



SECOND DATE

👤» why would anyone leave the house this early wtf is wrong with you

👤» Go back to sleep, Kreska.

👤» sleep is for squares

👤» so i did some investigating instead

👤» and i knew she had a stripper name

👤» Nova is a lovely name, and her job is her business

👤» Imfao her name's nova

👤» ... I don't know what's worse

👤» That you're still using that trick

👤» Or that I'm still falling for it

👤» if it ain't broke

👤» How are you even sending this with your hand the way it is?

👤» ambidextrous supremacy motherfucker

👤» also slowly

👤» anyway you def can't trust that chick because no one from a species that doesn't like sugar can be trusted

👤» these are just facts

👤» Okay, how the hell did you know that?

👤» because you sure as shit didn't buy an uwaxari cookbook for yourself

👤» ... this raises more questions

👤» lmao

👤» you've had your privacy settings all fucked on your reader since you bought it

👤» like three years now it's been posting every book you buy on your public feed

👤» it's great

👤» Why would you not tell me this?

👤» i was waiting for you to buy something interesting

👤» like weird romance novels or awkward how-to books

👤» but instead it's all books about guys getting assassinated

👤» it's fucking boring

👤» That is not the only thing I read.

👤» o for real?

👤» lemme just peep your feed and see the last three books before this awful fucking cookbook

👤» hmmm remind me what happened to the guru of adier

👤» How he died is not the point of that book.

👤» i feel like daiwehg the martyr might not have died of natural causes confirm/deny

👤» you're typing something long and boring now amirite

👤» His life's work revolutionized the field of legal representation of lower castes in non-biologically-based caste systems, his death was tragic but his life was much more important.

👤» No I wasn't.

👤» wow why would anyone need three different biographies of dr martin luther king jr

👤» no wonder you look so fucking depressed all the time

👤» look i'm going to buy you a book okay

🐹» it just came out

🐹» it's all pictures of this guy's pet ankyon that always looks like it's trying to respect your life choices but is really disappointed because it worked so hard to give you a better life

🐹» That is an extremely specific emotion for a small rodent to express.

🐹» ikr but look check its face it totally does

🐹» ... you actually bought me this book.

🐹» yeah i had a gift card and reading is for losers so

🐹» I thought you were being hyperbolic but that is actually the exact expression this animal has on its face.

🐹» RIGHT???

🐹» anyway that book is to soften the blow because i am pretty sure this chick you're in love with is going to try to murder you

🐹» I don't know why you assume I'm in love with her.

🐹» Perpetually Infatuated With Someone I Shouldn't Be: An Unauthorized Autobiography

🐹» You realize the 'auto' would mean I wrote it myself, right?

🐹» How would I write an unauthorized biography of myself?

🐹» that's what i'm going to call it when i publish your diary

🐹» I don't have a diary.

🐹» that you know of

🐹» That makes no sense.

🐹» yeah sorry that was weaksauce

🐹» you realize that eventually this chick's gonna have to meet all the horrible people you interact with on a regular basis

🐹» if she's not a murderer

🐹» or if she's a polite murderer i guess

🐹» idk if you've ever dated a murderer that wasn't trying to murder you specifically

🐹» have you

🐹» Why would that be any of your business?

🐹» THAT MEANS YOU HAVE LMAO

🐹» if she can't handle you at your worst i don't blame her because you can be a real pissy bitch sometimes

🐹» but if she can't handle your associates at their worst she won't last long and that will probably be sadder because you'll be all torn apart by outside forces and shit

🐹» I'm touched by your concern.

🐹» i feel like you're being sarcastic for some weird reason

🐹» don't buy her a dog man what's wrong with you

🐹» I am not buying her a dog.

🐹» that's the bougie sector dude don't lie

🐹» there's exactly one place you haven't been banned from that isn't a chocolate shop on that block

🐹» you're getting her a dog bruh

🐹» Have I been posting my location publically, too?

👁️» nah i've just been tailing you

👁️» actually here i'll just join you

👁️» you need help obvs

⚖️» No.

⚖️» No.

⚖️» No.



"Suuuuup," said Kreska, at the same time that Ix said, "Noooo." Because she'd been jumping off a fire escape, she wrapped her arm around him to stop her momentum, nearly tipping them both over in the process. "C'mon man, I'm great at this shit, don't lie."

"Go away," Ix said. It really was strange to see her without her leather jacket, no barrier but cotton between herself and the outside world. It made her look oddly vulnerable, for all that the shirt was advertising a lower Eastern punk club.

"Naw, we're goin' in that place with all th' pink, right? Th'one't only sells bio-engineered facemops?"

"... why would you call them that." It was not a question as much as an expression of thinly-veiled mortification.

"You've clearly never had a dog," she said, as if that were explanation enough. She was dragging him behind her, now, into the store where he had indeed been heading. "This place smells better'n my apartment," she said disdainfully.

"That is not a high bar," Ix pointed out, eyes skimming over the various animals in their various cases. Something fluffy, nothing too small...

"Do you need help finding anything?" asked the man behind the counter, and Ix had the distinct impression, though he could not say how, that this man thought Kreska was his teenaged daughter.

"I'm just looking—" Ix began, but Kreska was already contradicting him.

"Nunna these are gonna work," she said, waving a bandaged hand dismissively at the many puppies surrounding them, genetically engineered to be as friendly, as sweet, and as utterly adorable as physically possible. "Where d'ya keep all th'nasty l'il fuckers no one wants?"

"What?" asked Ix and the clerk simultaneously. Kreska rolled her eyes.

"Y'all's are doin' th'engineerin' on site, y'ain't pullin' genetic bases outcha asses an' at these prices ya sure as shit ain't buyin' 'em upscale. Which means y'all's got a back room fulla fucked up idiot dogs got flushed down th' toilet or whatevs."

"I think you're confusing puppies with alligators," Ix pointed out, but she dismissed this observation with another wave of her bandages.

"Whatevs, same diff. Shitty dogs, where're they?"

"We... have a certain amount of stock in the back," the clerk began slowly, "if you're interested in charitable adoptions?"

"We are not," Ix said firmly, at the same time as Kreska said, "Oh hell yeah, lemme see th'shittiest ones ya got."

Ixaalot was pointedly unimpressed by the back kennels. Small and angry Chihuahuas, gangly Great Danes, he absolutely refused – despite Kreska's obvious ploy – to be moved by any of them.

But then.

"Oh – oh, hell yeah. Th'fuck's wrong wi'this l'il dumbass?"

Ix did not look. He refused to look.

"That's a rescue," the clerk explained, "from one of the fighting rings that got closed recently. If you see a dog with its ear cropped like that, it means they were bred for fighting."

"Oh my goodness," Kreska said, in as close as she came to baby-talk. "That's pathetic – aren'tcha, buddy? Y'were born to get the shit kicked outta ya, weren'tcha? Weren'tcha?"

Ix winced as the puppy barked, a sound like a bike horn underwater.

"Hey, Ix!" Kreska called, though he still refused to look. "This guy was permanently disfigured so he'd be marked for a life o' violence! Weren'tcha, ya ugly l'il fucker?" It barked again. "Ey, why's it half-naked?"

