



FIRST DATE



Nova wasn't the first person to claim not to mind his tendency to over-explain simple topics. It was much more reassuring than the usual claims – first and foremost because she seemed legitimately concerned that he might stop. Usually it was more along the lines of *I like hearing you talk* or *it's cute*, both of which tended to transition into annoyance as soon as it stopped being a novelty.

A tendril closed the gap between them, and he was frozen in place, as if to move would cause the moment to shatter into pieces. It did not successfully prevent her from drawing away, but he spent from then until he got into the car trying to imprint the moment on his memory.

It wasn't as if he was starved for contact. It wasn't as if he hadn't known plenty of people more than willing to touch him. Something about that fleeting touch had still felt rare, special. It seemed... kind. Lacking in ulterior motives.

*I just met her. I don't know her. I'm projecting based on what I want her to be.*

She was teasing, but it was a legitimate concern for her to have, and he considered it seriously. "I—" He was cut off by the automatic seatbelt, which always and without fail trapped at least one of his arms. He struggled with it for just a second too long before continuing as if nothing had happened. "If I do not always seem... forthcoming. It is not out of any ill intent, nor because I think you untrustworthy. I just. I'm. I have it on good authority that I am a terrible judge of character. So. For the sake of the people to whom I have obligations, there are things I won't tell you. Which is. Shady." He wasn't willing to light a cigarette in this enclosed space, and being seated meant he could not put his hands in his pockets; the two fingers on his lower right hand tapped unconsciously on his thigh, and though he mostly looked out the windshield as if there was a view worth looking at, his gaze occasionally flickered to the wisteria Nova held.

"If it helps – and I know it might not – I'll try not to lie."



Nova found herself smiling almost endearingly as she watched him attempt to pull himself out the seatbelt and set it right. She turned her head though, throwing her gaze out the window, and pressing her lips into a thin line to stifle the expression. She didn't want him to think she was laughing at him. It was more so that he took himself so seriously that a moment where he couldn't help but look like a huge dork was refreshing.

"That's fair," she replies, still watching buildings and streetlights pass out the window. And it was. There were a million things about herself that she wasn't exactly ready to bring to light, so, she couldn't *and didn't* expect him to lay every aspect of his life out before her.

The tentacle that had been in charge of the bonsai, transferred the potted tree to her lap, and she curled one hand around it, almost protectively, to keep it in place. Her other hand reached out and enclosed over his tapping fingers, effectively ceasing the dull thumping noise they were making. The gesture was made automatically, as if she had picked up the habit from suppressing someone else's fidgeting habits.

"While, I can assure you my character is *excellent*, I will let you find that out for yourself," she turned her head back to face him, that cheeky grin seemed to be a permanent fixture on her features tonight. Her hand still rested over his against his thigh. "And it *does* help. It's better than nothing."

"So, howabout, instead of speaking of said *obligations*, you can tell me all about falling out of trees..." a smaller tentacle rose between them as she spoke and gingerly traced over the contorted line across his nose, granted that he didn't pull away. "And graduating with honors," the appendage dropped to the circular seams at his chin. It was highly probable that Nova remembered everything he had told her about the marks, that first night that they had met. She had a wonderful penchant for details, especially when they were fascinating. It was *also* probable that touching him for the first time on the sidewalk breached a personal barrier she had been harboring, seeing as the amount she touched him now had increased one hundred percent since then.



A part of him was embarrassed that she'd even noticed his brief disagreement with the safety harness. The other was disappointed that she hadn't laughed. He *liked* making her laugh. Even if he was bad at it. And even if it wasn't always on purpose. The fact that it *could* be on purpose, sometimes – that was enough. He could count the number of people capable of recognizing that he had a sense of humor on two hands.

Her hand stopped the fidget he hadn't realized he'd been doing, and his other hand tentatively reached out to brush against it. He was careful of the lamellae on his fingertips, because he wasn't sure if she'd enjoy the sensation, if it would be unsettling or unpleasant.

He closed his eyes as she touched the scar across his nose, though he didn't pull away. He'd been on Osiris for thirty years now, knew very well that his scars had no real significance to anyone here. There was what they meant, and there was what they *meant*, and she only really cared about the one. It was strange, despite that.

"Falling out of trees," he said finally, opening his eyes again, "is. Harder to explain than it sounds. On Maroc, there is this thing called..." He took the hand on top of hers away so that he could gesture, indicating something about twenty centimeters tall and ten wide. "Grenk. Sort of. I'm leaving out the sounds that aren't... pronounceable." He cleared his throat self-consciously, because most of the time he didn't even bother explaining the transliteration process to make his native language sound like recognizable words.

"So. There is a game, on Maroc – sort of a game. A thing that Siladen children do. They chase the grenk up a tree, and it climbs to the highest branches," he said, and three of his hands made small but expressive gestures while the fourth remained beneath her touch. "The trees are not... sturdy. So the grenk goes up the tree, they shake the tree, the grenk falls and it dies, and then you. I don't know. Skin it or eat it or throw it at people. That isn't really... the point." He shrugged.

"When I was – I'm not sure how to translate my age. But I was very young, only barely old enough to play with my older cousins. And I was very stupid, because I was very young. I didn't like this game – that was not the stupid part, the whole planet would be better off if they'd just import some decent entertainment. Very boring for children, Maroc. Anyway, since it was one against... thirty, or so, I did not have a lot of say in the matter. My solution – and *this* is the stupid part – was to climb the tree, and get the grenk down myself, because they wouldn't go shaking *me* out of the tree."

His expression was rueful, but not bitterly so. Amused, perhaps, in a self-deprecating sort of a way. "The grenk is not a nice animal. If it was a nice animal, this wouldn't be a game. It is dumb, and mean, and ugly. Half its bodyweight is teeth and the other is claws, is the other thing, which is why you chase it up a tree instead of actually trying to catch it. My cousins did *not* shake the tree, but the grenk responded to my rescue attempt by trying to disembowel me. I fell out of the tree, and – because I was still trying to hold on to the thing, which took all of my arms and probably could have used a few extra – I landed on my face."

He paused. "The grenk *did* live, though. For the equivalent of another week, at most, because that is the maximum lifespan of a grenk. Probably not more than a few standard days."



As Ixaaliot spoke, Nova managed to find a way to intertwine their fingers in a manner that was almost natural, despite the differences in their number of digits. Her thumb rubbed small circles across his skin, and as his hand brushed hers in return she angled herself in the seat as best she could until their knees touched and it sort of felt like they were sitting closer. Seemingly satisfied with this arrangement, her tentacles withdrew among themselves, twisting in a loose imitation of curls against her chest.

She listened to him intently as she always did; she was never bored with him, and she never would have imagined they would ever talk this much when she first met him. Quiet, disinterested, *reserved* were some of the words she would have used to describe him. She had other words now. Warmer ones.

Her line of sight had a habit of dipping from his own gaze to his mouth. Watching the curve of his lips as he formed words, the way they parted slightly when he paused. She found herself laughing at one point, a bubbling of giggles that started as a whimper in her throat when he first described the creature, and escaped when she tried to picture him scaling a tree.

"I, uh-I don't mean to laugh," she explains as soon as she is able. The hand that wasn't laced with his brushed across his jaw, and upwards towards his ear as means of apology. "I have a hard time imagining you participating in something like that. If I were to imagine you as a child; I would just kind of see *you*. But smaller. Maybe even more serious. If that's even possible."

A few more lazy chuckles. "But I also have a hard time imagining children doing anything for fun, I guess. Stupid or otherwise."



"Your imagination is very accurate," he said dryly. He leaned just the slightest bit into her touch, trying and failing to avoid looking like a cat being pet. "I did not consider it participating, so much as *intervening*. I... read, a lot. Mostly. Siladen children are hideous and feral things, and I do not recommend being one." Unable or unwilling to establish a more seemly amount of distance, he let his other right hand wrap around hers, so that his palms pressed against both sides of her hand.

If he wasn't careful, he was going to kiss her a lot sooner than he'd planned.

"Are Calrathi children more well-behaved? I confess to not having much of an imagination, but. I can't imagine you *not* having fun." He didn't think he *wanted* to, at that. He'd rather imagine her smiling. "You're even having fun with *me*," he added, with a meaningful lift of his brow. But smiles could be shields that hid a person's heart, and he didn't want to be the sort of person who only wanted the pleasant parts. Half teeth, and half claws.

"There's an idiom – it doesn't really translate. *Liratne totenk griia*. The closest I could get might be *laughing at hippos*, which. Is a horrible phrase I regret saying. It's supposed to be about people who can make bad situations better by being happy. I used to think *optimist* might be the right word, but the connotations are wrong. It isn't supposed to mean *naïve*. It's supposed to mean *brave*. And – I don't know you, yet. But you make me think of that. And I thought. You might want. To know. That."

It seemed like a self-indulgent tangent, now that he'd said it. He looked out the window, to where the streetlights had stopped moving. "I'll get the door for you," he said automatically, though his eyes went to where his hands were wrapped around hers, and he made no move to untangle them.



He didn't seem too fond of her description and it prompted another lilt of giggles. The way he responded to her touches caused a small thrill to course through her, she resisted finding more excuses to do so just to witness it. With one hand trapped between both of his, she allowed her other to curl around her small tree. It remained unforgotten, despite the distractions.

Pushing air between pursed lips, she seemed to be considering her next answer. "Calrathiion children are...*disciplined*? I guess. It's not a matter of choosing to be more well-behaved. It's about not knowing any other way," her eyes dropped, fixating on their hands as she continued to explain. "Kriion is a military planet. It's a very...rigid lifestyle. From the very beginning, for everyone." Light blue hues lifted, but they immediately rolled towards the ceiling, lost in thought. She heard him point out the he couldn't imagine her not having fun. "I guess that's why I left," her eyes dropped to his again, and a wistful curl of a smile indicated there might have been more to it than that.

She blinked at him slowly, hoping that the relative darkness of the car hid the amaranthine tint igniting across her nose; her tentacles slowly began to unravel, as if they would go back to their trouble causing was. It was amazing that they had remained still for so long. His native language was intriguing, even such a small snippet of it. Like nothing she had ever heard before. She could definitely stand to hear more if it. "Th-thank you, Ixaaliot. That's actually incredibly sweet," she murmured, two smaller tendrils entwined against the hollow of her throat.

Her eyes dropped to their coil of digits as well, at the very least she knew she wasn't going to be the one to break the hold. "Okay," she responds quietly, but didn't move. She felt as if she could sit here for the better part of forever with him and not be bothered at all. Perhaps that was an exaggeration.

*You're being silly, you barely know him.*

"Have you been to the gardens before?" she chimed, as if giving him another question to answer would keep them from having to break apart just yet.



"I am attempting to imagine someone disciplining you," he said, "and I am failing. I can imagine them *trying*, perhaps. *Succeeding* is another matter entirely." His fingers stroked against hers, always and carefully so that her skin moved toward his fingertips and not toward his palms. "Or maybe that's presumptuous of me to say."

He wondered if she missed it sometimes, the way he missed the tall and slender trees and the music of insects and animals not found anywhere else. The transition from such a strict culture to a place like Radius sounded fascinating – but she sounded no more eager to discuss the person she used to be than he was, so he wouldn't ask. A story for later, when they knew each other better. "I know someone," he said, though he opted not to say who, "who says that no one moves to Osiris that had a happy childhood. Because if they *did*, they would have stayed on their home planet like a sensible person. I've heard... similar sentiments from others. Not quite in those words, but the thought is there."

Ix's smile at her thanks was faint, but it was a faintness of timidity rather than restraint. "You said you didn't like sweet things," he reminded her, and only context suggested he was teasing. Neither of them seemed to want to let go of the other, which was – as problems went – absurd. Particularly for a first date.

Every time her tendrils passed over her skin, he wanted to trace the paths they drew with his hands, over her throat and along her shoulders. Which was also absurd.

"I come here – not often, necessarily. But I come here." Slowly and carefully, he pulled his fingers from hers. "And I *do* want you to see it," he added ruefully. He slipped out his side of the car, circled around to hers and offered her a hand to help her out, although she didn't really need it.



"Not presumptuous *at all*," a humored inflection rose in her tone. "I *may not* have been the most well-behaved compared to other children, because of- uh, because of my tentacles." Her free hand curled around the larger appendage that cascaded just before her left ear, almost self-consciously. It fell motionless instantly beneath her touch as she smoothed her palm down the length of it. "As I'm sure you've noticed," she begins again, sarcastically, "They don't really *stop moving*. Adults and superiors always saw it as a lack of control, as a flaw. I was constantly getting scolded and that made me angry and then I acted out and ... then the whole process would start all over again. I spent a lot of time being disciplined. I guess I didn't really learn anything from it." That was only half true, as the punishments got more and more severe, she eventually learned something.

