy. We can’t just call it ‘the island’ forever, that’s silly.”

“S’yeah but… Crocker Island?” Her nose wrinkles. “It’s a bit presumptuous, Jane. And it has a name, sooooo.”

"It has a... " Her nose crinkles. "Where? It was just called 'Newly Charted Pacific Island'--"

“There were people here before us, Jane!” Roxy's laugh grows loud and a little incredulous, almost devoid of humor. “You know you could ask if things have names.”

You look down at your work. Grabbing a handful of threads, you start separating them out into groups you can work together. You want to make a stronger one now, so maybe you’ll start with one thin braid that you can rebraid over for more durability and strength. That sounds good and time consuming and exactly what you should be doing right now.

“Look, it’s just for my records. If I’m putting in the work to document everything, I don’t think it’s unreasonable that I get to handle the nomenclature.”

“Well, no, but… It’s not Crocker Island, Jane, come on.”

“Fine, then what is it called? Do we know yet? Have you figured out that much of the lexicon?”

“It’s… just Kaleidos. ‘Cause you know… Callie’s everything here? Or enough that they just considered her to be the island. It’ll make more sense when she’s up and at ’em again.”

“How am I going to document that? Append a footnote to every mention of ‘Kaleidos’ to ensure its clear if I’m talking about Kaleidos the entity or the island or the plant--”

“Now you’re being mean. It’s just the island and her! And… well. The Children of Kaleidos, obviously. Name of the people who lived here before.”

Jane laughs. “So she can have her name on everything, but if I take some ownership of my work with my name…”

They’re both getting louder, working up a decent rhythm to their little debate. You are not remotely surprised when Jake lifts his head and lets out a high, sharp trill, his tail peeling off the ground to slap heavily down.

You shake your head and breathe out through your nose.

“Well, here we go!” Roxy says, stepping over the pile of floss to nudge her foot against Jake’s tail. “Mudskipper. Settle something for us!”

“No,” Jake says petulantly, yawning and shoving his face against you again. Hiding, apparently.
“He’s not interested, Roxy, and besides, asking him isn’t very fair,” Jane says.

“Uh, it’s super fair, I think. Jake.” She nudges him again. Jake’s tail whips away, twisting around to stretch out on your other side, away from her. “The island’s name, what is it?”

Jake looks up, eyes squinting, chest rumbling. “How should I know? It doesn’t matter, does it?”

Roxy’s face falls. “What? I mean…”

Behind her, Jane rolls her eyes. “I’ll put in a section about the original name of the island and explaining the delineation between the people and the local god and the island, alright? I mean, at this point, it’s all for my own edification, isn’t it? We don’t know how…. ” She shrugs, looking down at her feet. “How anything’s going to work out when the Shell comes down, do we?”

No, but more and more you think you're going to have to start talking about that. Not yet though; given the grimace on Roxy's face, it's probably too soon.

Jake just shrugs and leans on you again, clearly not interested with the conversation.

Jane stands there in the wake of that and the resultant unpleasant atmosphere, chewing her lip but unwilling to add anything. Rather than carry on, she bends to pick up one of the completed ropes, offering you a small smile in thanks before retreating into her house.

Roxy throws her hands in the air, giving you an aggrieved look. “Fuck, right?”

You shrug the shoulder that isn’t currently supporting Jake’s head. “I know. But I get it.”

“Really? Then could you explain it to me, because I have no idea where she gets the idea she can just name stuff and lay claim to it like that! It’s kinda rude!”

“Yeah, alright,” you tell her evenly. “But how do you know about this crap?”

“Uh, I asked?” She lets out an raspberry noise. “Like?”

“Jane hasn’t gone to the temple since we all went with Jake,” you remind her. “So.”

You can see the bluster drain out of her all at once. “Oh.”

Yeah. You shrug again, carefully, and look down at what the hell you’re doing, trying to figure out which cluster goes where next.

You only hear it when Roxy mutters, “Shit,” before she follows Jane, the sound of the canvas entryway being pulled open, then pointedly shut behind her.