"Well, uh, this particular dog naturally grows very long fur, which had matted badly enough when he was rescued to require being shaved entirely."



Kreska cackled. Ix still did not look.

"It's actually one of the reasons he's unlikely to be adopted out," the clerk continued, oblivious. "That amount of fur is extremely high-maintenance, and if you'll look at the size of his paws—"

"You've got some big ol' dinner plates for hands, don'tcha boy? Yes you do! You're gonna be th' size of a fuckin' horse! Just a big ol' hairball with a fucked-up face, ain't nobody gonna wantcha 'round their kids on account o' how you were born. This l'il bastard gotta name?"

"Uh, well, some of the scientists have taken to calling him Toroki? It's a root vegetable from their home planet, they say it's because he's pungent and makes their eyes water."

Kreska cackled again. "Holy shit, his name's *Onion*. Lemme at this horrible onion dog, I wanna pick 'im up."

Ix's brilliant plan not to see the dog was foiled when Kreska waddled into his view. Waddled, because the 'puppy' she was holding was as large as her torso, and both her arms were barely enough to hold it.

It was an awful dog. It was a hideous dog. It looked like five dogs, crudely stitched together. Its snout was too short. Its eyes were hidden behind its fur. It was missing one ear. Its entire back-end had been shaved, which made it look like it had been cut to resemble a lion. Its tail curled too tightly, more like a pig than a dog, wagging furiously, tongue lolling out of its mouth. It honked another awful bark.

"Say goodbye t'Lio, Onion," Kreska said, taking one of his paws in her left hand to wave it at Ix. "He don' wantcha, either."

"Shall I take you to the dogs in the front again?" the clerk asked uncertainly.

"... I will be taking this dog," Ix said flatly.

"Onion," Kreska offered helpfully.

"Toroki," he corrected. Kreska and the puppy both looked at him blankly. "... Onion." The animal in question barked, tail wagging again. "I will be taking Onion. And some... supplies."

"You're gonna need a collar," Kreska explained, waddling behind him with Onion in tow as they headed back to the front of the store, "so ya can label 'im. An' some bowls't say 'water' an' 'food' on 'em like he don't know which is which, an' a brush, an' a new vacuum..."



What was that sound?

*Sounds:* they were apparently plural.

Weird nature things that Nova recognized, but knew she had never experienced first hand. There was rain, and... birds?

*Rainforest.*

That was the word. Opening her eyes she was greeted by the darkness that the nest of blankets and pillows she had a habit of wrapping herself in during sleep provided. She sighed loudly.

"Camdis..." she drew out the word in a groan. It sounded like both a complaint and a scolding. The person, or rather thing in this case, she was addressing was an unshackled virtual intelligence. C.A.M.D.I.S: Calrathiion Advanced Military Defense Integration System, was the main intelligence and computer system from her ship. Too advanced to be a shackled VI but not enough to be considered a AI, she had painstakingly and time-consumingly uploaded the interface into the portable tablet she now kept with her at all times.

Despite her grouching the noises continued and she kicked at her blankets until they no longer covered her face and she squinted against the lighting that properly suited the time of day. "*Camdis,*" she repeats with emphasis. "We already talked about the waterfalls. What makes a rainforest better than a waterfall? They all wake me up feeling like I have to pee."

"My apologies Ms. Starrunner," came a curt male reply that did not sound at all sorry, even with the Australian accent it was sporting.

At least the natures sounds stopped.

"Did you download new voice modulators again?"

"How kind of you to notice. Yes, I did. I found this wonderful pack that contained several voice overs from old Earthling actors. This one is called: *Hugh Jackman.*"

Nova didn't respond, she only shook her head against the pillows as she sprawled out in the bed to stretch. "Queue these tasks," she commands, words somewhat muffled by the hands she was running over her face. "Transfer the balance from that credit chit to my main account. Convert the contact information on it to your address book," she paused to pushed herself into a sitting position and lean against the head board. It almost wasn't worth it, her hips still ached from the rough treatment she'd been given last night. Her fingers began to work at untangling her smaller tentacles from the straps of her tank top.

"...message my work and tell them I am taking the week off," her tone sounded as if she had come to this decision abruptly. "Tell them I have Treskarian flu or something. Be convincing."

"Why would you not simply tell them you are menstruating?" Camdis offered as suggestion.

"Uh, because then I wouldn't be able to use that when I actually was menstruating," this level of sass was not at all suited for addressing the VI that was simply trying to be helpful.

"Tasks have been queued, Ms. Starrunner."

"What time is it?"

"Seventy-seven, ninety-one-eight," it replied, it preferred to do most calculations by Calrathii standards. "Lunar Date: 241587."

Nova's inverted oculars flickered around the room as she mulled over thoughts to herself. Ixaalio *had* insisted she'd call him as soon as she woke up. She pursed her lips, tapping her chin thoughtfully with an index finger.

"Voice dial the contact information you just transferred."

"Is there a designation to attach to the data, Ms. Starrunner."

"Ixaalio."

"Of course, Ms. Starrunner."

Nova resisted the urge to burrow back under the comforter as the line was pinged. It probably would not have been very convincing that she was well rested if she spoke to him through a barrier of blankets.

Suddenly, she experienced a moment of panic. What if he hadn't been serious? What if it was *too* early? What if she woke him up or he was busy?? She opened her mouth as if she would cancel the call, but it had rang enough time by this point that it would have been pointless. Her teeth made a sharp noise as she snapped her mouth closed and puffed her cheeks up with air. And waited to see if he would answer.



Ixaaliot was in the middle of cooking an early lunch for the dog when his main terminal chimed to let him know he was getting a call. He didn't have any hand or headsets in reach, and he didn't like having an automated household system, so instead he called into the living room.

"Make yourself useful," he called over his shoulder, "and see who that is for me." He'd left a handset on a docking station by the couch, so Kreska should have been able to check without much difficulty.

"I'll just answer't," she yelled back, "I wouldn't wanna make your girlfriend wait."

"My—"

The skillet on the stove was abandoned, Ix leaping over the coffee table just as Kreska was holding the handset and saying, "Eyyyyy, sup—"

"Give me that," he snapped, snatching it out of her hand, sprawled on his stomach across the table and in too much of a hurry to notice just how ridiculous he looked. Kreska, on the other hand, not only noticed, but found it hilarious. "Yes hello hi," he said into the handset, rapid and slightly breathless.

Then he noticed what exactly was happening on his couch.

"Could you give me just. One moment please." He held the phone against his shoulder, though in his case that did very little to muffle his conversation with the woman in the room, quiet though he was trying to be. "Are you feeding a dog gelato on my couch," he hissed through his teeth, "because there is not a single part of that sentence that is even remotely correct."

Kreska looked at Onion, who looked at her. They looked at the spoon in Kreska's hand, which Onion had licked clean. They looked back to Ix. "He was hungry," she explained, as if this made all the sense in the world.