She released the extremity and leaned back in the seat with a contemplative sigh. For a brief moment it seemed like she wasn't looking at him, but out of the window on his side of the car. "They sound like a very wise person. I mean, why *would* anyone come here? Sometimes this colony feels like a pitfall trap. You stumble in, and then waste all your time and energy trying to claw your way back out." A surprisingly morose metaphor from the usually cheerful dancer; her words held a solidarity that indicated she believed them to be true.

Her thumb picked up its small circles on the top of his hand again, moving in time with the way he caressed hers. Her gaze focused in on his face, and she lapsed into a bout of silence. A million thoughts felt like they ran through her brain in a second. Their mutual closeness and the easy flow of conversation was not something she would have expected to happen at such a rapid rate. Weren't first dates supposed to be clumsy and awkward? With prolonged pauses and maybe a few minutes of timid hand holding? Their time spent together thus far had been exactly *none* of those things.

"You're right, I don't," she eventually broke the quiet she'd induced with a response, she was grinning. "But I like you, so I *guess* sweet things aren't all bad."

She spread her fingers to allow him to free his own from her grasp, even though she really didn't want to. The difference was immediate, her skin tingled in the spots he'd been repeatedly petting.

*He wanted her to see it; it was something he specifically wanted to share with her.* That alone caused a wave of gleeful butterflies in her stomach. She slipped her hand into his, and as she stood a tentacle pulled the wisteria from her lap and held it possessively. She considered bringing it; too ridiculously attached to it to leave it behind. However, that was ridiculous, so she held her hand out for the topiary. The tentacle deposited it reluctantly, and she leaned back into

the car to set it on the floor near her bag. Straightening she adjusted her coat with both hands before starting to walk off. After a few paces she turned and started to walk backwards, hands planted on her hips; smirk planted on her lips. She was clearly excited, like a child given free run of a toy store.

*"Well, come on."*



"Siladen tentacles are involuntary sensory organs. If you hadn't said anything, I would have gone on thinking it was cute." The corner of his mouth twitched. "Now that I know it's a *flaw*, however. It is. Much cuter."

Ix snorted reflexively at the thought of anyone he knew being *wise* – particularly Kreska. Then again, he *had* done her the favor of turning her words into something less vulgar. Her phrasing had involved a lot more words like *fuckup* and *dumbass*. He tried to cover the almost-laugh with a clearing of his throat.

"I have found Osiris to be... I would not say that I like it, here. But I also don't think I'd like anywhere else any better. The things that I dislike most on this colony are no less prevalent on others, nor on other planets. I've considered leaving – I've seen others do the same." He hesitated. "But. If I left, I would be a lawyer again. Which, I think, would work out about as well as it did the first time."

It was not terribly impressive from the outside, the place that he'd taken her. He liked that about it, if he was honest. Not many people bothered to visit, since it was technically a research facility. Open to the public, yes, but not many members of the public were interested in visiting a drab little research lab in the expensive part of town. Two hands were back in his pockets, and two clasped behind his back, and his pace was a little bit slower than necessary as she tried to go ahead of him.

"I don't know why you're trying to hurry ahead," he observed, "when the doors won't open for someone who doesn't have an access pass. You'll ruin the surprise, besides." He stopped just short of being in range of the door's sensor. "Actually – here." He held up the hands not in his pockets, and gestured for her to come closer. "I'll cover your eyes until we get in, and then you can see it all at once." He paused. "Unless you're uncomfortable with allowing shady men you've just met to lead you blindfolded into nondescript buildings in unfamiliar neighborhoods. For some reason."



"Don't call them *cute*," she seemed to whine, gathering up three each in either hand before they could go wild. They looked to have responded to the compliment almost instantly, twisting over themselves despite her hold on them. As much as she would like to pretend they were completely separate, self-aware objects, they were not. She was doing this. *She* was reacting him calling her cute; reacting to that almost half smile that had followed the comment. "I'd sometimes rather they not do anything at all."

She stared down at her hands, glancing up briefly because she was almost positive she heard him laugh. *Almost*. She pulled fingers back tentatively as if she would release the appendages, but they instantly reached out to coil around the pair of Ixaalot's arms that were closest to her; she pinned down on them again before they could succeed. "To be fair, I guess I do not despise Osiris now as much as I have before. It's revealing that it has *some* good things about it." Another slow release of tentacles, when they remained in place she released them completely, but followed it up by pushing them over her shoulders. "Why would you only be a lawyer again if you *left*?"

She stopped walking immediately as he mentioned an access pass. She was frowning, but it honestly looked more like a pout. "Well obviously, I didn't know I needed an access pass," she remarks dryly, not concerned that it was likely a rhetorical statement. She walked back to him at his beckoning, stopping before being toe to toe with him. As he continued speaking she cocked her head, a singular brow climbing her forehead. A common look of slight suspicion. "I wasn't really worried about *any* of those things until you pointed them out," regardless of her doubtful response, she turned in one fluid movement, giving him her back. Tentacles dropped down to follow the curve of her spine, feeling generous enough to stay out of the way. She held up a singular finger, like a warning as she glanced back at him over her shoulder. "If you murder me or something I am going to be really upset."



He half expected her tentacles to wrap themselves around him now that they were so close. Would he mind if they did?

That was a strangely complicated question.

"If I murder you," he said solemnly, "I will also be very upset. And so will the Osiris Institute of Biomedical Botanical Research. They would probably rescind my guest membership." His hands carefully covered her eyes, and it probably wasn't fair that he waited until she couldn't see to smile like a smitten puppy. "I will also try not to walk you into any doors," he added helpfully, and his other two hands went to her hips to guide her forward.

That was almost definitely the only reason. Helpfulness. Very helpful. Definitely could not have been this helpful by putting his hands on her shoulders. Certainly not.

"I came to Osiris for a job offer immediately after graduating law school," he explained as they walked, the doors opening automatically for them. "I spent twenty years being a lawyer here before taking an early retirement. It was... not a long time. Comparatively speaking. And explaining why I retired would be a very long story."

It was a long walk through the less interesting halls to the actual reason they'd come, but it wasn't *that* long.

"I've found that the fastest way to summarize my illustrious career is to list the places from which I have been banned indefinitely. The zoo – you needn't bother asking which, because the answer is 'all of them'. The public aquariums in the Eastern and Southern Quadrants. Benkredi, Vardina, and most other four-star restaurants that were operating twenty years ago. The entire Skivan empire, including embassies. Any pet store or apartment complex run by OmniCorp. Anywhere that manufactures or sells Abfir brand droids, synthetics, and artificial intelligences. Watch your step, there's a bit of an incline here."

He paused as he tried to recall any other embarrassments of note. "I believe that covers most of it. I do not think I'll be rejoining the profession any time soon." He brought them both to a stop, and turning her in the appropriate direction, removed his hands from her eyes.

His other hands remained where they were, for surely sensible reasons.

He took off his glasses and slid them into his pocket, because this was one place where he was sure his vision wouldn't go showing him things unpleasant. There was no artificial lighting in here; only the glow of leaves and of branches, spiraling and winding and curling, wide petals and slender leaves. Species of trees and flowers and fungus from almost every known planet, some tucked safely into glass enclosures that replicated their preferred environments. Insects that

looked like butterflies and sang like crickets helped keep the artificial environment stable, and the quiet was half the thing he liked about it.

The other thing he liked was that the wall they faced was the transparent enclosure of this segment of the colony, as close to space as it was possible to get. Not even artificial lighting to distract from the lights of stars and galaxies and supernovae.

"Unobjectionable?"



She wasn't quite sure what to do with her own hands. Her mind had gone blank as soon as his palms enveloped her hips. It was a wonderful thing that it wasn't her turn to talk, because she couldn't really think of anything outside of all the touching. "Oh, good. I'm glad we've reached a mutual 'no murdering' clause then. " The words came out relatively even despite how fast her heart was beating. She was thankful for that.

She could feel her lashes brush against his hands, because regardless of the arrangement she still felt the need to blink. She was able to take steady steps under his guidance; eventually her hands dropped to cover the ones he had on her hips, having grown tired of holding them awkwardly to her chest.

Tendrils twisted and untwisted in a steady rhythm at her back as he spoke. She wasn't sure if his prolific banning record was a good or bad thing. Perhaps a bit of both? Maybe she'd ask for clarification someday.

"Well, staying retired definitely has one benefit that I can think of. You can spend some of that copious free time you mentioned hanging out with me," she joked as the toe of her boot searched for the incline he mentioned.

They stopped and she waited, practically trembling with excitement. Her sharp intake of breath was immediate when he uncovered her eyes, and they focused to accommodate the dim lighting of the garden. She didn't move out of his grasp, she didn't do anything but stare; she was awestruck. Eventually she gained enough composure to move forward. He would either have to follow suit or let go of her.

"Unobjectionable?" she breathed, fixated on the expanse of space that was presented through the transparency. Looking out at it now, she felt as if it had been one hundred years since she'd last seen the stars like this. "This is amazing...incredible. It's absolutely stunning."



His smile had grown when her hands met his, not least because it meant she didn't mind having them there. "I'd be happy to," he said honestly to her suggestion of how he could spend his free time. He wanted to rest his chin on top of her head, kiss the glimpses of the back of her neck when her tendrils curled tight.

He was being ridiculous.

For someone who worked in a sweaty, smoky nightclub, she smelled *very* good.

"I didn't specifically say so earlier," he murmured, though he could not actually be quiet, "but I really do think it's charming, the way you... move." And charming as well was her gasp of delight, though his mouth had returned to a more neutral shape. She'd gone for the same thing he had – not the flowers all glowing in shades of blue and green and orange, but the *stars*, suns burning bright and bursting, the impossibly tangible gas giant around which their colony orbited sitting in a sea of light.

Reluctantly he let his hands slide from her hips, standing in place as she moved nearer to the wall. "They were allowed to build the facility this way because the effect of natural light is part of their research," he explained, hands going back to his pockets as he watched her watch them. "If you get a little closer and look straight up, where it starts to curve, you can see – I don't know if you'll be able to see it, actually." He tilted his eyes upward, though he wasn't quite in the right spot to be able to glimpse what he was talking about. "There's a gas cloud with two galaxies colliding inside it. Depending on which kinds of light you can see, it will either look like a big puff of green, or it will look iridescent. It's my favorite part of the view." He lowered his gaze back to Nova, taking in the way she looked against the backdrop of the sky, the glow of strange flowers against her skin. "Was," he amended. "*Was* my favorite part of the view."



"Good," she remarks simply, trying to remain calm though she was (not so secretly) thrilled. Tentacles flared at the line of her waist, her smile seemed impossibly wide. "I look forward to seeing more of you in the future, then."

She resisted the urge to lean against him while he was so close, telling her that he liked the way she moved. If she had done so, cephalic appendages would have likely wrapped around him in any way they could and it would take ages to get them to let go again. Judging by the way they constantly reached for him, she imagined they would be ridiculously stubborn about it. And if he was particularly fond of the way she moved from point A to be point B, she wondered what he would think about one of her shows at Radius.

When she glanced back at him, his face had returned to a more impassive expression, but his glasses were gone. Wordlessly, she imprinted a mental image of the way he looked without them. She followed his instructions. Venturing closer and turning her attention upward.

"I'm not sure I see it," she admits, bending at the waist slightly to get a better angle. She thought she might have seen a hint of green, but not enough to be sure. "But I do know that galaxy right there," she used a finger to nominate a twinkling blue colored light that was a bit upwards and to the right, as she stood straight again. "That's Gamma Septari. That's where Kriion is. Where I am from." She was quiet for a handful of seconds as she seemed to consider this fact; that it was so close but so far away at the same time. Tentacles slid over her shoulders all at once, entangling against her chest.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she says quietly, pivoting away from the glass. She ventured closer to one of the plants within a case nearby. She leaned over it slightly to get a better look; a flowering bush, illuminated a pale sort of cyan in the dark. It had florets with wide, white petals that were dotted with irregular spots. "I didn't even know this existed. It's beautiful."



A second date. That was what she meant, wasn't it? They hadn't even finished their first, and she already wanted a second. He was already halfway through a list of things they could do before it occurred to him that he still didn't know half the things about her that he felt like he should have.

He stepped nearer to the wall to better see where she was pointing: a little blue galaxy, and he could see gaseous arms in vibrant red spiraling out far further than the reach of the stars within it. "*Uugrichet* – or Theta Cassiopeia, whatever the hell they call it – you can't really see it, from here. There's an observatory at the highest level of Eastern with a telescope strong enough, but it isn't really worth the trouble." He shrugged, and eventually dragged his eyes away her homeworld to look at her instead.

"Thank you for joining me," he said as he watched her admire some of the garden. "Even Osiris has *some* beautiful things." He wished that he could say he'd brought her here because he thought she'd like it, to cheer her up, to share something special with her. He seemed to have accomplished those things, but that was a happy accident. Mostly, he'd thought that she'd look beautiful here.

It was one of the rare occasions when he was happy to be right.

He paused, struggled with whether or not he ought to ask what he'd been wanting to. "Do you – when you. Work. Is it ever... under a blacklight?"