It’s quiet again, though you feel Jake’s grip around your waist tighten for a second. You reach down and pat his arm, then get back to braiding this slippery shit into something useful.

“You gonna sleep all afternoon?” you whisper. Jake chirp-purrs against your back, but otherwise ignores you. “Uh huh.”

Time slips by. You come to learn more about your new life. For example, the rain.
The Shell makes something as simple as rain into a distracting spectacle that still grabs your attention after half a year here. Any change in weather makes itself known first by the ripples it sends through the Shell, lamp oil circles spinning out from impact points to meet other yawning circles, until everything over your head is a light show. With the moon overhead, blue-white light catches against every disturbance and ignites it until everything is a silvery dancing star chart dominating the sky.

You’re already kind of a mess from visiting Callie, your clothes sticking to your body and shoes tied at the laces and hung over your shoulder. Getting more wet is impossible, so you take the temple steps slowly, face tipped up to watch the rain.

There must be some kind of complicated magic going on here. Storms and gales won’t break through the Shell, but the average rain gets through fine. You might one day ask how the hell that works. The magic here is interesting at least, and feels less malicious, besides the friction burn tattoo ink incident.

You’re long healed now, from time, aloe, and a little loaned magic from Kaleidos. All that remains is a soreness around the spokes of your wheel, but given how much it’d been spinning, that’s maybe to be expected. Bandages long gone, you can feel the tracks of rain down your arms as you walk.

A weird reality of the island is getting inured to being wet almost all the time.

Case in point. As you navigate the damp stone path, a wolf-whistle calls your attention to the right, towards the lake.

There’s only one person it could be, so you break from the path and walk carefully, barefoot through the grass and undergrowth until you find the lake’s edge.

When you get there, Jake is posing for you. His body is stretched in a recline, putting all his ridiculous length on display, one leg bent at the knee, his head propped up on his elbow. All he needs is a rose between his teeth to really sell the ridiculousness of it.

“Yeah?” you ask, crossing your arms over your chest.

Jake grins. “Hallo, Dirk. Pretty night. Pretty… uh…” He frowns, looking up and away from you. “Oh, balderdash, I had this… line… Because I call you pretty and it fit together nicely.”

“I can pretend to be impressed if you want.” You walk over to him. Sprawled like that, he’s easy to mess with, open and inviting. You tap your toe against one of his peacock fins, just to see it light up for you.

“Can you pretend to be wooed? I should have brought you something. Like chocolate.” Jake shifts, sitting up, folding his long legs in front of him in a neat bend. As rain hits his shoulders, his spots react with little startled flares of yellow light.

“The hell are you wanting to woo me for?” You squat next to him. In your wet trousers, that feels pretty awful, so you just sit your ass down with him.

“Mostly ‘cause it’s fun. And you’ve been gone all afternoon.” He chirps, looking up at the temple. “How’s she… how is she, then?”

“Fine. Always happy to talk. We were figuring out ways to help Jane out with the flora and shit, like getting some real pollinators in here. The system where the locals could just take care of everything doesn’t work when there’s only four of us doing upkeep. Jane’s stretched thin, so if
Kaleidos can maybe make some small fauna…” You stop and sigh. “You’re not listening.”

“I am! Just…” Jake taps his fingers rapidly against his knees. “Waiting?”

“For?” You lift your eyebrows at him.

“Well, I wanted to go… for a swim…” There is a guilty set to his face at least, and he won’t meet your eyes directly. “I know all this is important, but I don’t see why Jane’s not handling it herself and making you do it.”

“It’s complicated,” you tell him. “Jane’s still adjusting.”

Jake lets out a burble of noise, shrugging. “But you’re all wrapped up for the night, aren’t you?”

It’s been an adjustment for everyone, is the thing. Jane is having the most trouble with it, how this expedition has turned into a lengthy living situation. You don’t think she regrets anything, per se, but it’s obvious staying was an impulse decision for her.