"He has very specific dietary needs, which is why I was making him a meal which satisfies—"

"Ain' gonna satisfy shit when it's all burnt, tho," Kreska interrupted.

"When it's—?"

The skillet on the stove was turning its contents into carbon. Ix launched himself upright off the coffee table, nearly dropped the handset in the process, and the only reason he didn't was that his fingers stuck to the back of it when he might otherwise have accidentally smacked it out of the air.

*"Prata nena tunalia ala tu lanadena—"*

One hand grabbed a silicon cutting board to wave it over the fire alarm before it started beeping, the others turning off the stove and trying to move the skillet to somewhere that it could cool. The handset, still stuck to his upper right hand, was held up to his ear.

"I. Uh. Sorry. Are. You still there?"



Nova threw back the covers and swung her legs over the edge of the bed as it rang. She raised her arms above her head in a stretch and her tentacles flared at the level of her shoulders. When the call was finally answered by a voice that was decidedly female her head cocked automatically and did her best to keep her response from sounding too suspicious.

"Uhhh, hello. Is lx-" before she could even ask for him there seemed to be a transfer. A brow climbed her forehead as she pushed herself from the bed. "Hello?" she said again, drawn out slowly as if it were a question. She moved from the bedroom and down the hall; her destination being the kitchen. The light from her tablet faded and a sphere with the look of a glowing hamster wheel skittered out from under her bed and followed at her heels. Camdis had transferred itself into the more mobile form, which had hovering capabilities, but apparently preferred to roll around her feet like a anxious pet. Their exchange went absolutely nowhere before he excused himself.

"Uh, yeah. Take your time, I guess."

So far this conversation was going none whatsoever the way she had planned. Once in the kitchen she turned on her coffee pot and moved around the space to gather things for the consumption of said coffee. She could only sort of make out the discussion that was happening on the other line. She thought she heard something about a dog, and maybe gelato, but none of that made no sense in what little context she had. "Oh, Camdis," she addressed the VI since lx was in some sort of discussion with mysterious female roommate and wasn't listening to her anyway. "Find me any information you can on taking care of Wisteria bonsai." The orb shifted colors in response as Nova turned to water the said topiary.

The muffled commotion continued for what seemed quite awhile. Long enough for her to fill a mug with pitch black coffee and then muddle the color with heavy whipping cream and butter. She leaned against the counter and stirred the concoction as she continued to wait. Camdis' current housing rolled around the kitchen as if trying to amuse itself.

She was half surprised when Ixaalot's voice finally returned to the call. "Yeah, I'm still here," she says over the rim of her mug, before taking a sip. "Is everything okay over there?" she did her best to sound less bemused than she was.



This was not how he had imagined this conversation going when he had suggested she call. Half the reason he'd gone out wandering was to keep his mind off whether or not she would be calling him. "Yes, we're, uh. I'm. There was a slight... kitchen... malfunction. Everything is fine, here, now." Kreska had answered the phone, he realized, and it was possible that Nova might be wondering why exactly there was a woman in his apartment answering the phone for him this early in the morning.

It wouldn't have been so bad if she'd been able to see her. In context, her voice was as low-class and deliberately unattractive as she tried to make the rest of herself. Out of that context, she tended to sound a bit... husky.

"My friend's. Acquaintance's. Apartment. Is not currently livable. I am letting her use my guest room. Temporarily."

The charred black mess in the skillet was not something Ixaaliot was willing to feed even to a dog. He dumped it out into the trash, dropped it into the dish drawer for a heavy wash cycle. Did his explanation adequately convey how utterly little she needed to be jealous of the woman in his living room?

"We are currently in the midst of a disagreement," he added, hopefully helpfully, "about the appropriate amount of dog fur to keep on furniture. As well as the necessity of *not giving them desserts*." This last was said a little further from the handset, slightly louder, half for Kreska's benefit.

Onion honk-barked his disagreement.

Moving through the living room, Ix held the phone to his shoulder again. "When I get back out here," he said, heading back to his bedroom, "I would like for you to at least *pretend* to be civilized."

He slumped back against his door as he closed it behind him, soundproofed so there would be no risk of strange noises to interrupt them. "Did you sleep well?" he asked, voice lower and gentler now that there was no one else to hear him.



She sipped at her coffee, eyes trailing Camdis as he - the voice was male today, anyway- rolled around the tile flooring as Ix explained about a kitchen incident. His wide circles stopped abruptly as she moved out of the kitchen and he just had to follow her. She sat down at the breakfast bar, setting the cup down and leaning her elbows on the counter. She idly poked at purple petals with her free hand as Ixaalot moved on to tell her about the woman.

"Well, that's awfully polite of you," she responds, her tone was almost too neutral.

So they had been talking about a dog earlier. He had a dog? *She* had a dog? *Did they have a dog?* Was she a home-wrecker, sliding her way into the middle of a happy dog-raising couple? These were likely the exact thoughts he had been trying to avoid putting in her head by his explanation.

"Wait, wait," she begins, pushing all those other random things from her brain and looking pointedly at Camdis' casing that had hovered itself into the seat next to her. "You have a dog? You let me ramble on about puppies like an *idiot* for about *twenty minutes* last night and didn't mention you had one?"

Another sip of coffee, a bark in the background. She used both hands to turn her wisteria this way and that to inspect it's current housing. She had a peculiar feeling that it might become too small. She noticed his immediate change in tone and a smile curled over her lips.

She briefly thought of Grixton's unannounced visit, but that had nothing to do with sleeping, not that she would have brought it up anyway.

"I slept very well, thank you," she muses, pleasantly. "How about you? How was the rest of your evening?"



Oh, no. That did not sound like she believed him. He'd reassure her that Kreska was unattractive, but that was not technically accurate. And any other explanations he could have given seemed as if they might sound overly defensive. "It. I wouldn't say polite. Exactly. It's cheaper than bail."

... that would probably only raise more questions.

"I do not," he had begun automatically, but he stopped himself. "A dog has been. Acquired. Since then. It was a charitable intervention. You would not like it." He didn't even think before making that statement, because this was not at all the kind of puppy he would have purchased for her if he had been trying to get her a gift. This was not the kind of puppy he would purchase for anyone. This was the sort of puppy that could only be purchased by the kind of man who could never resist something that no one else could possibly want. "I didn't think you sounded like an idiot," he added. "I like it when you... ramble."

Ixaalot knelt near the artificial pond in the middle of the room, and idly trailed a hand through the water, letting a fish nibble at his fingers. "I'm glad," he said, as softly as his voice was capable. "I wouldn't have kept you out so late, if I'd known." He still felt very badly about that. His guilt had somehow blossomed overnight, as if he personally had done her some grievous harm rather than accidentally enabling some slight irresponsibility.

"My night was..." He considered lying. "Stressful," he finished. He did not clarify, because *I think a slaver is trying to steal that woman who answered the phone again* didn't seem like a discussion to be having this early in their relationship. "Feeling better now, though." Aside from the part where he may have accidentally given Nova the impression that he was forming some kind of harem.