"I'm sure it's a bit worth seeing," she objected, moving further into the spread of various flora. Fingers laced behind her back as she stopped in front of another casing; this one had fluorescent butterfly-like creatures flitting over what resembled stalks of lavender. Tentacles wrapped around her upper arms and elbows in groups of three. "Or rather, I'd like to see it."

There too many things riding on her statement that she didn't actually say. *I want to know everything about you. Even the smallest, most mundane things. I want to know what you like, I want to know what you don't like. I really, really want to kiss you...*

Now, *she* was being ridiculous.

"I guess you've proven me wrong. It's got hidden gems it seems," is what she said instead.

Tentacles tightened around her arms, nearly giving her whiplash with the intensity of which they did so. Clearly not pleased with her nonchalance. She really hoped it wasn't noticeable in the distance she had put between them.

She had wondered if and when he would ask her about work. Most men she interacted with didn't want to know about anything else. But as assorted as those questions tended to be, this one was quite tame. She rocked back and forth on her feet as if in thought. Frosty hues slid in his direction, flickering over the entirety of his person once before resting on his face. "*Sometimes*. Like, when I am on the main stage; for pole dancing," she spoke about the topic with a confidence. She'd never been embarrassed about being a stripper; it was a choice, not her only option. "And in the private rooms. Why do you ask?"



"Oh, it doesn't look like much through a telescope. A little galaxy at the edge of nowhere. If you were near enough, it would look like mostly oceans. Everything tall and spindly because our gravity isn't quite the same. And the sky—" He cut himself off as he realized something. "Or, no. I didn't have my glasses, then. I don't really know what the sky looks like. Would look like, to you. Maybe just... maroon?"

His elbows drew in sheepishly again. "I just. Not everyone is... pleasant. To look at. When I take my glasses off." He stepped closer to her, because as much as he liked being able to see her all at once, he liked seeing her up close more. "You look – blacklight isn't the same, exactly. But it's as close to the way I see as most species get. And every time I take my glasses off, I think it would be... a shame. If I was the only one who got to see this." He was close enough now that he could reach out, and brush a few fingers gently over the scales on her hands. "I thought – when I looked at your face the first time, I thought you looked like you were made of stars. And your scales... aurora? I think that's. The right word. You look like the Maroc sky on a summer night. And I didn't know if you... knew." He frowned slightly. "That sounds very patronizing," he apologized, because who was he to assume she didn't know what she looked like?

He really did find it stunning, the way her scales went from bright at the center to dark at the edges, reflecting the shorter wavelengths around them like mirrors; and the not-quite freckles in her skin, bright and sharp-edged spots painted over blue skin. Her tentacles looked like the arms of a spiraling galaxy, her arms trailed rainbows, and there was just the faintest ring of light in her eyes.

Almost everyone else he'd met on Osiris had eyes that looked almost dead.

"I shouldn't have – there were better ways to have said that, without bringing up work. You were, as I recall, *one hundred percent* done with that. Let's talk about... not work. Your favorite food. Your favorite song. Other facts that I can use on our next date to overwhelm you with romance."



"It sounds beautiful, you know. When you describe it. *If* one were to stay away from the children, apparently." She chuckled softly at her own joke. By now she had wandered to a trellis of hanging vines. Two tentacles pulled away from the grouping as if they wanted to touch the slightly curling leaves. She made a scolding sort of noise with her teeth, the kind you would hear if someone was trying to correct the actions of pet and they curled around her neck instead.

Nova simply found herself watching him as he drew closer. She was quite obviously left speechless by his description, indicated by the way she said nothing. She only stared up at him, her eyes a bit wide around the edges, with that indigo tint permeating the bridge of her nose. When one of his hands brushed hers, she looked down at the joining, scrutinizing the scales in question. She turned her hand over and curled her fingers around his, to keep him from pulling away.

She was not once able to form a vocal response for any of this. Patronizing? Not all at; sure she was aware of the way she looked but she never once thought she looked like that. Or that someone else would ever see her that way. *Say something*, her brain urged, but simultaneously did not give her anything to say.

Not work? Well, she could certainly talk about that.

Wordlessly, she slipped her free hand around his tie. Because she knew just rising up on her toes wouldn't eliminate the height difference between them. So as she did just that, she tugged on the tie gently to bring his mouth down to meet hers. She kissed him. It was slow, and sweet and gentle; the feeling of closing that final distance between them was...indescribable.

When she felt unsteady on her feet, she dropped down again. Her lips left his and she allowed his tie to slip out of her fingers. "I... like savory foods," she vocalizes softly. "Not things that are too sweet. And I don't have a favorite song. I like too many if them to choose."



Ix was briefly concerned that he'd left her appalled. Or perhaps she'd been stunned into silence by his clumsy attempts at seduction, this woman whose job it was to embody beauty and desirability. It was reassuring when she took his hand, but he was reassured by anything that seemed to indicate even the slightest return of his burgeoning affection.

His breath caught when her hand wrapped around his tie, and in that instant he forgave the garment any ill-will he had ever bore it. Ties were brilliant. Ties were a wonderful garment. All the discomfort in the world was worth it to have a beautiful woman grab him by the tie.

Their mouths met, and his mind went blissfully, wonderfully blank. Two hands went automatically to her hips, the others to her face, thumbs brushing over her cheekbones. He touched her as if she were made of spun glass, and it wasn't until she drew away that he remembered how to breathe.

He opened his mouth to say something, but his eyes grew wide before he could respond.

*Oh, no.*

*Nonononono.*

His neck had done *the thing*.

The hands that had framed her face went to his mouth, but it was a futile gesture. His mouth has nothing to do with it. The right side of his neck, all puffed up with air, went flat all at once. The sound his body made seemed to come from somewhere in his chest, a loud and low frequency sound like an overlarge bass drum. It was probably audible within a five block radius, and in the quiet of the garden, it *echoed*. For a moment afterward, the insects stopped chirping. By the time they started again, Ixaaliot had covered his face with both hands – though, to his credit, he had not attempted to retreat.

He'd *croaked* at her.

"Sorry," he said, muffled by his palms.



Nova's shock was brief. As soon as she realized what had actually happened, her features split into a smile. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth to try and smother them, but giggles that sounded more like whimpers bundled up in her throat. He was literally, the most adorable person she had ever seen.

Tentacles curled in on themselves, and she began to laugh. The kind of genuine laughter, where it feels like you can't breathe. Where you have to press your hands to your stomach, because your diaphragm can't handle such an intense level of unadulterated amusement. "It's okay," she manages to squeak out somehow during this fit. She waved her hand as if dismissing the issue before pressing it to her mouth, to try and choke off the sounds.

She managed a breath. "I'm sorry," a brief string of chuckles, before she regained some scrap of composure. She cleared her throat and the "I'm sorry," that followed sounded much more convincing this time. She reached up and pulled his hands away from his face, and continued to hold them in her own.

"So...you were going to say something?" she blinked up at him, trying to portray some innocence, but she couldn't hide the signature look of the cheeky smirk. She figured he would just prefer to move on from the whole ordeal. She'd probably bring it up again someday; in the perfect instance of heartfelt reminiscing, but for now, she could let it go.



He was mortified. Utterly and completely mortified.

But she was still so pretty when she laughed. She'd at least tried not to, and she was apologizing, and he found himself feeling less disgusted with himself than he could have been. He even almost smiled, because her laughter was contagious.

He lifted her hands with the ones that she'd claimed, and bent to kiss each of them in turn. "I was *going* to say," he said, "that your lack of specificity is extremely unhelpful."

Gently, all hands attempted to turn her around and bring her closer, because he wanted to wrap his arms around her and watch the *qana* flowers sway. He had to bend down to wrap his arms around her waist and shoulders, but he had to bend down for a lot of things. "I have no idea how I'm supposed to seduce you under these parameters," he said, faintly accusatory. "You like gin and tonics, unspecified but presumably numerous songs, and watching me make an ass out of myself. If you're trying to trick me into taking you to a karaoke bar, it isn't going to work. Do you like spicy food?"

Unable to resist, he kissed the spot where her neck met her jaw. "Neither of us seems to be breaking out into hives," he pointed out, though biocompatibility had never actually been much of a concern of his where kissing was concerned.



She was entirely convinced that at least one of her hearts stopped when his lips brushed across her hands. "I've been told that," she mumbles. Nova knew she had a habit of being unable to make passive decisions to a point that was almost exhausting. She was too easy going and full of more 'what do you want to do's and 'I'm okay with anything's than most people could stand.

"Well, all in all, I enjoy other drinks *besides* gin and tonics." She allowed herself to be turned and leaned into his embrace, tucking her head beneath his chin as if she had done it a thousand times before. Being this close to him made her feel giddy; excitement buzzed over her skin like static. She shook her head back and forth quickly as he mentioned karaoke bars. "No way. I spend enough time in one loud, crowded place. I don't really need another. I like quiet things," she seemed to have decided to be more forthcoming with her preferences. "What songs I like depend on what I am doing," not that that was much of a clarification. "When it comes to food, it's just sweets I don't like. I only use *sweet* as a reference because everyone else does. We - Calrathiiions- our bodies don't use sugars for anything, so the taste doesn't process into something pleasant."

*Oh, great.* Apparently it was her turn for a lecture. "Just so you don't think I'm some miserable downer that doesn't like cake."

"That's a good sign," she replies enthusiastically, smiling as he kissed her once more. She placed her hands over the set that wrapped around her hips. Tentacles were surprisingly still between their bodies. As if they had nothing to fight for now that they were getting exactly what they wanted. "Even though we *both know* a kiss isn't a very good test."



"I don't mind if you don't feel strongly," he reassured her. "I'm just... precise. A perfectionist. I want to get it right. Whatever it is." Suddenly he was wishing he'd taken her to a movie, instead, or anything where they could be this close and still have something to distract them. Or distract *him*, at least. Standing around and cuddling with nothing else to look at but flowers and stars set a mind to *wandering*.

Fortunately, he'd not be croaking again any time soon. And the rest of his anatomy did not quite suffer the same involuntary issues as so many other species.

"Not too quiet," he observed, "or you wouldn't be able to stand me." Pressed against his chest, his voice would rumble right through her, nevermind that he was trying for a murmur. "Probably not opera, then. Theater? Or concerts?"

He tried to imagine serenading her with his *angat*, but decided he wasn't feeling quite that shameless, yet.

"I didn't think you were a miserable downer. Though I guess that doesn't mean much, coming from me." Experimentally, he raised one of the hands wrapped around her shoulders to lightly stroke the base of one of her tendrils. "Just means more cake for me. I like knowing more about your—" *Anatomy*, he'd almost said. "... tastes."

He lifted his fingers to lace them through hers when her hands covered his. "Biocompatibility isn't actually that much of an issue, usually," he admitted. "I only said that so you'd have an excuse. People don't always like to admit it when their reasons aren't... physical."

"There are better tests," he added, "but somehow I don't think this facility was intended for that kind of research."



"Oh, I think I've noticed," she remarks about his being a perfectionist. "I like that about you, though." She was quiet for a moment. She was beginning to notice that the warmth of his arms and the serenity of the garden was exacerbating the fact that she'd actually not been to sleep since they'd last seen each other.

His voice vibrated through her, and she was thankful for the coat she still wore. The feeling of it drew goosebumps across her skin, and she wasn't quite ready to admit how easily he affected her. "Those are different," she points out. "They're not just *noisy*, not really. Besides, I'm feeling pretty confident that I would enjoy anything if it was with you," she reveals; her tone carried a weight that suggested she would even suffer through a karaoke bar for him.

A hand brushed across one of her tentacles and a shudder ran down her spine almost instantly. There was no avoiding it, and certainly no hiding it, pressed this closely to him. "Oh? Have you had a lot of opportunities to test *biocompatibility*?" she teases. Attempting to draw attention away from how sensitive her tentacles were.

"Then I guess we'll have to find a better place for research, someday. For the good of *science*. Of course."



"Do you?" he asked, surprised. "Usually it's a red flag. Control freak, and so on. But it's not... I don't apply those standards to other people."

"You say that now," he said seriously, "but just you wait. I'll take you to a N'sazz opera, and before the first act's done you'll have left me for dead. They will find me in the aisles, with your footprint on my face. The cause of death will be that my lungs burst, but the broken heart will also be noted on the coroner's report."

Nova's shiver at his touch made him want to do it again, and also made him wonder if he ought to be doing it in public. He'd have done it again anyway, if she hadn't interrupted with a question. The way she asked made Ix suddenly feel defensive, as if he were being accused of being a slut. "I. Wouldn't say. Not a *lot*. Just. Some people don't like touching. Otherwise. I mean. Gloves. Exist. And cling film. If a person is. Determined. And doesn't mind. Anatomical differences. Siladen have three sexes. And eight genders. Male is just... closest. Sometimes that is a problem. Not that you. Asked. I just. Surprises are. Not. Good." He shut his mouth tightly, as if words might somehow force their way through if he were lax.