There’s some kind of learning curve for Jake as well. Secretly you think he was more prepared for a life of just the two of you together on the island; having the witches helps immensely, and in the long run it’s going to be better, but also you now have a lorelay trying to get your attention, and that’s never a harbinger of peace.

Roxy is doing fine, you think. You’ve never seen Roxy more excited to get her day started, no more dragging ass and drinking coffee. Now, she’s an early bird with way too much shit to do.

And then there’s you.

You roll your eyes at Jake and shove him off the lake’s edge and into the water.

He completely vanishes for a moment, as you expected. While he’s getting his bearings or plotting or whatever, you take off your shirt and trousers, rest them with your shoes in a neat pile. Once you’re ready, you swing your legs into the water and wait.

Jake returns, his hands taking hold of both your ankles. His grip is firm, index finger to thumb, and squeezing. “That was rude.”

“Gonna do something about it?” you ask.

“Hm.” He swings your legs a little, brow furrowed in thought. “I could. Would serve you right, being busy all the time and a menace the rest of the day.”

“Sure,” you agree, and kick his arm lightly, goading him.

He keeps frowning, then turns big eyes up at you. “That does sound like a fun way to spend the night, but… I’d like to just go swimming, if that’s acceptable to you.”

You feel all the taut anticipation wink out like a blown candle. “Oh. Yeah. That works for me.”

He backs up from the ledge, giving you room to drop down into the lake. The moment you bob to the surface, he darts back in, taking hold of your hips and rubbing his nose against yours.

A long breath sighs out of you as you just… relax your grip. This is the lake. Something of a refuge, one that’s never let you down. You don’t have to think about anything for a while.

A kiss pours magic into your throat and lungs, and lingering besides, with Jake pulling you against his chest and delving his tongue in after the cool wash of energy. It’s easy to the point of being
second nature, how you don’t need to keep afloat. It’s fine to sink under the surface and kiss him back for a while, enjoying the affection, submerged in warm water.

Eventually, you stop, inhaling to fill your lungs. It’s dark down here, only Jake’s yellow glow illuminating the murky depths, and even then only just.

He takes one of your hands, lifts it to nose your bracelet aside to kiss your wrist. And you feel just a little wooed.

Pulling you in against his body, your back to his chest and his hands firm on your elbows, he carries you along, doing the swimming for you. You kick along to help, but the lion’s share of the work is done with big strokes of his tail. You’re drawn through the lake easily, looking out and around, trying to discern shadowy shapes and mostly failing.

After a long leisurely swim, Jake takes hold of you, spinning you around before lifting you both to the surface. The night air is cold against your skin as you sit there, held up out of the water. You cough and blow out a stream of water so you can breathe; it’s an unavoidable bit of unpleasantness to Jake’s magic, getting the water out when you’re done. “What?”

“Hi.” He hitches you up on his hips, hands secure under your ass. He squeezes a little, but you’re used to that. There are better asses in the world, but Jake seems content with yours. “What do you think of over here?”

This question demands you actually pay attention for the first time since you started this lap through the lake. You take a moment to flip your hair out of your face and wipe the water out of your eyes. It’s dark out now, and though the moon and the Shell provide some light, you are not built for night vision.

This spot is just beyond the foot of the volcano, where the jungle starts to thin towards the eastern shore. You can hear some of the waterfalls nearby, so it must be near the basin. Consulting your mental map, you figure this is a fair walk from Jane’s little house and even farther from Roxy’s, since Rox elected to build a little closer to the temple.

Here, the foliage lines the water’s edge, a few persimnot trees hanging outward, bowing heavy with fruit, branches low to the lake’s surface. The dark sandy shore curves up along the land before fading in the steeper drop of the stone ledges. It’s easy to wade out of the lake from here. And the water’s warmer, given proximity to the volcano basin.

“It’s nice. Why?”

Jake drops into the water enough to blow annoyed bubbles before lifting his head up again. “Thing is, Roxy’s about done with her little abode, isn’t she? You’ve just got to finish digging out the floor tomorrow and lay out the mats, right?”