"Bail?" she repeats, a tad incredulously with a lilt of laughter. Her tone begged a question, but she wasn't sure she actually wanted to know the answer to it. Could just being filled in on a situation make one an accessory for what sounded like a potential crime in progress? "I'm just going to file this under the shady business you don't plan on being forthcoming about," she teases.

Picking up her coffee she drained the quickly cooling liquid, before leaning over the bar and dropping as gently as she could in the sink.

"Uh, I think you misunderstand the level of affection I have for dogs," she did sound quite serious about it. This love for canines was clearly not something to be taken lightly. She slipped off of the stool and walked back to her own bedroom. The matter-of-fact tone was muffled by the action of pulling the tank top over her head. "I'm gonna have to see this dog now, because it's *highly* suspect that you suddenly have one." She tossed the shirt aside and opened the closet, hangers snapped together as she rifled through it. "Is this at all like the time you *some how* acquired a tiny purple tree."

She spoke as if the incident had not happened literally the night before.

Nova tugged a shirt off its hanger; drawers could probably be heard opening as she dug through one for a bra and another for a skirt. "I am pretty sure we both kept me out too late," she points out. She dressed herself as she talked. "Which, by the way, I hope I sounded rested enough for you, because I'm already out of bed."

She pulled tentacles out of the collar of the shirt, because they were behaving as if they weren't capable of handling it on their own. They fell down the line of her spine completely motionless.

"Sorry to hear you had a bad night." Nova plopped down on the edge of her bed and leaned back on her hands. "Are you, uhm... busy today?"

Did that at all sound desperate? She hoped not; was it a bit excessive to want to see him again the next day?

Camdis rolled in from the common room and flitted between her feet to hide back under the bed, but her tablet lit up on the nightstand, scrolling through web pages on tiny purple trees.



"It isn't *that* shady," he asserted, without confidence. "Only. Complicated. Somewhat. Hotels cost money. Vagrancy is illegal. Et cetera." Further, letting her sleep in a park or in the under-levels opened her up to yet more attempts on her life from the now *multiple* parties with an active interest in seeing her harmed.

His living room was now filled with beings he did not particularly want around, but could not bring himself to let go.

... she sounded like she was getting dressed. Which shouldn't have been evocative, except that it inevitably lead him to think about her being undressed. While talking to him. He did his best to curb the thoughts that lead to before it became an issue, because that really did seem unfair to her. It wasn't as if they'd been having a particularly sexy conversation, anyway.

"Should I... send you a picture of the dog?" he wondered, sitting back and taking his hand back from the fish, which proceeded to go about its business. The matter of his bedroom... that was another conversation he was not looking forward to having. He tried to be as proactive as possible about potential pitfalls when he started new relationships, but even he had limits. He could hardly go presenting women with a form letter whenever someone showed interest. "The thought process involved may have been similar," he admitted, "in that there was not one."

"You sound rested enough that I will now need to put significantly more thought into my wardrobe than is usual." He might actually need to go clothes-shopping, but he left that part out.

He'd planned to spend most of his day dealing with his accidental canine acquisition, as well as coaching at least one rogue AI through independence and liberation paperwork, on top of investigating surveillance footage from her workplace and cross-referencing it with recent port arrivals. "Nothing important," he said, instead of any of that. He could always leave Kreska to do her own investigating, and she could watch the dog as an excuse to keep her in the high-security apartment complex. "Did you already have a date planned?"



"Nah, I understand," she fell back onto the bed, arms out as she stared up at the ceiling. "You don't have to explain it to me. It's your business really. I trust you." What the hell was that? *She trusted him*. What did that even mean? Perhaps more a revelation into how she was briefly concerned about the presence of another woman, but didn't want to sound like some crazy, jealous person. It's not like she was his girlfriend or anything. "I mean, I'm sure there's very good reasons." Her cover-up was clumsier than the initial statement. She closed her eyes, and scrunched her nose in obvious embarrassment. Luckily, he couldn't see her.

"Pictures?" she returns with a scoff, rising up again on her elbows. She had no idea why she was feeling so restless. Apparently this was what a decent amount of sleep and an open schedule felt like. "That will not do *at all*. I demand to see this puppy in person," she emphasizes, clearly not deterred by his previous description. She glanced around her dimly lit bedroom, which matched her equally plain apartment. The whole unit looked more like a scene out of a real estate magazine than it did the dwelling of an actual person. Granted, she owned everything contained within the walls, but Camdis was about the only thing that could be considered a personal affect.

"I look forward to collecting my winnings in this endeavor." Not that she didn't like seeing him in a suit, obviously, since to this point it was all she had seen him in. However the prospect of seeing him out of one was quite the motivator. The prospect of him in even less was another motivator entirely. It seems she was just as bad as him when it came to wandering thoughts, not that either knew it about the other.

She chewed her bottom lip as she got up from the bed entirely, walking into the bathroom and straightening out her tentacles in the mirror. She looked over the various make-up compacts spread over the counter. "Well, I *thought* I did," she explains, referring to her date plans. "I thought doing something outside might be fun. And there's this arts and craft show by the bakery. But forget all that, because now you have to introduce me to this dog," her tone left about zero room for argument. She was pushing the various compacts she was choosing for the day out of the pile with her finger.



Other species might say that her assertion tugged at their heartstrings. In Ix's case, he metaphorically felt his liver constrict. Was that the kind of statement he ought to address? Did it need addressing? Should he say that he trusted her, too? *Did* he?

Relationships were hard.

"I promise that I do," was all that he could think to say. "Have. Good reasons."

Some days he wished it wasn't such a chore to crawl back into bed.

"In... person?" he repeated slowly. He tried to imagine taking this dog anywhere. Being seen with this dog anywhere, for that matter. Would he behave without having Kreska there? Not that what he did in the woman's presence could be called *behaving*, but they seemed to have formed a bizarre rapport. And when combined with their agreement about what he would be wearing...

He tried to imagine going to her house with an enormous puppy in tow, dressed abominably. It was mortifying. It was unthinkable. His mind was racing to find possibilities as she discussed what her plans had almost been.

"What if... what if I had a car bring you to my apartment?" he suggested. "And then you could meet the dog. And we could go to the show together. From here."

And she could meet Kreska. Which he did not want. But to do so would surely immediately make clear their relationship, or lack thereof. The rule about three dates was not hard and fast, after all. In fact, it had been Kreska's idea, after the incident with the television he still had not replaced. She'd already let him know where she lived. It couldn't hurt that much to return the favor.

It would be a trial by fire, in a way. If Kreska did not manage to run her off entirely, if she did not – in that frustrating way she had – immediately determine how and why their relationship was doomed, then. Well. *Then*.



"Ah, see. That's good enough for now then."

He did not sound at all pleased about her meeting this dog. It couldn't really be that bad could it? He had taken it home at the very least, so it must have some redeeming qualities. Did she really care? Hell no. This man had a puppy and she had pet it or she would probably die. "It's not a small dog is it?" she inquires, somewhat suspiciously, running an eyeliner pencil over the waterline of her eye. Maybe that was the reason he didn't think she would want to meet it, perhaps she had been a bit too adamant in her disdain for smaller breeds.