It wasn't as if he'd had *that* many relationships. That many *consummated* relationships. With that many *unique* species.

"... what would be. The normal amount. Of opportunities. Over a thirty year period."

"I can think of some places," he added. "Lawyers are very good at research."



She scoffed. "Even if you did, you'd have a hard time trying to control me. I don't take orders well." *Always*, she amended in her head. She didn't always take orders. There was a time and place for everything, and there was a *particular* time and place that Nova was very good at taking orders.

"I don't really know what that is," she points out, she didn't sound embarrassed about it, just matter-of-fact. "But I am willing to accept the challenge. How bad could it really be?"

As he began to explain, Nova's shoulders hunched like they always did when she felt like she had done something wrong. In this case: *said* something. Thinking back on it she didn't have a clue as to why something so petty had even come out of her mouth. His dictation, however, only left her more thoughtful on what their possible delving into physical intimacy would lead to.

She walked out of his embrace, suddenly not feeling like she deserved to be held by him after making such a stupid comment. Her tentacles curled in the same manner they had when she'd gotten short with the bounty hunter, and she crossed her arms over her chest. "*Vii'tu*," she exhaled sharply. Being reduced to cursing in Calrathii was a sure sign that she was annoyed. This time it was with herself. "I'm sorry, that was...rude of me. I shouldn't have asked you something like that. It's not really any of my business." They were on a date, not *dating*, he didn't owe her an explanation of anything, let alone something so personal. "I hope I didn't upset you."

She sighed. "If I keep opening my dumb mouth, we probably won't even get to see how my researching skills compare."



"I don't give orders. I give... suggestions. That sound suspiciously similar to orders."

"Until the war ended," he explained, "N'sazz opera was assumed to be intended as a form of torture, and was accordingly considered a war crime. Afterward, the N'sazz explained that their intent was to demoralize the enemy with a show of their superior culture. I am told that if you listen to N'sazz opera from within one of their own opera houses, it actually sounds quite lovely. It is, otherwise, safest observed from at least one kilometer's distance from behind safety glass."

When she drew away from him, he experienced a moment of panic. Had he said the wrong thing? Had his answer made him seem dishonest?

*She definitely thinks I'm a slut shit shit shit fuck damn.*

It wasn't until she apologized that he realized he'd misinterpreted her annoyance. "No, don't – don't apologize. It was a reasonable question. I want it to be... your business. I want you to be able to ask rude questions." He wanted to move closer to her, but hesitated, faltered. The curl of her tendrils and the line of her spine were not things he knew her well enough to kiss into softness. Was touch wanted, or unwelcome?

"I'm not upset. Upset looks. Very different. That was nervous. Because I wouldn't want you thinking that you aren't... special. Or misinterpreting my intentions."

"And there isn't anything dumb about you," he added, risking a step nearer. "Least of all your mouth. I like it best when it's open." He froze, eyes wide. "*Because it means you are talking and I like hearing you talk was what I meant.*"



War crimes, he'd mentioned. A sensitive word when you hail from a culture who's main export is war. If only Kriion could lay claim to a tactic that could in any way be considered cultured or elegant. Ruthless perhaps, merciless for sure. Bloody was another good one. She tried to push the thoughts away, lapsing into strange memories of her former life was never beneficial. She tried to focus on the way he spoke. How he seemed to know everything.

"I'm surprised I've never heard of this. Kriion has been allied in many wars. Maybe, it was before my studies, or perhaps the N'sazz and whoever they were at war against didn't need any...help?"

She uncrossed her arms, and smoothed her hands over her tentacles in a way that different species would arrange wayward strands of hair. She grabbed a few at a time, attempting to pull them out of their tight spirals. They resisted, no matter which way she worked her fingers around them. They had decided not to be as forgiving as he was. She stopped her useless fumbling with them when he began to reassure her; hands poised at the back of her neck, tendrils curled around a few fingers. He wanted it to be her business; as in he wanted her to want to know more about him? Was there possibly a more convoluted way for her to think about that.

*Special.* The word seemed to resonate with her. She dropped her hands finally, looking at him over her shoulder. Childishly, she wanted to ask if he thought she was special. To make him elaborate on the compliment. "I was just teasing," she explained, trying to inflect that she had not meant anything negative by it. "You don't really leave a lot of room for misinterpretations. It's just. That, uhm. You just don't seem like you would only be interested in me for what I could do for you physically."

Did that even make any sense? Was she just rambling now. Tendrils loosened as he took a step toward her and she turned around to face him. There was an involuntary quip of laughter, it was somehow neither a scoff nor a snort. Some unique sound in between the two. "You know, that's the second time you've said something potentially naughty about my mouth."



"Mmm, the war ended – twenty five years ago? Lasted decades, on the far end of space. Nearer my home sector than yours, though I was on Osiris by then. Quite a ways from here, as well. The N'sazz allied with no one, and Terran Allied Forces didn't put as much manpower into it as they could have. Easier to just avoid that sector." He thought of the N'sazz he'd known, mostly mercenaries and bounty hunters now, hardly the monsters they'd once been made out to be. A little aggressive, perhaps, but a little diplomacy likely would have ended that war before it had begun. "Ended around when the age of exploration began. Only reason most people know about it is the old propagand films. I doubt adolescents of Kriion were all swooning over Captain Robinson, but on Osiris there were lawyers who made their whole career trying to fight for paternity tests. Never worked out, since his reputation was exaggerated. Or maybe you were here, by then. I don't... know how Calrathiions age." He trailed off as he realized he'd been lecturing, again. About a *war*, of all things, a topic she surely knew more than enough about considering her homeworld.

His mouth twitched as he watched her fight with the tentacles pulled tight against her head. It really did make him want to kiss the back of her neck. And when she turned her head, and stood just-so–

He was starting to think she was one of those people that always looked so picturesque it was as if she was posing. How could she have ever been anything but a dancer, when every twist of her wrists embodied grace?

"I know," he admitted. "And... I know. I – it was why I asked, in the beginning. If you were interested. Because even if you weren't, I'd still like. To get to know you. Talk about things with you. Show you beautiful things." He paused, and the edges of his mouth tilted upward. "I don't know why you assume I'm interested in *you* doing things for *me*. Maybe. I'm interested in doing things for you. And. I would like to be sure. They are things you want done." He rocked on his heels, smiled faintly as his eyes went down to his shoes.

He looked back up when she didn't quite laugh, but at least she seemed amused. "I seem to be developing a fixation," he said dryly. "In my defense, it is a very nice mouth. Hardly naughty at all, I'm sure."



She made a thoughtful noise. She would have been in the middle of her time in the academy twenty-five years ago. If Kriion hadn't participated there would have been no need for her to hear about. Their history lessons were...selfish at best. Only capitalizing on facts that put them in a dominating light. "Slowly," she mumbled on the topic of aging. "Compared to some, I guess. I'm eighty-nine standard years. That's nothing to brag about back home."

"And I've only been on Osiris for five years," she added, an afterthought.

She took her own step closer to him, obviously over her previous bout of annoyance, but not quite sure how to bridge the gap she had forced between their bodies. When most people put their hands on their hips it looked like a hostile gesture, but for Nova it was the most relaxed position she seemed to have. "That's going to be a pretty tall order," she stated with a glance around the garden. "There are *actually* things more beautiful this?"

He presented her with the small hint of a smile. She would do anything it took for more of those smiles, live and breathe by those smiles. "Then I guess there will be a learning curve for both of us. When it comes to things we would like to do for each other."

The mouth in question did little more than pull into one of her more common half-smiles. "Hardly," she mimics, as if she weren't entirely convinced. "We'll see."



"I know I've been here thirty years or so," he mused, "but I've never quite figured out how many standard years old I was when I came. I'm fairly certain you're older than I am." In a purely literal sense, of course. Physically speaking – she was probably going to outlive him by a fair amount. But that was a thought for a distant future. "I am an overeager young man chasing after an older woman," he said, more than a little droll.

He looked around them, at the stars and galaxies and flowers glowing bright. "I. May have peaked early. Normally I would have done a picnic." He frowned, because clearly he was going to have to start getting creative. Second date picnic? Or a museum. A research aquarium? If she hadn't tried to murder or rob him after the third date, he could invite her over to his apartment for dinner. He liked doing that.

"We'll see," he repeated thoughtfully, holding out two hands in an offer for her own. "I'm easy to please. I'm a vegetarian. I like sweet things, and will eat literally anything that involves caramel. My favorite color is lavender, but it clashes horribly with my skin. I like movies made on Station Epsilon 6 best, because the special effects are awful and nothing depressing ever happens. I think art generated by designed intelligences is fascinating and lovely. I like music on stringed instruments meant to be plucked with fingers. My favorite musician is Johnny Cash, but that one's a secret, because I know someone who'd be insufferable if she found out she was right."

"Too much information?"



"Oh?" she seemed surprised. Whether it was by the fact that he didn't know or that he claimed she was older was unclear. Her lack of knowledge was catching up to her, knowing absolutely nothing of the Siladen other than what was standing in front of her, and that didn't reveal very much either. She was starting to think that knowing how to perform a lap dance and how to disable an attacker in forty-two different ways wasn't going to get her through life. Especially when he seemed to know so much about so many different things. Even though that likely came with the territory of being a lawyer. Retired or otherwise. "An older woman," she seemed to frown, but her tone read amused. "That seems awfully risqué of you. Though, to my benefit I don't think anyone would be able to tell."

"I'm sure you'll be able to think of something. Though, *I* could think of something too. Since *someone* decided to tip me a ridiculous amount last night, I've got some funds to blow through." Pale oculars rose to meet his pointedly. She'd decided not to mention it earlier in the night, not wanting to put a thought in his head that it was the only reason she'd called him.

She closed the distance and slipped her hands into the ones offered to her. Smiling instantly, clearly pleased that he had done so. "Not at all," she replied with a quick shake of her head. She would have explained that it was impossible to give her too much information since she wanted to know everything there was to know, but that probably would have sounded a bit overwhelming. She cocked her head to the side, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth in obvious thought. "Let's see," she begins, piecing together facts that were similar to his. "I'm indecisive to a fault, which you may have noted earlier. I'm *not* a vegetarian, but I am also not picky about what I eat. My favorite color is yellow, but I don't know why. It seems cheerful, I guess? I've never put much consideration into movies, they're not something I've ever felt could be enjoyed by oneself. I do like art. Paintings mostly, because I feel like it's something I would have liked to do if I'd ever been given the opportunity. I like music that can be danced to, because I like to dance. And I don't just mean that as a stripper. I like the bakery by my apartment. I've never eaten anything from there, but they have amazing coffee. I'm all about coffee. And I'm quite fond of tea..." She sort of let the last word trail off, realizing that she had gotten a bit more involved in the thought than she had meant to.



"They – we – tell time differently." He tapped his forehead, those star-like shapes that indicated when he'd been born. "Stars and constellations. Doesn't translate easily. I'm not quite middle-aged, anyway." Just talking about it was making him feel old. Meanwhile, Nova looked younger than he could ever remember feeling. "I'm very risqué," he agreed. "I take tiny trees to nightclubs, and sometimes hold hands with dancers in gardens."

"That was. I try to tip generously in general. And you... cheered me up. You earned it. Even if you hadn't flirted with me, you would have." He considered the other part of her statement. "Are you... offering to take me on a date?"

Both sets of hands wrapped around hers, lacing fingers with hers and gently massaging her wrists. It was strangely sweet, the habit she had of chewing on herself. Mouth not as wide as a Siladen, lips fuller and softer. At some point, he was sure, she was going to reveal a habit that *didn't* make him want to kiss her. "I can't dance," he admitted. "I have three left feet. Don't ask where I keep the third, I'm as confused as anyone. You'll have to take me to that bakery, sometime. And I'll take you to the coffee shop on the first floor of my apartment. I haven't had the coffee, because I only ever buy scones. They have dulce de leche scones – you would loathe them. But if the coffee is as good as the scones, there's a chance you won't despise it." He kissed her forehead, closed his eyes and imagined her drinking coffee in his kitchen.

"Let me know when you want me to take you home," he warned, "because otherwise I'll try to keep you here until you have to leave for work tomorrow."



Her gaze rose to the marking in question. She briefly wondered if she would have been able to decipher something from the design if she'd ever paid attention in her classes. It was unlikely, star charts were never her forte and he came from an entirely different part of the galaxy. Two smaller tendrils curled against either cheek. They seemed to mean something, the different movements of her tentacles, but there were too many different positions to actually pinpoint them all. "Ah, either way. I like that you bring me tiny trees in nightclubs." A tentacle stroked across his jaw, like her hand had done earlier in the night; an affectionate petting sort of gesture. But her hands were busy and she wanted to touch him more.

"I never would have guessed that I had cheered you up. I was pretty sure that I was just annoying the hell out of you," the appendage lingered against his face as she pointed this out. It pleased her that he'd opened up to her tenfold as the night had progressed, he had been impossible to read yesterday at Radius. "And why do you seem so surprised? Of course I would take you on a date."