The solution you came up with to make the little wood-transformed tents into viable homes was to go in and lower the floor, creating more space. You’ve laid stone stairways down into each, with a little landing area by the door. Initially, there was some worry about flooding the whole damn thing, but you and Roxy worked together on Jane’s, with you building it up and Roxy carving reinforcement charms into the walls. It worked well for Jane’s, and it worked even better for Roxy’s since you had more practice.

There’s more to do, of course. Better support structures, like windows and maybe skylights, but to do that, you had to wait for the witches to rest up. They needed to conjure up or transmutate the material you needed.
Getting this kind of work done feels good; you don’t really understand the undercurrent of worry in Jake’s voice. “Yeah, the bulk of it will be done, sure. What’s up?”

“So you’ll make up yours next, right?” Jake asks. “Can we put it out here?”

Now you look around with renewed attention. Letting your legs go lax around Jake’s hips, you slip off him as he lets you go. You swim to the loamy shoreline, shivering as you pull out of the water. It’s a little colder out lately, not enough to amount to a winter, but enough you feel it at night.

Rubbing your arms, you look around. The trees are encroaching pretty closely on the shore. You’d have to move them back if you were going to have room to dig out a house like the others.

You hear Jake following you up, the water dripping off him noisily as he pulls away from the lake. Without turning, you tell him, “There’s not a lot of soil here. It’d be a pain in the ass to figure out some way to reinforce it so the house won’t slide out into the water.”

“Oh,” Jake says quietly.

He sounds disappointed. Fine. You look around more, thinking. You’re not a carpenter, but you cultivate an image of having some non-magical ingenuity.

The trees would have to be pushed back. Which means more wood you could use. You turn and look at the shore, how far it stretches into the lake.

“It’d be a lot more work,” you inform Jake. “A significant increase in work. For one, we’ll need to set lumber into the soil and reinforce it. That comes first. Then, we can build upward on that platform, so there’s a solid foundation. It won’t be like your cave, if that’s what you’re hoping for, but,” you wave a hand outward, your mind’s eye filling in the space with a small dock or pier. "we could make an egress point into the lake. And maybe build a shallow pool in the house itself, so you don't have to traipse out in the middle of the night to get damp again--"

You're still going on, interconnected ideas webbing together as you say them aloud, when Jake lights up like a candelabra, grabbing you around the waist and lifting you with an excited trill. You curse and brace yourself so you both don’t fucking fall, but eventually you put your arms around his neck and slump into him. He’s warm, a raw heat suffusing into your body and sinking into your bones.

Eventually, there are frogs on Frog Island.

Jane wears gloves as she picks one up. Already, it’s a full grown adult, pulled out of a little soppy den near your house.

Or, the start of your house. The lumber is set into the ground. You’re still figuring out if you want to do something to the tent before you set it up to be transformed into the house skeleton.

As you do, you wonder if Jane and Roxy will be offended if your house is bigger than theirs. Mind, it'll require you actually figuring out how to accomplish that, but you're basically improving and iterating with each build you do. It's logical your house would be the best yet. And besides, it's for you and an oversized lorelay. Surely that's fine? And you can help expand their houses...
later.

Still, you have no idea, and it’s such a nice afternoon, you don’t want to sour it with asking.

“Not poisonous, right?” you ask as Jane cups a hand over the frog to keep it from jumping away.

“So far, none of them are! Which makes sense, given their origin. Callie wouldn’t want to make things that will hurt us. Oh, shit!” she yelps as the frog leaps out through the gap between her hands and onto her chest. She hurries to grab it, but it springs off her shoulder and to the wooden deck with a damp noise before sprinting away as fast as hops allow.

“He wasn’t havin’ it,” you point out wryly.

“Apparently! Gracious…” She takes off her gloves and tucks them into her belt. “Anyway, from my understanding, there’s more on the way, but frogs are just easier for Callie to make. Which is fitting, I think.”

Everyone has their affinities, and just looking around the island makes it obvious what Kaleidos’ are.