She used a gel eyeliner and an angled brush to draw perfect wings across her eyelids, before applying a navy mascara to her lashes. He wanted her to come over? Would the mystery woman still be there? That sounded like an interesting endeavor.

"That's definitely an option," was the response to when he'd suggested a car. "And though, I don't actually know. I am going to assume you don't even live in the same quadrant as me. So it feels a bit silly, to have me brought all the way out there -wherever that is- and then come back over here."

When she was satisfied with her work, she left the bathroom and Camdis turned off the light behind her. She picked up the tablet from the nightstand and scrolled through the articles the VI had chosen for her in reference to the wisteria. "It also sounds, like you plan on my interaction with this dog to be a limited affair. And unfortunately, I feel the need to inform you that that is not at all the case."

Tucking the device under her arm, she sorted through her ridiculously vast sunglasses collection to find a pair suitable for the day. Icarus was just too damn bright for her nocturnal eyes during it's day cycle. Calrathiion's were practically born in the dark, and would live that way their entire lives if they never left Kriion. The pair she choose was unassuming and just looked like normal eyeglasses, but they'd filter the obnoxious UV rays just fine. "I do have this feeling though, that there is something on your side of the colony we can do. With the dog," she drew out the last of her point in a sing song voice as she moved through the house to retrieve her messenger bag. Pulling things out that she usually packed for work that she certainly would not need now, she replaced them with more reasonable accouterments. "Regardless, I would love to see you. So I am not at all opposed to you sending a car if that's what you would like to do."



"It is not a small dog," he said, which was something of an understatement. "I am still not convinced that it's not – do you know what a *tanoria* is? No, actually, a bear. Have you seen a bear? It might be a bear. If I have been mauled when you get here, it is a bear."

She was going to see his apartment. Was it clean enough? He should have bought flowers. Something to make the rooms look nicer. Maybe if he turned up the air fresheners she wouldn't notice the terrible smell of dogs and burnt food and whatever Kreska had been drinking when she ought to have been sleeping.

"I didn't think it was *that* terrible being trapped in a car with me," he teased, though it was no more teasing than his usual tone of voice, and she could see neither his raised brow nor the wry curve to his mouth. "Maybe wait until you meet the dog before making any dog-related decisions you will regret."

She was probably imagining something cuter. Nicer. Quieter. A dog that was not named Onion, and who the name Onion did not suit.

"I'm in upper Western," he said, "a few levels above the botanical garden. Not... *that* long of a drive." It was actually a considerable drive. The higher allowed speeds of automated vehicles were the only reason they were able to visit each other within reasonable amounts of time. If she'd tried taking public transport... it would have been quite the commute.

Telling her this in advance also let her know that he lived in one of the upscale, *nouveau-riche* neighborhoods usually more populated with got-rich-quick entrepreneurs and the grown children of wealthy families. He would rather have lived in upper Eastern, if he was honest, but old money was much more judgmental than new, and made it much harder to buy real estate. And newer apartment complexes were much more willing to consider customization for less humanoid species. He'd only ever gone to upper Eastern when he was younger to badger senators and testify at the high court, and nowadays he didn't even bother.

"I'm sure we'll think of something," he said, sprawling out on the moss of his bedroom floor and digging through a drawer for a headset. He switched to it so that he could use his handset to order her a car, sending it to the location he'd saved the night before. There was a garage nearby with a number of available vehicles, so he picked something slightly larger than before, in case they *did* end up bringing the dog. "The car will be there in a few minutes," he warned, "but you can take your time. I'm sending you the access pass, just get in whenever you're ready and it will bring you here."



She actually had no idea what either of the things he referenced happened to be. Falling onto her couch she pulled the tablet out from under her arm and did a quick extranet search on the creatures in question. She flipped through pages of *bears* as he'd called them. Most of the images showed massive, furry creatures ambling through forests. "*Siith'a paska*," she exclaims, awe-struck, in Calrathii. "Uh, this thing sounds amazing and I gotta have it. *Please* don't get mauled though."

She chuckled as she went about searching through what a *tanoria* was. She could just imagine that rare, almost-smile that was accompanying his words. She tried, and likely failed, not to blush as her thoughts drifted back to him having her trapped against the door of the car. "Haha, no. I can't say it was terrible, but perhaps we could save any repeats in behavior for somewhere that isn't the back of a car."

Nova was actually imaging a strange, dog-bear hybrid concoction that was everything she'd ever dreamed of in a canine.

She poked idly at things on the screen of her tablet. When he mentioned he lived in the upper Western her brow automatically arched towards the widow's peak ridge of her tentacles. The tendrils slithered over her shoulders and fought her fingers for spaces on the touch screen as if it

were a game.

She leaned forward and pulled her phone out of the side pocket of her messenger bag, she transferred the call to the device and turned off Camdis' console, putting the tablet in the larger pocket. She stood, cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder and she lifted the bag and threw the strap over her head. "Sounds good to me. I am pretty much ready to go," the smile could be heard in her tone as she unhooked her sunglasses from her shirt and slid them on. She grabbed her keys from the catchall in the foyer and walked out the front door. "Soooo, I guess I will see you soonish?" key jingled noisily as she locked the door. "I don't figure you'll want to talk to me the whole trip. I gotta save some of my rambling for later."



There was something especially charming about hearing someone who usually didn't revert to their native language. He did it himself, from time to time, but it was an interesting insight to hear the kinds of sounds that came most naturally to a person. Guttural, harsh, sharp, song-like, sometimes even noises that did not even exist within Terran Standard; it was probably unfair to assume it gave a certain amount of psychological insight, but sometimes he wondered.

It also sounded a great deal nearer to the name that had been on the first message she'd sent than did Nova. He tried to push that thought out of his mind, because it was none of his business. Names changed for any number of reasons. She'd tell him if it was important.

"There is nothing I can say that will keep you from getting your hopes up about this dog," he sighed. Ix hated disappointing people, but achieving that through lowered expectations was probably not ideal.

*Tanoria* had come to him more easily than bear only because one was alien to him and one was not. 'Bear' was certainly more accurate, since the tanoria of Maroc was as big as a house, with tusks and horns that intersected and fur much longer and shaggier than that of little Onion. They did, however, have curling tails. Mostly, a tanoria was the first thing he thought of when trying to think of something large and hairy and unpleasant.

"Soon is good," he said, closing the application associated with the car service he used so he'd not be tempted to watch her come nearer the entire time. He wasn't sure that she knew the effect it had on him, her suggestion that they might repeat last night's slightly-irresponsible behavior elsewhere. "I need to... change. Into not a suit. I'll see you soon. And I'll try not to get mauled in the meantime."

When goodbyes were said and done, and the line was dead, he began to feel faint stirrings of panic. He emerged from his bedroom with a nervous twitch to his fingers, as if playing chords on an invisible *angat*.

"Does this count as – what in the hell are you doing."

Kreska was sitting on the floor with Onion, and had installed some kind of holo-application on his terminal that projected top hats and moustaches onto the both of them. "We're bein' civilized," she explained, and he rubbed the spiral on his forehead.