She resisted the urge to stiffen as his other set of hands moved to her wrists, forcing herself through the unbearable natural reaction to pull away. She worried that he would notice the palladium casing hidden beneath her skin; no bones, just experimental military implants. She tried not to think about it. "Dancing is easy," she insists, with the air of someone who was an expert in something would. "And it's a deal. The cashier at the bakery is always trying to talk me into a caramel sweet roll. They look good, *I guess*, if you're into that sort of thing."

He pressed lips to her forehead, and her breath hitched in her throat, taken aback by the tenderness of the gesture. "I don't necessarily want you to take me home," she was obviously disappointed in what she had to say next. "But you should." A sigh. "I've actually not been to sleep since we saw each other last. And I have to be at the club early since there is a limited window in which I can practice. Which I know probably sounds weird."



"I'm glad," he said, once again leaning just the slightest bit into her touch. "I wasn't... I thought it might have been. Idiomatic." He *knew* it was idiomatic, in fact, but as long as she liked it he didn't much care.

"I know it can be... hard to tell. You made me laugh. You seemed... nice." It was difficult to explain what exactly he meant, when *nice* seemed so much like damning with faint praise. It was the little things she'd done, the things she *hadn't* done. She'd teased him, but she hadn't made fun of him; she'd flirted, but not aggressively; she'd cheered him up, but not intentionally. *Genuine* might have been the better word, but it had connotations he didn't want to unpack just yet. "But taking someone on a date is different from being taken on a date. I wasn't sure if you had a preference."

There was a strange look in her eye as he touched her wrists, and he wondered if he'd imagined it, when she behaved as if it was nothing. So he wrapped his fingers around hers, instead, just to be safe. "Dancing is awful," he rebutted. "I have too many elbows. It is, as far as I'm concerned, a spectator sport." He considered the prospect of a caramel sweet roll. "You must buy me at least a dozen," he said seriously, "and you must not give them to me until we are about to part ways. Because otherwise I will eat them all in one sitting, and I'd rather you didn't see

that."

He was silent for a long moment after she admitted that their date was probably over. Finally, his eyes narrowed. "That," he said, "is *extremely* unhealthy." He spun her around in a maneuver that was suspiciously like dancing, with the full intent of marching her back outside with as much haste as was seemly. "You are going to go home, and you are going to get... whatever the healthy amount of sleep for a Calrathiion is. That is a *Suggestion*. Because I will not be responsible for keeping you up at all hours of the night when you have work in the morning. Even if I enjoy it."

... *what did I just say.*



He thought she was *nice*. This awkward, adorable, entirely too sweet for his own damn good collection of a man thought she was nice. And brought her tiny purple trees at work. He didn't seem to care that she was a stripper and kissed her forehead with such tenderness that she felt as if she would faint. "So, accompanied by tiny purple trees or not, does this mean I will be seeing more of you at Radius? Or do you have somewhere else to hang out and drink Martian tequila."

*Hard to tell*, he'd said. Another amused scoff. The more time spent with her would reveal that she had a handful of habits that just came naturally to her. Smirks, scoffs, *her tentacles wrapping around his forearms because she'd stopped paying attention to them*.

Wait, what?

*Je:mala per'leke*, she cursed in her head. They were stuck there now, there was no subtle or gentle way to pull them off of him. "Only letting you take me on dates would be a little unfair," she was determined to continue the conversation as if she wasn't clinging to him with almost every available appendage. "How would I get to show you that I really like you, if I didn't get to plan dates for you?"

He'd definitely noticed something. His hands moved away from her wrists and went back to playing over her own. He didn't completely pull away from her and that quelled the usual bubble of panic. He didn't mention it either. So she didn't have to fumble over a decent response. Also known as lying. Which she would generally like to avoid. "Oh, no. You're not getting out of it that easy. You *will* be dancing, if I end up with anything to say about it." She had her own moment of imagination. She saw him, in the seat across from her at her favorite table by the window. Enjoying one, or apparently twelve, of the sticky rolls that she had mentioned. A dreamy smile spread over her features. "I will even buy you *two dozen*" she proposes, fantastically, as if she'd just struck up some great bargain. "Because I like you that much and stuff."

She faltered for a moment when his eyes narrowed, the suspicious feeling that she was in trouble crept up her spine. Her tentacles dropped from his arms as he spun her, they had no choice unless they wanted to end up in an foolish looking tangle. "You're right, your suggestions *do* sound suspiciously like orders," she replies in jest, allowing him to escort her out of the room.

When they were back outside, she dug her heels in, stopping the momentum that he was using to propel her back to the car. She turned in his arms to face him, fingers sliding beneath the collar of his suit jacket and she used the grasp to pull their bodies together. He was wildly taller, so she didn't bother looking at him, just focused on the knot in his tie and allowed her fingers to play over the fabric she held. "So, you're *partial* to the idea of keeping me up all night, are you?" She kept her voice low, suggestive, only loud enough to be heard.



"If you want me there," he said. "I wouldn't want to bother you when you're working. I have other places I can be. Wouldn't want to seem clingy."

As if he'd be the clingy one, when her tentacles seemed to have decided to take his arms hostage. Not that he was going to complain. A hand left hers to hold one of the tendrils that had claimed him, because fair was fair. "I'd be happy as long as you didn't look too bored. But, fine. I will let you plan our next date. Even though it is so far sounding as if you will be watching me gorge myself on sweets before falling face-first onto some kind of dance floor." And he'd do both of those things, if she wanted, because he was not a man who made good decisions in the face of pretty women. Particularly ones who smiled at him like *that*.

He tried to spin in her in such a way that she wouldn't *need* to let him go, but he supposed it couldn't be helped. She had enough experience with her own anatomy to know how not to get tangled up in her own tendrils.

... even if that was a really interesting mental image.

"Yes," he agreed, hands on her arms and at the small of her back. "Suspiciously. You can tell they aren't orders, because the only thing that will happen if you don't listen is that I might be disappointed."

He nearly knocked into her when she stopped, and *did* when she turned around and pulled him close. Very, *very* close. "I am partial," he began slowly, as quiet as he could manage and rumbling all the same, "to the idea of you getting a good night's sleep. But if you had a few days off – if you didn't mind me keeping you all to myself – I might not." Two hands went to her hips, urged her nearer to the car so that she was pinned between himself and the door. "Be opposed." His other hands framed her face, tilted it upward so he could see her. "To the thought of us staying up late." He brought his face centimeters from hers, and realized he hadn't put his glasses back on, could still see the rings of light in her eyes. "For research purposes."

He was supposed to be doing the responsible thing and taking her home. Kissing her was neither of those things, but he did it anyway.



"I would love to have you there. The only thing is, sometimes I have to do actual *work* and I wouldn't want you to be stuck with nothing to do."

Nothing to do, she had said. Was that even possible in her line of work? Regardless, was that even possible in a bar? Entertainment was what she got paid for, and the more entertaining the better. But she seemed to speak self-consciously on the matter. Nova was popular, but she wasn't the *most* popular, always falling short behind the same dancer.

She turned her attention on the appendage the he held. It seemed to thread through his fingers and slide over his palms like a pet begging for attention. "I would never," she says, taken aback, gaze flickering back to his eyes. "Do that to you on the second date." She finishes. "I'm going to think of something so perfect and incredible and just sweep you off your feet. You're going to be amazed." She pulled one of her hands from his to make a grand gesture to emphasize her over-exaggeration.

He ushered, she walked. "Well, what happens if I don't listen to an *order*?" The thought of him being disappointed was enough to make her follow said suggestions, but if that was the mildest of problems, what was the worst?

She was standing so close to him that his voice vibrated through her. It seemed to touch every part of her, but the words he chose brought forth a pout a first. His hands went to her hips and she couldn't breathe. He backed her up against the car and her mind went blank. The press of his body against hers, hands framing her face, staring up at him: a perfect combination. Her tentacles flared around her shoulders. She could have been struck dead at that very moment and there would have been no question that she had died a happy woman. "For research purposes," she murmured in what sounded like dazed agreement, her lips brushed against his as she spoke.

He kissed her, and the thrill that shot through her was different than when she had initiated it. Her fingers tightened around his collar, as her lips moved against his. This kiss lasted longer, she made sure of it. She would memorize the taste of him, the way his mouth felt against hers. So when they were forced to part, she would have that piece of him. Over time, there was the irresistible urge to take a proper breath. She broke away from him, and pulled a shaking inhale, fingers uncurling from his jacket. She smoothed it back into place with her hands. "It's a date then," she promises, trying to keep her voice as steady as she could. "Tonight, I will sleep, but the next time I have days off, I am all yours."



"I could always try to get things done while you work," he said, clearly giving it serious thought. "I don't know that a man sitting around answering messages would mesh well with the ambiance." Some things would require him to be there in person, besides. Radius was not the sort of place where he would choose to spend any amount of time, under normal circumstances. Nova wanting him there with her was not normal circumstances. Or was she suggesting she wanted him to watch her work...?

He wasn't sure how he felt about that. He wouldn't mind seeing her dance. But in the context of work...

"Not the second date?" he repeated. "So you're leaving yourself open to do it on the third. Or the tenth. As soon as I've let my guard down, I'm sure." He said it as if he were serious, but there was a hint of a smile around his eyes. "I'm already feeling fairly swept. But I'll take your word for it that I will find myself additionally off-balance."

"Whenever I failed to follow orders," he mused, "I got fired. Or fined. Since I'm in no position to do either of those things, I can only give suggestions." He considered the question. "I could threaten to punish you, if that would make you feel better," he decided, "but since you're from a military planet, and I'm from a low-gravity backwater, I feel like it might not carry much weight."

For someone who didn't like sweets, she seemed awfully sweet to him. He might have been imagining that, but he didn't think he was. It was with the utmost reluctance that he let her draw away, did not immediately try to claim her mouth again. The lapels of his jacket were probably going to remain a little bit wrinkled, though she did her best to put him back in order. "I'll—" The door of the car attempted to open automatically to grant them entry, pushing her further into him. His expression was flat, and he gave an exasperated sigh. "I will look forward to it," he said, though the moment was ruined. He pulled her away from the car door so it could open, and held it though he didn't have to.

"Would you like me to ride home with you? I can find my own way, if you'd rather not." *Do you mind if I know where you live* went unsaid, though it was the question implied.



"Eh," the noise was merely a quip, but it seemed to convey the emotion that he shouldn't put that much thought into it. "Don't worry about it. *You'll* be busy, *I'll* be busy. I'm sure we'll see plenty of each other without me making you hang around the club all the time."

"*The tenth date?*" she questioned, managing to sound shocked, even though she was smiling. As she spoke her left hand reached up to cup his cheek, fingertips lightly played over seams as her thumb stroked the hollow beneath his eye. She'd noticed that he had yet to put his glasses back on and this was one of the handful of times where she looked up at him as if he wasn't real; a dream. "Apparently, I am feeling awfully ambitious in my date planning. Should I also choose our furniture for when we move in together? Or what kind of centerpieces we will have at the wedding?" That same lilting bout of laughter at her teasing. "And I don't know if I believe you're really taking me seriously."

*I could threaten to punish you.* An immediate and seemingly uncontrolled string of nervous sounding giggles escaped her at the phrase. It put her heart in her throat, and her tendrils twisted over one another, even though her mind had instantly put the phrase out of context. Pushing the thoughts that rose to the back of her mind, she managed her best pugnacious smirk. "If that is the case, I would start thinking of punishments now if I were you. I'm not very good at following orders, and *sometimes* I don't like following suggestions."

The door bumped her rear and pushed her into him. She couldn't help a few chuckles as the moment fell apart due to such horrible timing. She pressed a quick kiss to his chin, because it's what she could reach, as she finally released her hold on his jacket. "As will I." He moved her away from the door, and she took a moment to be pleased in the way their bodies fit together, despite an obvious difference in height. Climbing into the car, she pulled her wisteria from the floor and set it in her lap. She turned her head look up at him. "Only if it's not out of your way. I just need to be taken back to Radius; I like to walk home from there. But like I said, only if it's not inconvenient." Her response was not based on an aversion to him knowing where she lived, but on a complicated fitness regime that he likely had zero interest in.



"Let's not ruin this before it starts by talking about interior decorating," he said, the tone of a man who'd seen more than one relationship die in the face of irreconcilable style differences.

The thought of letting someone else pick out his furniture made his teeth itch.

He could not think of a single response to her second suggestion that would not dig him into an inescapable hole, and so he chose to pretend she had said no such thing. She hadn't meant anything by it, anyway. Harmless teasing, nothing more. "Do I look like I'm not serious to you?" he asked, which was something of a trick question. He always looked serious. *Especially* when he was joking.

He hadn't yet figured out how to translate all her body language, the way her tendrils moved in subtle displays of this or that. The more obvious things, yes, but not any of the subtler things he'd more prefer help in recognizing. Nonetheless, that giggle – almost uncharacteristically girlish. Nervous? And her tentacles mostly seemed to move like that when she was excited about something.