Many of them popped up overnight, and the novelty of having any creatures around was significant. After so long with only the sound of the ocean filling the twilight hours, the sudden introduction of loud irritable croaking confused the hell out of you. You’re still adjusting to it, the addition of life around you.

It’s nicer than the old ambient noise you lived with, the sound of the city at night. It's gentler, like a lullabye.

“Doesn’t really help with the pollination problem.”

“No, not really.” Jane sits herself down on a pile of wood, crossing her legs at the ankle as she watches you measure and take notes. “But even a full apiary with no vacancies is going to have a tough time with the island. Remember we are surrounded with megaflora, not just the usual fare. So, we need something else…”

“Megabees,” you offer dryly.

Jane gasps, covering her mouth. “A megabumblebee. That… I would love to see that. It’d be like an enormous flying powder puff!” She grins, holding her knuckle against her teeth. “We should ask Callie about that.”

“You might have to go see her,” you say, trying to put this kindly. “I’m going to be tied up for a while. I want to get this built before rainy season really kicks in.”

Her smile fades. “Yes. Well.” She looks down at her skirt, smoothing it out. “I’m not very skilled at talking to her.”

“The only way to get better is practice.”

“Says the man who walked in and could just commune like that,” she says, snapping her fingers for emphasis.

It’s difficult to figure out how to handle that. Even now, almost a year later, Jane’s reticence with visiting the temple has not abated much. She’ll go with someone, but you don’t know if she’s ever gone alone. There’s a chance she’s hesitating due to the magical language barrier, of course, but you wonder if there is something else holding her back.
It’s inaccurate to say you don’t want to pry. You don’t enjoy it, but you’ll do it when needed. Now it’s probably needed, but…

You wipe sweat off your brow and look at the numbers you’ve jotted down, at the materials you have set aside. At this point, you are thinking about building a fucking scale model to see how it fares as you wind up further and further from your intellectual comfort zone. It’d look real fucking stupid to build a bigger, better house only for it to fall down at the first hard gust or anytime the lake level rises.

Maybe you can get Kaleidos to loan Jake more knowledge, if she’s got any expertise on house building in her repertoire. Worth asking, anyway. She’s beyond eager to help everyone settle in. If only Jane understood that.

Roxy’s sitting in the water, legs bent, her hands resting on her knees. It might be meditation. You’ve never figured Roxy for the type, but priesthood has had its effects on her lately. Are you allowed to interrupt? You have no idea.

Before you can figure that out, a much noisier interruption happens: the lake’s placid surface breaks dramatically with a upkick of foamy spray as Jake tears out of it. His legs kick high as he hops up the shore, pushing against the water. He’s bright green all over, and something steely and cold fills your spine at the sight.

You know the synesthetic language of those colors, and toss your journal onto the ground to hurry along, meeting him. “What’s wrong?”

Jake just lets out a high pitched cricket tone of dismay, grabbing your hand when you extend it and pulling himself in faster. It modulates into longer notes, low and vibrating through the air. It’s like a siren ringing as he wraps his arms around you tightly, picking you up and carrying you further up the shore, away from the water.

You suck in a breath against his vise grip. “Jake, the hell?”

“Something’s in there!” Jake tells you, agonized. He takes you up onto the wood deck before putting you down. “Something is in my lake, and it’s not supposed to be! There are things in there and I don’t know what they are!” He keens, shoving his face against your chest, his spines sticking straight out.

Jane puts a hand on his shoulder. “Is it more frogs?”

“No it’s not frogs, I know frogs now, these are not those leggy loudmouths!” He whines.

Roxy unfolds from her possibly-meditative pose to spring to her feet, pinwheeling her arms to keep from pitching herself right into the lake. “Did you see them, Jake? Where were they?”

Jake seems to be trying to burrow into your shirt. You wrap your arms around his shoulders, patting his back best you can while keeping him from knocking you to the ground. “No, I didn’t put my goggles on, I just felt them and got the hell out of Hades’ den before he could invite me to supper!”