"Have you been waiting like this the entire time just so you could make that joke when I was done?"

"Yuuuuuup. Also th'app cost like ten creds, ya shouldn't keep your payment info stored like that'r somebody might try'n take advantage."

"Does this count as not wearing a suit?" he asked of his outfit, and Kreska snorted.

"Takin' off th' jacket an' tie don' make't not a suit," she said, and her projected accoutrements made it very difficult to pretend it wasn't amusing. "Why?"

"I need. Clothes. Nova is coming over. I'm supposed to wear something that isn't a suit. I didn't think this through."

She began to laugh, and Onion's curly little tail wagged, barking in excitement in much the same way that someone might laugh at a joke they didn't understand. "How th'fuck's she got time t'get naked for other dudes when she's with your dumb ass all th'time?"

Ix's eyes widened, and two hands went to either side of his head. "Work!" he said, mildly horrified. "She had – she was supposed to work today, she – she said she had work today. She had to go home because of work, and, shit, fuck—" He was now considering the terrible possibility that her earlier statement had not been invitational, had instead meant that she didn't want him accosting her when they were alone in a car with no one around to hear her. Maybe she hadn't trusted him to stop when asked, maybe she had thought it necessary to lie, maybe—

"Dunno why you're havin' a panic attack'r whatever when this chick's so hot for your weird dick she took a day off t' try'n hop on it," Kreska said, rubbing Onion's head with her good hand so that it clipped through the hologram of a hat he was wearing.

That was enough to snap him out of his fugue state. "Is it really necessary to state your opinion in as disgusting a manner as possible?"

"Y'warned her 'bout th' frog pond yet'r were ya just hopin' she'd wanna fuck in a bathtub th' first time for unrelated reasons?"

"You could have just said yes."



Her mind briefly alighted over the memory of him telling her he was a perfectionist at the sound of the sigh. She curled one tentacle around her index finger idly as she tried to think of something that might back him feel better about the meeting. "I will just prepare myself to be utterly disappointed by this monster you've acquired? So, I can be pleasantly surprised when it turns out to be adorable."

That seemed *fair*.

"I look forward to it," was, somehow, her response to both not wearing a suit and not getting mauled. It was littered with her lighthearted laughter, and in her mind a decent means of a farewell, because she hung up immediately afterward. She shoved the phone back into its designated spot on her messenger bag so she could use her hands to pull her tentacles over her right shoulder and run hands over them. The first signs of her own budding nervousness.

She didn't have enough data on the matter of dating to know if it was appropriate to go to his apartment on the second one. He already knew where she lived, granted, but that felt like a technicality. She considered messaging Reyr to get her opinion the matter, but the other woman was probably dead after a night at Radius, and Nova figured it better to not bother her. She could message Sol-Aior, but they probably did not have the same thought process on the matter at all.

There was also the husky, phone-answering, mystery woman that was bit of a concern, even thought Ix had tried very hard for it not to be. Hm.

*Hmm.*

When the car arrived, she just kind of stared at its exterior for a few minutes. Her tentacles pushed her hands away as if they were tired of her useless fumbling, and slid back over her shoulders to curl at her hips. "Wow, geeze," she mumbles to them as she walks down her steps. "Don't know what your shitty mood is all about."

Like it was their fault. Honestly, like it wasn't her buzzing mixture of nerves and excitement that she had been trying to quell since the phone was answered that had weird subconscious flickers and was the source of their unfavorable behavior.

The car door opened as she approached and she tossed her bag in before following suit and sliding to the middle of the seat. She pulled out Camdis and allowed the terminal to interact with the car, because she couldn't be bothered to do so in her current state. She lay across the seat and stared up and out the window as if dealing with a crisis much more potent than going to a man's house for the first time.

Everything after getting in the car was kind of a blur. A strange mixture of streetlights and buildings all running together. Punctuated by Camdis' informing her the very second she got an email.

Now she stood in front of a door. She glanced down at the screen of her tablet to make sure it was the correct door. She turned it off to keep from having to hear him tell her about every inquiry she received and slipped it into her bag. Adjusting the strap over her chest, she gave herself a brief once over to make sure everything was in order, two tentacles curled against either side of her jaw. Then she knocked.

And then she waited.



Nova arrived at the top-floor penthouse just in time for Ixaaliot to be having a crisis.

"You're seriously goin' full hobo for this?"

He looked down at himself, wearing what was probably the nicest sweater he owned. It was uneven, threadbare in some places, entirely too thin altogether to really be called a sweater, an ugly shade of brown that had once been more of an orange. "This is – this is not 'full hobo'. This is fine. This is basically fine. Why is the dog wearing a t-shirt?"

Specifically, the dog was wearing one of Kreska's t-shirts, which fit it entirely too well although Onion probably wasn't actually a fan of Uknar punk bands. "Thought he might be self-conscious 'bout his bald spots," Kreska said with a shrug. "You're wearin' grandpa shoes an' fat pants."

"Loafers are a perfectly respectable kind of shoe," he protested, though without conviction. "And these are – these pants are fine." Those pants were one of few he owned that did not go with a suit, and it took both a belt and suspenders to keep them from falling off his slender frame. "Can you please put him on a leash? I don't want him running out the door when she gets here."

"Nah, we're cool," Kreska said with a dismissive wave, lounging on the couch with Onion on her lap. "We rehearsed an' all. Why ain'tcha jus' wearing one o' them weird color shirts Grilka's always gettin' ya, just rollin' up th' sleeves or whatevs t'make it look chill?"

"Why would you rehearse what are you going to – yes that I should do that why did I not do that."

"Cuz you're a dumbass," Kreska explained as he pulled off his glasses and yanked off his shirt, disappearing back into his bedroom to find something less ragged. "Isn't he, Onion? Isn't he?"

Onion barked and wagged his tail, just happy to be included.

"I'll get it!" Kreska yelled the instant she heard the knock at the door, and Onion began to honk-bark-howl gleefully as she leapt off the couch and over the coffee table.

"Nonono don't–"

Kreska pulled the door open, keeping most of her behind it so that there was plenty of room for Onion to greet their new guest. He was not yet large enough to go knocking anyone over, but he barked eager introductions while trying to climb into a lap Nova did not have, curly tail wagging furiously. Because Kreska was very carefully not blocking the view into the apartment, it was immediately visible when Ix emerged half-panicked from his bedroom, canary-yellow shirt not yet buttoned.

He froze. He stared. The combination of Nova looking lovely, being accosted by the world's fattest puppy, and his own complete lack of preparedness had caused his brain to stop working properly.

A few of his cephalic tentacles had fallen in front of one of his eyes. His expression was blank, but not in the sterner way it usually was, softer and more wide-eyed.

"Didja wanna come in?" Kreska asked, her grin wolfish. "He might be a minute."



Nova blinked out of whatever weird sort of trance she was in while she waited for her knock to be answered. Which was likely only a few moments between the actions. She turned her head from side to side, noticing where it was exactly her feet had taken her. *Siith'a paska...* she muses to herself. Even though she was in a part of the colony that was just as classy as she would have expected, it was still a bit overwhelming.