Hm.

*Hmm.*

"I will endeavor to be creative, I suppose," he said, in the noncommittal way to which he defaulted when he was concerned he might be agreeing to terms he did not understand.

"I'll be happy to join you," he said, though it was indeed out of his way. He wondered, though he knew it was none of his business, if she lived near Radius or simply had travel arrangements from there. Mostly, he just wanted to delay the point at which they would actually need to split up and say goodbye for the night. He didn't know when she'd get more time off, when they'd be able to see one another again.

The longer it took, the more likely he'd show up while she was working with another tiny tree. If he seemed sometimes concerned to excess about seeming clingy, it was only because he knew very well that he *was*.

This time when he sat down beside her, setting the car on a return route, he was more cautious of the seatbelt. He still looked unbelievably awkward, but this time he didn't look as if he was losing a fight with the car. As they began to move, he retrieved his glasses from his pocket and put them back on, dismissing all his notifications without even bothering to read them first.



She laughed, her hand fell from his face, but not before the thumb brushed across his jaw. "Oh, ho ho. You did not like that at all, did you?" she points out in jest. "I could practically feel your jaw clench. Don't worry, you can pick out all the coffee tables." She continued even though he had tried to shut her down. She seemed to enjoy poking at small tangents that got him worked up; but not enough to be a general annoyance. She hoped.

She rolled her eyes, both in a way to convey her thoughts and to look up at him. "I think your serious face actually looks just a tad bit different." She held up thumb and index fingers in his line of sight, the digits were separated by mere centimeters of space. "Just a little, but I think I'm starting to be able to tell the difference."

Begrudgingly, she would admit that he was still very hard for her to read; unless he was being more obvious. Reminding herself that she had plenty of time to figure him out was a reassuring thought. Well, she was pretty sure she had plenty of time. At the very least he wanted to see her again, so that was going in her favor.

"Creative? That sounds like it could be fun. Or... ruthless. Y'know, whichever you were going for." The smile in her voice could be heard, even though she had moved further into the car, seemingly to locate her bag and rifle around in it for something. For some reason she had gotten the sudden urge to send nothing but a tongue-out emoticon to Reyr who was stuck back at the club. She managed to do this and maneuver around the seat belt at the same time.

Her mouth twitched around the edges. She was holding back a comment about his further success with the safety harness, because she figured she had definitely teased him enough for one night. Which was an impressive milestone for her. If being relatively mature could be considered a milestone.

After shoving the phone back into the side pocket of her bag, one hand wrapped around the pot of her tree and the other reached for one of his; the lower one of the set that was closest to her. She turned it palm up so she could run her own fingertips over the ridges on his. She'd noticed them after the number of times they'd held hands in the garden. "Why don't you ever seem to read your messages?" she inquires, she'd noticed that he constantly looked to be dismissing them. Leaning her head back against the headrest, her tentacles coiled against her chest, some disappearing into the collar of her coat.



"You're exaggerating," he accused, though she probably wasn't. "Soon you'll be claiming I'm capable of feeling joy," he added, though the thought that she was studying his face brought him no small amount of joy in and of itself.

He didn't miss the way she had to fight to restrain herself as the seatbelt restrained him. "Ruthless," he decided, as if it was anyone's fault but his own that he looked ridiculous. "Definitely ruthless. To suit my cruel and merciless nature. Which you have certainly noticed by now." What she had presumably noticed instead was that he was about as cruel as a kitten, assuming the kitten was very tired and much nicer than most kittens.

"Don't—" But it was too late. It was second nature to be careful when he touched things, in the same way that it was second nature not to bite his tongue. When she touched his fingertips without that same caution... she stuck. "Here, wait – don't." Another hand gently took her wrist to keep her from trying to pull away, because that wouldn't help at all. The trouble with getting stuck to someone was that it was a stressful situation, and becoming stressed caused an involuntary reaction in his setae that made him *more* stuck.

"The parties with whom I regularly communicate know well the times at which I am available to them," he began, because continuing the conversation as if nothing was happening was the easiest way to help disengage. "As well as how to tag messages that are urgent. I have, thus far, not seen anything urgent or interesting come in." He realized as soon as he said it that it was an almost deliberately obtuse way of putting it. "Yesterday, I didn't answer because I was irritated. Today, I'm not answering because I'm busy." He lifted the hand that was stuck to his, and kissed the back of it, able to take his hand away almost immediately afterward. "In the last two days I have not seen a single subject header more interesting than you are." He considered the possible future implications of that statement. "If I ever stop to answer, please assume my house is on fire or someone is about to die."

Or someone had already died. It was the sort of statement that sounded like a joke, and he rather hoped she'd take it as such, honest though it was.



She was not, in fact, exaggerating, but she didn't say so. Instead, she managed a woeful expression, as she pressed the back of her hand to her forehead, against the widow's peak-shaped ridge where her tentacles began. "You're just determined to break my hearts," she muses; a cheerful light still shone in her eyes. "All my efforts will be for naught, if you can't be bothered to enjoy them."

Personally, she could have done without the seat belt, more than willing to risk personal safety to be able to sit closer to him. To lean against him in the confines of the car, as she watched the buildings and streetlights pass out of the window. "Ah, of course," she reflects, nodding sagely as a smaller tentacle curled beneath her chin. The others continued to move over her collar and chest like a tangle of serpents. "Only the most cruel and merciless of souls take girls to bio-luminescent gardens on a first date. Your method of cruel and unusual punishment by means of being entirely too adorable is effective, I must say."

The face she made when she found herself stuck to him was, at best, difficult to pinpoint. It was a well-crafted mixture of several feelings all at once. Even though her lips did purse, and her brow did furrow, the expression was not wholly annoyed or disgusted or disappointed. She looked down at their locked digits and couldn't even be bothered to worry when his fingers encircled her wrist; she wasn't planning on pulling away. Nova just sat there with her hand poised in the air, resisting the urge to wiggle her fingers and watch his move in tandem. She was doubtful it would amuse him as much as it would her. The interaction caused her thoughts to wander.

"Sorry," she inflected with a tone of fault, as lips pressed to her hand and their fingers fell apart.

She smiled as he offhandedly complimented that he found her interesting. "I was just beginning to wonder. When I messaged you earlier today, you didn't reply to it. You just sort of appeared. With a tiny purple tree at that. I guess... I was mostly wondering if I would be getting replies to the sexy messages I will *inevitably* be sending you in the future." She said this factually, grinning from ear-to-ear, making whether she was serious or not hard to determine.

"I suppose it would be wrong to express how pleased I am to only rank below house fires and potential deaths."



"Focus your efforts on things that will make you happy regardless of what an asshole I am," he said. "Then your hearts will be safe from my terrible influence." But mostly – mostly – he just didn't want her doing things for his sake. He wanted her to be selfish and happy, the kind of happiness he wouldn't be able to ruin. Less guilt and less regret, less altering themselves to become nearer to what they thought the other wanted.

"Absolutely the cruelest," he agreed, trying not to let his eyes trail over the way her tendrils writhed over her skin. "Now whenever someone who isn't me tries to earn your love, you will find yourself thinking: *yes, but this isn't as good as those gardens*. I am pre-emptively sabotaging all attempts to have a love life after you've left me a lonely shell of a man."

... that may have been slightly too accurate.

If there was one thing more embarrassing than croaking at a woman, it was getting stuck to her. Apparently, he was pulling out all the mortifying stops this time. There was no real way to reassure a person that he'd not be getting stuck in more awkward places, not without making the situation worse than it already was. *It doesn't happen if they're wet* raised more questions than it answered, particularly as to the direction of his thoughts. To say nothing of those still-lingering compatibility questions.

"Don't be sorry," he said. "I should have been more careful. Or warned you. Thank you for not. Being too offput. It is less problematic than it seems."

The reasoning behind her curiosity was not quite what he'd expected, and he seemed to take a very still moment to process it. "If I. If you. If you send me messages. Like that. And I do not respond. It will be because I have become. *Distracted*. And possibly. I will be trying to determine if. I ought to come see you."

"... if you would rather I didn't *suddenly appear*. You should probably specify. Or else there is a chance that I will do exactly that."



She was quiet for a few seconds; looking up at him with a contemplative expression. She felt there was a cynicism to his words and that brought a question to the front of her mind. She doubted whether she should ask. Despite his telling her that he wanted her to ask questions, to make things her business, the timing just didn't feel right. Tendrils twisted over themselves on her shoulders. She tilted her head back further. Her eyes, with their overlarge irises in a sea of black, locked onto his yellow ones; she was obviously putting a lot of effort into this thought she was thinking. "What if making *you* happy makes *me* happy?" she concluded. The question lacked the lilt of her teasing tone. She continued to look at him; tentacles moved to wrap around her biceps.

She seemed surprised. This could be determined by the way her head cocked almost immediately after his response, appendages tightened around her arms. She wanted to raise the inquiry to whether this was legitimately a vie for her affections, if there were desires for them to become a long term sort of thing. But she didn't want to freak him out, didn't want too sound overeager or something equally unfavorable. "Why do *I* leave *you* in this scenario?" was her immediate response despite all the self-reflecting that was happening in the background. "I get to ride on the coattails of: *oh, Ixaalot took me to the most beautiful garden...* and now I have to come up with something equally incredible to *impress you*. Which is going to be, like, impossible. So, naturally, I am the one who gets dumped and withers away as a lonely and bitter old woman. With a hundred cats!" For a moment, she looked to be in actual distress, she spoke entirely too fast. The fact that she was going to have to come up with a date comparable to this one seemed to have caught up to her in that moment.

She pulled her hand back to her side of the car and wiggled her fingers in her line of sight. "I'm not worried about it," she murmurs, turning the appendage around as if she were inspecting her scales. "It's kind of cute. In a strange way; a *really* strange way that probably makes me sound like some kind of weirdo, but, oh well." The end of the explanation was punctuated with a yawn, and therefore muffled by her hand moving to cover her mouth.

"You should always come see me," she replies nonchalantly, not even having to give the response much consideration. "Just to save you all that time you'd waste determining if you should."

She reached over and brushed her knuckle across his jaw; it was slow but fleeting all the same. She seemed to enjoy doing that. Her lips curved into a genuine smile, no trace of the smirk. "If you can manage to suddenly appear whenever I message you, I will be both amazed and extremely pleased."



"Then we are both doomed," he said. "We'll be caught in an endless loop of trying to make each other happy, and accidentally make ourselves miserable, instead. Or else we will be so deliriously happy with one another that we will be utterly useless at anything but staring at one another." The latter did not actually sound like that horrible a fate, despite how dire a warning he tried to make it sound.

He considered the best way to answer that question, before deciding there was none. "I probably shouldn't tell you this," he admitted, "but I have only ever been left. Up to and including my last relationship, assuming the theft of my television was intended to convey a desire to part ways. If they ever return with the desire to resume our relationship, I may be forced to terminate things, though they may have had good reasons." He fidgeted with his tie. "I am trusting you not to take advantage of this information. But. If you take me on a date which does not end with a loss of property or health on my part, I will be suitably impressed. If you exceed that – which I am sure you will – I will be beside myself with joy."

That really did make him sound horribly pathetic. Which might not have been inaccurate.

"It doesn't sound that weird," he reassured her. "Though give it time, and the novelty may wear off."

The novelty would probably also wear off of his willingness to be by her side at the slightest suggestion of it. "I don't know about *sudden*," he warned, since on at least some occasions he would probably be on the other side of the colony from her, "but I will almost certainly be there sooner than later."

They were approaching Radius, and she was clearly exhausted, but he wished desperately that she didn't have to go just yet. He placed his hand over hers and held it so that he could turn his head and kiss her palm. "Message me whenever you'd like," he urged, "whether you want me there or not. Message me to say hello, and I'll be pleased just to hear from you."



She frowned at his use of the word 'doomed.' Her brow furrowed at the word 'miserable,' though it perked up again towards the end of his explanation. She was quiet once more. He was really good at leaving her mildly speechless. He had also managed to make both options sound decidedly unfavorable. "You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?" A slow smile spread over her features, clearly unperturbed by the options, after all. Determination glittered in her eyes, she was always up for a challenge. Especially if that challenge included getting smiles out of her impassive ex-lawyer.

"Well, I guess I will have to change my plans. Since, punching you in the nose and stealing your wallet can no longer be on the agenda." She managed to say this with a straight face, as she separated her tentacles into two bunches with her hands and ran digits down the length of them, as she watched him trifle with his tie. "It's really the best thing I had going, date wise." When she released the appendages, they simply fell back into place, which was a decent testament to how tired she actually was. "I promise not to take advantage of such useful information. Or *you*, for that matter. So prepare to be so ridiculously overjoyed you won't be able to handle it."

Being left. That was certainly something she could relate to. Not that she had a veritable array of relationships, but there had been enough for a pattern to develop. One she didn't necessarily understand all of the time. Turns out it was possible to try *too* hard, to be *too* giving. Too invested in someone else.