Roxy does not seem perturbed in the slightest. Instead, she claps her hands, bouncing in place. “Ohmigawd, Callie told me to keep an eye out, aaaaah, finally!” She squeals and wades deeper into the water. “Dirk! Diirrk, Dirk, come here!”

“Kind of busy,” you tell her, before looking to Jane and mouthing, what the hell?
“Are you sure it’s safe, Roxy?” Jane asks, shaking her head back at you in response.

“Safe as houses, as a Strider Manufactured Hobbit House!” She waves her arms at you. “Come on, come here, Di-Stri! Peel off that mudskipper, you’re gonna want to seeeee!”

Peeling Jake off is not a simple task. He does not want you to go, nor to let you go. With some coaxing, you get him to sit on the deck and hold Jane’s hand, which helps. He attaches to her with gusto and turns big eyes up at you, chirping at you incessantly. Christ.

“Just a second, okay? I’ll be right back.” You pat his arm, then slip away, stepping over his tail when it tries to catch you and block your path. “What is it, Rox? Another new creature from Callie?”

Roxy waits for you, tapping her fingertips together in blatant anticipation. Her smile is reaching unreal Cheshire sizes.

“No, babe. This one is allllll you. Or, half you, heh.”

You’re almost waist deep in water, waiting for the punchline, when something bumps into you.

It’s sudden enough your muscles tense, instinctively going still. The movement is enough to make the thing leave, swimming away from you. When you take a breath and lean in, you can see through the refracting light into the lake just enough to spot a big… thing…. moving around. But its image is erratic and changing with the water’s ebb and flow.

Beside you, Roxy rolls up her sleeves and lowers her hands into the water slowly. “Let’s seeeee if I caaaan….”

She cranes forward, hands snapping together as fast as they can with the water resistance. “Shit! I missed. Help me out, Dirk, come on.”

You don’t bother rolling up your sleeves; after Jake’s bearhug, you are already a damp mess, as fucking usual. Instead, you put your own hands in the water, following Roxy’s example.

There is no need to catch the thing. It comes right at you and butts its big round head against your hand. The texture is weird in a familiar way, like the nodule of Jake’s peacock fins, if a little firmer. It’s soft, almost spongey, and incredibly smooth.

Darting a look at Roxy next to you, you sort of cup the thing and lift it a bit closer to the surface. Its shifting visage clears, and you are holding… a frankly huge dark ball with a long tail. Roxy makes a muffled noise of delight and reaches out to rub the ball with two fingers, stroking down from its… approximate head to its tail, which flutters wildly from the attention, splashing up water. Faintly, you can hear a soft watery trilling noise.

“Uh,” you say.

“It’s a pollywog! A big doofy pollywog, oh my god it’s so cute! Jane has to see-- Jane! Janey! Come look, hurry hurry.”

You jerk as another thing careens through the water and hits your hip. And another. You look around and there are a few of the things swimming around. One, two, three, four…


Roxy isn’t paying you any goddamn attention now. Instead, she has a hand on your arm as she
turns, leaning out to wave Jane over or something.

You cup the big… round… squishy thing between both your hands. It fills them pretty solidly, and when you lift it up out of the water, you can see it better. It’s definitely a sort of tadpole, with stripes of color shimmering along its soft, dark body. The light catches it, and its colors brighten in a way that might be bioluminescent. And from its back, trailing down from the tips of your fingers where you’re holding it, there’s a foot long tail in constant motion, shaking and flipping this way and that. Maybe it’s distressed, being out of the water.

Eventually, the tail sort of slaps damply against your hand and wrist, sticking. It makes more wet brvvt noises as you look it over.

It has enormous alien eyes. They are vivid and amber as they stare at you.

Swallowing an anxious breath, you lower it back into the water. It remains sitting in your palms for a moment, in no rush to leave, until you take your hands away; finally it swims off, circling with the others.

Well.

This is new.

Chapter End Notes

i think the coda will be 4 chapters in all but we'll see

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