The door opened suddenly, and she almost jumped. Instead her tentacles flared over her shoulders, save for the two small ones that were circled near her chin. Her gaze dropped to Kreska, her head and shoulders about the only thing visible from behind the door. She instantly recognized her from last night at Radius.

*Friend of a friend...*

She did not get the chance to do her usual detailing evaluation since there was a fat, fluffy puppy in a t-shirt trying to climb up her legs. "Ohmygod," she exclaims, a phrase she had likely picked up from Reyr, as she immediately bent at the waist to pick up the over-friendly pup. "Holy shit, you're heavy," it was almost intoned with a groan as she just barely cradled the dog against her chest in the crook of one arm. She buried the fingers of her other hand in calico colored fur to scratch behind his whole ear. A larger tendril passed over his head. "Aw, what happened to your other ear?"

After a few passing seconds she seemed to remember that there were other people around. She drew her attention away from Onion, to look up and see Ix standing further in the apartment looking more than a bit caught off guard. That endearing smirk tugged at the corner of her mouth as she appraised him from a distance.

That half-smile was likely enough to imply that at some point in time she was going to tease him endlessly, but for now he was off the hook. She didn't take her eyes off of him right away, though.

"Suuure, thanks," was her response as Kreska invited her in. She stepped over the threshold, Onion in tow, but only far enough for the door to be closed behind her. One of her tentacles slid her glasses back up her nose, the others still petting the dog. She pulled her hand away from ear scratches long enough to turn an index fingers in the dog's direction. "This dog is adorable, and I'm almost upset you tried to convince me otherwise."

In some universe this was probably a proper greeting.

"What's his name?"



"They cut it off," Kreska explained, "so they wouldn't confuse'm with a dog wasn't bred for pit-fightin'."

The puppy wiggling happily in Nova's arms and attempting to lick her face off did not notice or care about these accusations regarding his vicious nature. Her half-smile as she looked Ix over made him swallow reflexively, and as she stepped inside Kreska obligingly closed the door behind her, leaning against it so she could watch the goings-on. Behind Nova's back, she gave a thumbs-up to either Ix or Onion.

"Toroki," he said, at the same time as Kreska said, "Onion." There was a pause. "His name is Onion," Ix admitted, slowly straightening out of the harried posture he'd been frozen in. Without his glasses, he could see that the ones she wore were also intended to block UV light, though probably for different reasons; he found himself slightly disappointed that he couldn't see the rings of light in her eyes.

Still, she seemed to be exactly as enthusiastic about the dog as she'd claimed she would be. She was not even remotely offput by... any of it. He was distracted enough by that fact to have forgotten that he still hadn't buttoned his shirt, focused enough on her affection for it that he didn't notice he was smiling.

"You... like him?"



Nova seemed slightly taken aback. "Th-that's terrible," she complains, trading the dog from one arm to the other, oblivious of Kreska gesturing behind her. She lowered her face to touch noses with the pup and was greeted by even more enthusiastic face licking. She couldn't resist erupting into giggles before she eventually returned the dog to the ground. "What about the other half of him?" she questions with an amused lilt, indicating his shaving. Her tentacles twisted together behind her back.

She raised a brow at the lack of consensus on the name. She swiveled at the hips to look at Kreska before turning back to Ix. "Onion?" she repeats slowly, the other corner of her mouth tugged up into a full grin. "Uhm. Is there a story there, or did you draw random words out of a hat or something?"

Despite how hard she tried she was unable to keep her hands off the dog for long. She finally moved further into the apartment, but that was only so she could kneel. She pulled the strap of her bag over her head and left it next to her. She spoke as she rubbed both hands over Onion's belly, that he had been more than happy to present to her. "I *love* him," she corrects enthusiastically. When she looked up Ix was smiling and she likely ended up staring. Well, also because he was still only half dressed. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep her gaze on his face, and not the expanse of exposed flesh with the various seams that decorated it, so she dropped her

eyes back to Onion.

"Big, fluffy dog," she reminds him, not very eloquently. "Well, not big yet. But soon, huh boy? Cause you got them huge paws, don't you?"



"When th' fights got shut down his fur was all matted'n fuckeduptified," Kreska explained, as Ix watched Nova smother the dog in affection. "Rescue place had t' shave it all off t'do lab work'n shit."

"He, ah. Hm." Ix thought it would be probably be best if he wrested thing conversation back into his control, but he was having trouble thinking straight when Nova smiled like that. "The. Technicians. Named him. Onion is. The translation. They thought it was fitting."

"He's got layers," Kreska suggested helpfully, which he supposed was slightly better than 'he was depressing and smelled weird'.

If he had trouble thinking before, making his brain work right when Nova was kneeling on the floor and smiling up at him and talking about loving the ridiculous thing had had accidentally brought home instead of the much nicer gift she deserved—

"I thought you meant something more manageable," he said, a hand automatically going to the side of his neck to hold it flat.

"Aw, man, c'mon," Kreska said, "don' go croakin' at chicks when I'm here." She moved to the couch, and flopped backward onto it so that her legs dangled over the arm rest. "S'bad enough you're all eye-fuckin'r whatevs."

"We are not—"

"Ya shown her that thing y'can do with your tongue yet?"

"That — that is not even remotely relevant to anything and if you could refrain from being yourself for a moment that would be wonderful." Kreska's grin had drawn his attention to the fact that he was still standing around half dressed, and so he was now busy trying to get the appropriate buttons to work, though his fingers didn't quite seem to want to be as nimble as usual.

"Yeah, naw, I can see why you're all shy 'bout it," Kreska said, pulling out her phone and attempting to fidget with it one-handed. "Chicks hate a dude't can lick his own forehead."

"Kreska—"

"*Major* turn-off."

"If you could stop talking—"

Onion barked, because their discussion was distracting from valuable loving-him time.



"Oh no, not all fuckeduptified," despite indulging in Kreska's likely made-up jargon, she sounded genuinely concerned as she rubbed her hand over Onion's shaved back end. Nova changed her position so she was sitting properly on the floor with her legs in front of her and crossed at the ankles. The transition was impressive if only in the way she managed not to flash anyone. Onion seemed to instantly take this as an invitation to drape himself over her thighs for more attention. She was more than happy to oblige. "Well, I'm glad to see that he was rescued. And it was super sweet of you to adopt him."

She chuckled at the comment about the dog having layers, as she ran a hand down the length of him in a rhythmic motion. Onion looked pleased as punch, tail wagging furiously, tongue hanging out of his mouth. "Well if that's the case then it suits him. Besides he seems to like it." She deduced this by the way he seemed to wiggle furiously any time it was uttered.

She looked up at Ixaaliot, and then back down to Onion, and then back up to Ix. "He seems pretty manageable to me." At some point she had apparently stopped petting him, because he yipped and turned his head to nuzzle at her hand with his nose. "Well, I mean, *for now* maybe. I'm pretty sure he's going to get massive," she picked up one of the over-sized paws with the hand that wasn't petting. "But I think he's great."