"It doesn't really have anything to do with the novelty of it," she clarifies. "I think it's cute because it's a part of you. Because I think you're cute." She made it sound simple, as if *ix* being himself was more than enough for her.

"Eventually is good enough, I suppose," she huffed, somewhat like a spoiled child, before breaking out in a smile. A brief glance out the window revealed buildings to her that she was familiar with. The other hotels, clubs and whatnot that surrounded Radius. Her fingers curled to brush against a seam along his cheek as he kissed her palm. The digits of the opposite hand curled tighter around her wisteria. "Believe it or not, I have inordinate amounts of free time. You're going to regret giving me your contact information. Just you wait."



"I'm very easy," he countered, before pausing. "To please," he added. "By which I mean. Making me happy. Is easy."

It was really difficult to keep his words straight when she smiled like that.

"Though I would prefer it if you refrain from punching me in the nose, yes." He rubbed absently at the scar already drawing a jagged line across the offending feature. He opened his mouth to say something else, then closed it with a *hm* as he realized he'd almost given Nova permission to take advantage of him.

Clearly, she wasn't the only one who was tired.

"I'll try to keep my liver from bursting. Or. Heart. Whichever organ you associate with affection." Hearts really made much less sense to him as a metaphor. Hearts were much simpler and easier to replace.

Ix was trying not to think about their next date too much. He didn't want to get his hopes up. That never ended well. But it was very difficult not to wonder what she had in mind. He hoped it would be nice. Something simple. And just distracting enough to keep him from kissing her all the damn time. Maybe something that would keep him from talking about senate reform, or how pretty she was. On more than one occasion, he had made the mistake of trying to fill the silence with stories about being a lawyer, which dragged the mood down enough to end the date entirely.

"I..." He didn't know how to feel about being cute. With some species, it almost always meant that they considered him in his entirety to be something of a novelty. But Calrathiion was near enough to Siladen in enough ways that he didn't think that was what she meant. In which case, he wasn't quite sure *what* she meant. "Yes," he said finally, lying outrageously, "I've heard that before. Like a kitten. A tiny, tiny kitten. With big beady eyes and lots of fibrous keratin."

He actually found kittens fairly unsettling.

"That had better be a promise," he warned. "If you do not message me often enough to overload my notifications entirely, I will be sorely disappointed."



She followed up the staccato way he'd strung words together with more smiles and small chirrups of laughter. Nova wasn't necessarily vain, but she liked to think that she affected him in some way and that was the reason he sometimes seemed to stumble over his responses.

"No nose punching," she agrees, holding back the urge to follow his fingers over that uneven blemish. "Just clinging hand-holding, and lovesick staring that will probably lead to me running into something, sooner rather than later." Another yawn, this one hidden behind her shoulder. Even with exhaustion creeping up on her, she didn't regret messaging him tonight. Sleep would have been lovely, sure, but not as lovely as the time she had just spent with him.

"Liver's beware," she murmurs, dreamily, as if she wasn't going to make it much longer. Car rides had always been a guaranteed way to lull her off to sleep, even when she hadn't already been awake for an entire day. The muted drone of travel, watching buildings pass outside the window - better than any handcrafted sleep aid. "My charms have been known to rupture many an affectionate organ." She paused, eyelids narrowing, oculars shifting, as if she had thought of something; probably reflecting on the the ridiculous thing she had just said. She didn't elaborate on it though, just flickering those pale hues in his direction.

Perhaps cute had not been the best adjective for Nova to properly convey her feelings. Had she been aware of his doubts on the phrase she would have found a better way to say what she actually meant. That she liked all the things she knew about him, and was eager to learn more. To discover more things that he was into, things that he wasn't. Places of which she could run her fingertips over to make him melt.

She wrinkled her nose. "A puppy, I think, would be a much better comparison. I don't really like cats much anyway. I think I am allergic."

The car stopped, Nova didn't move. She would be content to ignore the fact that they had arrived back at Radius until Ixaalot scolded her again about getting more sleep. Her phone went off in her bag but she ignored that as well.

"Well, I do aim to please. I hope you like pictures of coffee and random emoticons."



"I'll try to keep you from walking into anything," he said, "but I make no promises, since I will probably also be staring. There is a chance that we will both wind up walking into space, which would be a rather embarrassing way to die."

Again, he opened his mouth to say something, and this time he covered his mouth with one hand to be sure he didn't say anything untoward about affectionate organs. "That sounds... messy," he murmured despite himself, muffled by his fingers.

*Don't buy her a puppy. Don't buy her a puppy. She doesn't want a puppy.*

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, which almost certainly meant that at some point he'd try to buy her a puppy. He should probably have been getting the door for her so she could go home.

"Oh, no," he groaned, though there was no real annoyance behind it. "Don't tell me you do the... emoji... thing. Tiny yellow faces and strange animals that take longer to decode than just writing what you'd intended to convey, little glittery things that are either decorative or extremely important in the conveyance of tone." He paused. "I'm sure it's very charming, when *you* do it." Mostly he was thinking of Kreska, with her capacity to convey some of the most hideous vulgarity he'd ever seen with only a small pixellated eggplant.

He undid his seatbelt so that he could move closer, reaching out to gently stroke one of her tendrils. "If you don't go home soon," he pointed out, "I'll have to carry you. And I don't think I actually have enough upper-body strength for that. Twice the arms, half the muscle."



"I guess we will just have to take turns then. One gets to stare while the other leads. So, at the very least, we won't knock over shop displays and small children in our wake."

Those eyes that she had flickered in his direction, narrowed into small slits at him now. She had hoped that the accidentally indecent thing she had said would just sort of be swept under the rug, and to give him credit, he was trying to hard to contain himself. Despite all the vaguely sexual comebacks that popped into her head, she pursed her lips, turned her gaze forward and went back to talking about puppies. Which would turn out to be one of her more involved subjects.

She *loved* puppies.

"Puppies are just great all around," she continues, unaware of the puppy-purchasing conflict that she probably wasn't helping with as she rambled on. "They've got those wet little noses, and they're always sweet on you. Plus their fur doesn't make me feel like I am dying, so there's that."

"Deciphering them is all of the fun," she explains, undoing her own seat belt as he moved closer. She shifted in the seat, but still didn't seem like she was going to get out of the vehicle. "Emojis are one of the greatest things Earthlings ever came up with. How would anyone know if I was joking or not without a slice of pizza sticking it's tongue out to tell them?" she jokes, with a small chuckle, even though it generally became harder for her to think the closer he was to her.

Just like the first time, an unavoidable shiver cascaded down her spine as his grip slid over the appendage. Her eyes fell closed, and she seemed to take a moment to draw a slow inhale. If he kept touching her like that she'd never leave. The tentacle he held remained motionless against his hand as the others curled over themselves against her collar, except for one that pulled the wisteria out of her lap. "I guess, I will go then," she begins, eyes opening to settle on his, fingers sliding over the door handle. However, her movements were deliberately slow, and he still held the appendage. "I'd hate to inconvenience you like that."



"We will not *accidentally* knock over any small children," he amended. "Though so far, I admit, you do not seem the sort to go letting me run into children as a prank."

He really did need to get better friends.

"... do you *only* like puppies?" he wondered. "Or do you also like dogs?" This was horrible. He was imagining Nova with a great big dog that weighed more than he did, something that looked like it belonged on a farm—

Oh, no. He was imagining her on a *farm*.

"I would ask," he said, trying not to imagine her wearing denim and flannel. "Why would I assume that sentient pizza tasting itself indicated facetiousness? That seems both serious and tragic to me." Even Ix couldn't tell if he was joking, this time.

How was he supposed to stop touching her when she reacted that way? He did it again, and another hand slid beneath her other tendrils to clear the way to her neck, and he leaned nearer to press his lips to the crook where her neck met her shoulder. Another hand covered the one on the door handle, the final one coming to rest on her knee. "It's no inconvenience to *me*," he murmured against her skin, his mouth moving higher until he was kissing right beneath her ear. "Not knowing where you live might be a little tricky," he said, as his lips began to trace her jaw, moved back down to her throat, "but I could always just get you a room. Which might be a problem for *you*, when you need to get ready for work and don't have any clothes."

Nova without any clothes. There was a thought.

"That would be bad," he said, as if reminding himself, vibrations of his voice pressed directly against her skin. "We shouldn't do that." It probably would have been easier for her to leave if she didn't have four hands touching her, thumbs drawing circles and his face buried in her neck.



"Sometimes small children just gotta be knocked over," she explains, matter-of-factly. Her mouth had set into a line, eyes focused forward. Apparently, she had some kind of grudge against children, or she was no longer able to make her tone sound light and teasing this far past her bed time.

"I like big dogs." She held her hands apart in what she assumed was indicative of a large canine. "Or medium sized ones," she brought her hands closer. "Not small ones. The noisy kind that nip at your ankles. But I also like them to be really fluffy. Big. Fluffy. Dogs." She sounded halfway delirious, rambling on about dogs the way she was. A sideways glance to Ixaalot revealed him to be as impassive as always, which was probably for the better given all the things running through his head.

"The humor is in both the seriousness, and the tragedy. Or something like that, I am sure. Probably not at all. I just won't send you any pizzas. What are your thoughts on smiling cupcakes?"

It happened again, naturally, at the second caress. Mildly involuntary and an obvious testament to how she liked being touched. As he moved the other appendages it was impressive the way they behaved themselves, sliding to the side to give him access to his goal. Her breath hitched in her throat as lips met her neck. His mouth moved across her skin, and she let go of the door to intertwine their fingers. She was reduced to nothing but full body tremors and small sighs at his touch. She closed her eyes, and swallowed hard; despite the temptation she knew that she wouldn't make it much longer tonight. As soon as she came in contact with a bed, she was likely to pass out, and she had no idea if she was even cute when she was sleeping. "I live about three miles away," she replies, confident that rational conversation would bring some sense back to her. "In an apartment in the fifty-second sector."

His voice resonating through her left her breathless; there was a waver to her tone when she spoke again. "Yes, bad. Very, very bad," the fingers of her free hand traced over his frilled ear. "So, for now, I guess you will have to settle for kissing me goodnight, and allowing me to meander my way back home."



She was clearly exhausted. Practically drunk on sleep-deprivation. "Cupcakes are good. Better when they're real." He couldn't possibly let her walk three miles in her condition. Unsafe. Irresponsible. He wouldn't allow it even if she were in a good neighborhood. He tilted his head so that he could address the car without losing contact with her. "Car: sector 52 – *safeties off*." The latter was added hastily as he imagined the seatbelt yanking him away.

They could stand to be a *little* unsafe. Briefly. Probably.

"Kissing you goodnight, yes," he agreed. "Meandering home, no. Walking won't get you home fast enough." He shut his eyes, swallowed hard to get his bearings as her fingers moved along his ear. "This is. Safer." And gave him a few more precious minutes to kiss her senseless. "You need to be in bed." He was practically pinning her to the car door, hands stroking her tendrils, her shoulders, kissing the hollow in her throat. "Getting a good night's sleep." The only distance between them was to allow room for the wisteria, or else he probably would have pulled her into his lap by now. "Lawyer's orders. Or... suggestions."

He absolutely refused to think about walking her home, about her head on his shoulder, about wrapping comforters around her and watching her fall asleep in an old shirt that was entirely too big for her—

"Yes. Suggestions. I suggest that you go straight to bed, and sleep for so long you feel spoiled. And I suggest that you call me the instant you wake up, and if you seem anything but well-rested, I will suggest you call in sick and go back to bed." He was punctuating these suggestions with experimental kisses to her tendrils, the way he might kiss the back of her hand. Of course, he still hadn't thought of any particularly interesting 'punishments' if she didn't listen to him. "And if you're good, I'll..." He paused to think, the car already slowing to their destination. "I'll wear something that isn't a suit, next time."

And then, finally, he pressed his lips to hers, claimed her mouth with a level of devotion not at all suited to a first date. Because he didn't actually know if she was going to call him in the morning, if she was as interested as she claimed in sending him idle messages at all hours, but he was damn sure he wasn't going to regret not kissing her as thoroughly as he should have when he had the chance.

(He kept most of his tongue to himself, of course. That was just a practical consideration.)



"Real cupcakes, check."

He kept emphasizing that she needed to sleep by running hands over her, and it only made her want to disagree. A purring noise of pleasure hummed in her throat as he trailed kisses between her collarbones. Her smaller tentacles curled around his fingers, while the larger ones remained motionless. He had her pressed against the door, one hand locked around hers; the others on various parts of her person and now tangled with a few tendrils. She couldn't actually leave if she wanted to.

She did not want to.

"I walk home every night from the club. I'm still alive, so it can't be *that bad*."

More rambling to distract her. If only she could claim that her thoughts were so tame. She was lost to another night. One where they were all over each other somewhere that wasn't the back of a car. One where his affections weren't inhibited by a barrier of clothing. One where she was returning all his small touches and kisses in equal increments.

She couldn't resist a small snort of laughter, but perhaps that was to cover a soft moan. Her tendrils were all too sensitive, susceptible to his gentle handling. "I knew you gave orders," she teased.

She smiled as he finally pressed his mouth to hers, she couldn't help it. He kissed her like he wouldn't get to again, as if in that moment she were the most important person on the whole damn colony. Her lips moved with his, mirroring his fondness; tasting him eagerly. Her hand trailed from his ear to trace the seam along his cheek, as if she would memorize the pattern.

She drew back, breaking the seal of their mouths with a shaking inhale. "Something other than a suit?" she murmured, her finger stroking back and forth along his jaw. Her gaze flickered over his face, as she smiled. She quite liked the idea of seeing him in something else. "Then I guess I will have to be a *very good girl*-" she places a small kiss against his nose. "-and go to sleep as ordered. I mean.. as *suggested*." She kissed his forehead, before adding another peck to his mouth, "If I don't call you, I will send you a voice message," the press of lips to his temple. "Promise." She leaned forward, the motion would cause him to pull away from her, and she unlocked their hands to return to the door handle, her tendrils uncurled from where they'd gathered around him. "I had a wonderful time with you, Ixaaliot. Thank you."

Another kiss to his lips, as she smoothed her other hand away from his face to point out the window. "I live right there," the space in which she indicated contained a nice looking townhouse with a red door illuminated by a porch light.

A porch light she didn't remember leaving on.

"I'm going to go before you can convince me otherwise." The wisteria was traded between the larger tentacles. She opened the door and stepped out, dipping back in to grab her bag. She crooked a finger under his chin, affectionately. "See you, soon, okay?"

She scurried off before he could pull her back in, or something equally interfering of her going home and sleeping, she was practically skipping.



He watched her go, waiting until she was in the door to close the car door behind her. He still stared out the window, as if frozen in place, for a good long moment. "Shade the windows," he ordered finally, and the glass tinted black, blocked all forms of vision from entering – or exiting – the vehicle.

At which point, he fell backward to lie on the seat, arms dangling over the edge, one leg bent and propped against the door, one hand running over his cephalic tentacles. "Fuck."

She was gorgeous and clever and fun, and she *liked* him.

He was smitten. He was *fucked*. He was going to be waking up all goddamn night just in case she might have sent him a message. He was already thinking of having flowers sent here in the morning, which he was pretty sure was a horrible idea. He saved his location for future routing, anyway. Just in case.

In the privacy of the car, he was a heap of tangled and slender limbs. His posture resembled a cheap umbrella after a particularly vicious storm.

"Car: home. Safeties off."

He almost never wore his seatbelt when he was alone.

Nearly upside-down in his seat, he started skimming through some of his many dismissed notifications. Lucas had done something stupid again, no surprises there. Grilka wanted him to send over some of the testing data necessary to prove sapience in artificial intelligences, there was probably a story there and he probably didn't want to know it.

He froze when he realized that one of the notifications from Kreska had been tagged high priority. He hadn't thought anything of it, still dismissed notifications from her out of habit. But he had edited his filters so that her notifications never went through unless it was an emergency message.

Insofar as an emoji of a poodle could be considered an emergency message. But so far it really was something she only sent when the shit had hit the proverbial fan. He opened her conversation thread with a sense of dread.

🐶» 🐱 🐼 🧑

🐶» 🧑

🐶» false alarm i'm cool

🐶» speaking of how cool i am can i crash tonite or is the frog pond full

The timestamps suggested this had all happened not too long after his leaving, with a sizable gap between the messages. If he had to guess, she had gotten herself into trouble, and Ingrico had been forced to intervene. Hopefully he knew well enough by now not to let her play cards. With an audible sigh and a roll of his eyes, he pulled out his pocket terminal to reply.

♣♣» You are a vile person, but yes, you may use the guest room again.

♣♣» cool cool

♣♣» fir warning some guy is saying he wants to put me in a cage

♣♣» lmao fir warning

♣♣» high chance of trees

He did not just roll his eyes, but groaned. Her sense of humor was abominable. So abominable, in fact, that it momentarily distracted him from the actual substance of her message. Which was serious enough to make him sit upright, rereading it to be sure he was not misinterpreting.

♣♣» What guy?

♣♣» idk some guy

♣♣» his coat is dumb

♣♣» his face is dumb

♣♣» no sense of humor

♣♣» you know how it is

This was absolutely useless information, and she knew it. Apparently her ego had been bruised.

♣♣» Where's Ingrico?

♣♣» getting his horns wet or something idk why do you assume i know

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, could feel the tension returning to his shoulders.

♣♣» He should be watching you.

♣♣» lmao he's not my keeper

♣♣» i can handle myself

She absolutely, utterly, could not handle herself. She *thought* that she could handle herself, and truth be told Ix did tend to underestimate her. She was not helpless, he reminded herself, she had handled horrors. Handled them badly, but handled them. Nonetheless: that Ingrico would leave her alone in *Radius*, of all places, grated.

♣♣» tbh i'm hoping he goes to my apartment all stalkery

♣♣» and maybe him and those other dudes will kill each other

👾» that would be super convenient

👾» i miss my shit

That was the worst excuse for optimism he'd ever seen. Though he had to admit there was a certain practicality to her hopes.

♠️» I want more details about this.

♠️» Is he after you specifically? Does he know who you are? Do you know his species?

👾» omg who gives a fuck he's some asshole and i annoyed him somehow

Her ego had definitely been bruised. If Kreska wasn't giving identifying characteristics, he probably didn't have many. She was rarely deliberately useless, not unless there was something she wanted to be spiteful about. She might find colorful ways to convey information, but she *did* convey it, if it had the potential to do them some good.

♠️» If someone is attempting to resume the illegal trafficking of sapient beings on Osiris I would like to know about it.

👾» i was only telling you so if i went missing you'd have a lead and know i wasn't ditching y'all on purpose

👾» i didn't want to play twenty questions of justice

👾» new band name

👾» he threw a collar at me

👾» want to check if he put his name on it

👾» If Lost Please Return To Some Asshole

♠️» Go to Farendajo immediately and tell Grilka I sent you. Try to give em slightly more useful information.

👾» cool your tits i'll do it later

♠️» Don't touch it with your bare hands. It might have wireless transmitters or tracking devices.

👾» are you saying i shouldn't be wearing it as a belt

👾» but it looks so fashionable

👾» you know how much i love putting strange technology from murderapists all over my body

♠️» Kreska.

👾» i'm licking it now

👾» is that bad

♠️» It was a legitimate concern. I was concerned. I was not trying to be patronizing.

👾» this is not my first attempted kidnapping you doof

♠️» I'm sorry.

👤» you really are is what's funny about it

👤» you're too precious for this colony

👤» You're a jackass.

👤» lmao much better

👤» ♡

👤» Come home early please.

👤» no promises

So much for his good mood.



There were other reasons that she had not wanted Ixaaliot to accompany her all the way home. Even pulling across the street had almost been too close for comfort.

She took the steps to the front door of her apartment very slowly, when she reached the top she could tell the door was ajar. Quite a sobering realization, no matter how exhausted you are. She leaned back to peek from behind the alcove and saw the car pulling away.

She cursed silently, leaning forward again to push open the door. There was no one in the foyer or the hall, but chatter and light flooded from her living room. She closed the door behind her, and was surprised to find it still shut properly with the bout of breaking and entering it had just received. She dropped her bag on the floor, and took off her coat. She hung it up properly and smoothed out her clothing, willing her hands to stop shaking. She wasted time, unlacing her boots and kicking them off against the wall. She pulled her wisteria from one of her tentacles and walked into the kitchen to find it a nice spot on the breakfast bar. She leaned against the sink and steeled herself, staring at it's drooping purple petals. *Calm down, she willed. Get them to leave. Go to bed. That. Simple.*

When she moved, she felt like she was in a trance. She felt like she was watching her body slowly take steps down the hall, more so than making it do so. She came upon the entryway and took in the scene.

Grixton.

She knew who it would be, but the sight of him still caused the breath to catch in her throat; her mouth to run dry. He sat in the love seat furthest away from her. He was smoking, because he knew it annoyed her when he did so in her house. The hand that didn't hold the cigarette trailed up and down the thigh of the woman that sat next to him. His bodyguard, a Cruthkai named Jaxx, stood near the sliding door that led to her balcony. Grixton was dressed impeccably as usual: a green silk button down that matched his skin, dark slacks, shining shoes.

Nova took in the features of the other woman, extracting details to memory, just like when she was in the service. She was Calrathiion as well. She had magenta colored skin and orange eyes in a sea of black. Two tentacles: lower class. A small crescent moon tattoo beneath her eyes, like a beauty mark: she was a prostitute back home, if not here as well. Three black dots replaced her left eyebrow: three years in prison. Her bottom lip was tattooed black, with a line trailing down her chin: a deserter and a traitor; makings the woman and Grixton shared. She was shorter than Nova, but only by a few inches. No military training, her posture was too poor - leaning back, with one arm thrown over the couch, legs crossed, angled towards Grixton. Her dress was new, and expensive, but in Grixton's favorite color. A gift.

She blinked and her gaze fluttered back to her ex. "Was is that hard to replace me? Hookers are quite the step down, I feel." She hadn't even meant to say anything. Especially not that. At some point in time she had moved further into the room. She didn't remember that.

Grixton's conversation stopped and everyone turned to look at her. Most who didn't know him would describe the grin that followed as *devilish*. But it was evil. She knew that.

"You're home *late*."

"*And you're in my home*. Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see you."

Her brow furrowed and he flicked ash onto her carpet.

"Get out."

"Where were you all night?"

"Get. Out." she emphasizes, through clenched teeth, but he only seemed to find this amusing. He put out his cigarette on her coffee table and waved away any remaining smoke.

"Parshlan:ya," he scolds, and it only pushes Nova further into a rage.

"Call me that again, and it will be the last time you have a tongue in which to say it-"

Grixton launched himself from the couch before she could finish the threat, he stalked over to Nova's position like an apex predator. He was livid, she could see it painting his features in an expression she knew all too well. He reached out as he approached and grabbed her jaw with one hand, the large appendage nearly covered the lower half of her face. He wrapped a grouping of her tentacles around the other hand like a length of rope. His body weight forced her to take steps away from him until she hit the wall. He pinned her against it, holding the tentacles above her head like the bonds of a prisoner. Pairing that with the hand on her chin forced her to look up at him.

She was expressionless, and that only seemed to piss him off more. She stared back into his pale purple eyes - glittering with his rage, and all she could think of was Ixaalot telling her that lavender was his favorite color. Grixton leaned down and pressed his forehead to hers. "Parshlan:ya," he begins, his tone soft, intimate. As if he had any right. Her eyes narrowed then, but he was no longer looking at her. "Why do you do this to me? You know I get jealous." His head dropped to her shoulder, like a man truly in pain. Nova knew better. They had played this game too many times.

She could feel two of his tentacles slip under her shirt. She began to struggle then, trying to push him away with her hands, but he only captured those with his remaining tentacles and held them at her sides. The tendrils beneath her clothing drew slow circles around her pari'ia, brushing over the apertures, but not pushing inside.

"Stop it," she commands through clenched teeth.

"I can't stand the thought of you out all night with other men..." his thumb brushed her jaw almost affectionately. Her fingers closed into fists, but she knew the way he held her wrists was deliberate: she couldn't get to her weapons with the way he clamped down on their sheaths.

"You lost that right when you dumped me," her voice was muffled by his palm. His grip on her jaw tightened and she whimpered. The entirety of the huge hand eventually covered her mouth to silence further protest. He pulled his head back to glare down at her. "And you think traipsing around with some *Siladen*, is the way to get back at me?" He spoke as if he was talking about something unsavory, Nova was reduced to her pathetic glaring. The tentacles beneath her shirt forced their way into the concavities they circled and her eyes widened. Desperate noises sounded in her throat, as her efforts of struggle increased. "I could take you right now, if I wanted to," he threatens, tendrils roughly probing at the holes. His body pressed her so close against the wall she felt like she couldn't breathe. She could hear the whore cackling from the couch. Cheering him on like it was a show.

"You can have your fun," his mouth had moved to her ear, he spoke low, all of the grips he had on her tightened, tendrils forced their way inside her as far as they could go. "And after he's used you, and left you, just like the others, you can try to come back to me. I'm the only one that wants you."

He released her all at once, and she crumpled to the floor, coughing and gasping for air. He lit another cigarette as she propped herself against the wall. He stared down at her, grimacing like he was just presented with trash. "I'll see you soon, *Parshlan:ya*."

He motioned to his crew and they followed behind him as he left the room, trailing smoke and malicious chuckles. She heard the front door close. She brought her knees close to her chest, hid her face behind them. Dull aches built in her chest, and on her hips, her tentacles hung limply off her head, coiling against the floor.

She wouldn't cry.

But she thought about investing in a better lock.

Or maybe moving.