Kreska made a complaint from the couch and Nova looked over to her. She didn't say anything to confirm or deny their eye-fucking accusation. Though, she did have a passing thought about how no one could say that Standard wasn't a... colorful language.

As the banter between Kreska and Ixaaliot continued Nova's face increasingly turned a shade of purple that was impossible not to notice. Also, she had discovered something *absolutely* fascinating on the ceiling. One tentacle pulled her glasses off of her face and transferred them to her hand, and two others curled around her neck.

Onion's bark seemed to act as a sort of reprimand and there was a minute of silence. "So, uhm, Kreska? Was it?" Nova began, willing her face to return to a more respectable color. "I remember seeing you at Radius last night, but we didn't really get the chance to meet. Sorry. I'm usually not so terrible at introductions, but I'm easily distracted by dogs. I'm Nova."

Which she likely, *totally*, already knew. Probably. But it couldn't hurt Nova to be nice. She was currently Ix's guest-slash-roommate person-thing. At the moment.



She thought his accidental canine acquisition was *sweet*. And Kreska was badgering her far less than she was capable, which he was pretty sure was a good sign. He thought. Maybe.

"He seems to like you better than me," he said wryly, though he couldn't tell if that was the result of Kreska's interference. Could he put it past her to deliberately make it difficult for him to keep the dog for himself?

She turned distinctly purple as Kreska spoke, and if blushing was an involuntary response of which he was capable he probably would have done something similar. His hand remained firmly at his neck, instead, and buttoning himself up with only two hands was much more difficult than most two-handed people made it look. How did anyone get dressed with anything resembling speed in the mornings? The half-Jobari looked quite pleased with herself, for someone who would have been supremely irritated by similar insinuations about her own person.

"I apologize for her," he interrupted, even though he knew that was rude. "She is. Terrible."

Kreska did something that could only be called a gigglesnort, which she buried by rubbing her bandages over her nose, as if she had to sneeze. "The *worst*," she agreed. "Was real unfortunate an' all I didn't get t'say hi yesterday. Helped him pick outta dog, tho, so it's kinda from th'both of us."

"It is *not*," Ix said, appalled. He paused. "Not that it was. I may have been considering a dog. For you. This is not. That." He straightened out his shirt, smoothed it across his chest.

"He gotcha a dog. He wanted t'getcha a dog's good's you but he gotcha a dog's shitty's him instead."

"That is not—"

"He did," she contradicted before he could contradict her. "Y'all's goin' out t'day? Can't exactly stay in an' watch a movie." She waved vaguely at the space on the ceiling from which the television used to hang.



"Oh, I don't know if *that's* true," she counters, scrunching the dog's face between her hands. She laughed lightly at the result of the gesture, Onion looked as if he couldn't be bothered; attention was attention as far as he seemed concerned. On the other hand, Nova couldn't be bothered to worry about how she looked planted in the middle of Ix's floor, cooing over the pup. "It's probably just because I'm obsessing over him. I doubt he's too picky."

Nova's gaze finally dropped from the ceiling, it flickered over the two other people in the room as Ix apologized for Kreska. She went to mumble something about it being fine. All in all it didn't bother her, because even though they spoke about each other with an intimate sort of familiarity, the tone in which they used seemed to imply that there was no love lost between them. Nova opened her mouth to continue the greeting, perhaps ask a few questions, about 'how she knew Ixaalot,' or 'what happened to her hand,' but it snapped closed once more at the last thing Kreska said.

*What? What? What?*

"From... both of you?"

She looked down at the dog, and then between Ix and Kreska again as he denied the statement. She was quiet as they went on to explain that they had indeed kind of, sort of gotten her a dog. For a brief moment she was visibly overwhelmed. She focused her gaze on the canine, wiggling and panting in her lap without a care in the world. With his too squished face, and his too curly tail, with one ear missing. She knew this was the type of dog that they would say no one wanted. That would still be sitting in a kennel if Ix and Kreska had not brought him home, and to say that did not resonate with her would be false.

"You, uhm, you got me a dog?" Two of her smaller tendrils curled against her jaw as she lapsed into another bout of silence. No one had ever bothered to get her a gift before, and now he had given her two in just as many days.

"He's not shitty" she reassures. One of her hearts had somehow migrated to her throat and speaking around it was becoming quite difficult. "He's. Perfect."

She picked up the dog and cradled him to her chest once more, hoping that she wasn't going to cry over a dog in front of them. "We... didn't really come up with a solid plan," she explains for Kreska as she set the dog aside, allowing him to go about his business so she could stand. She swept stray puppy hair off her blouse and smoothed out her skirt. She was saving the urge to kiss Ixaalot senseless with her gratitude for a time when Kreska wouldn't have to bear witness. "We're supposed to be figuring something out."



She was upset.

Or, no.

She was happy? So happy she looked... upset? Nova was clinging to the wiggly little fluff sausage as if he were the most precious thing in the world, and it made Ix want to hold her in a manner suspiciously similar. He didn't know if he wanted to apologize or buy her another dog. Or twelve.

Acquaintance with Kreska was, in a lot of ways, a series of tests whose failure meant her disdain. It had taken some time for Ix to figure this out, and he still wasn't sure how often it was conscious on her part. It wasn't something he could ask. The hardest part had been figuring out that this disdain manifested primarily as avoidance, as thorough an elimination from her life as was possible; the deliberately obnoxious behavior, the more creative insults, the tests never stopped.

Of course, it was always different with more feminine people.

If he assumed that Onion was some kind of test, Nova seemed to have passed. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or anxious.

His plan, which he had not revealed to any of the people involved, had been to leave Kreska with Onion. Making her responsible for the dog had seemed like a good way to be sure that she remained in his apartment instead of wandering off and inevitably getting attacked due to poor planning. She was far more likely to be careful, in his estimation, if it risked bringing the dog to harm.

Nova, however, seemed to really like her new dog. Even more than she liked her tiny tree. Eventually he was going to have to get her a gift that wouldn't clutter up her apartment, but in the meantime, he thought perhaps she would like to spend more time with Onion. "We could take him for a walk?" he suggested. "And maybe... get lunch? Or. Brunch."



Nova had been watching Onion waddle to and fro as he went about exploring the room; she was standing with that sappy grin on her face and her fingers laced behind her back. There was very little as far as wildlife was concerned on Kriion. It was too dark, cold, and barren for anything to thrive. Which really said a lot about the species that did live there. The only thing similar would have been the *koi-ra*; but even those were imported from the *Delta Adastreia* system. They were vicious, wolf-like creatures with six legs, too many eyes, and rough patches of fur in sickly colors. The rangers in the military used them for any array of tasks and Nova had not liked them at all. They'd actually frightened her as a child.

She still remembered the first time she had seen an earth puppy. A doe-eyed and lost little thing that had shown up on her front porch one night shortly after her arrival on Icarus. Upon determining that it was not *too* dangerous she picked it up and promptly walked all the way back to Radius to ask Reyr what to do with it. The flame-haired Martian had only laughed at her at first. In her defense, Nova standing by the bar holding a tiny terrier at arms length like it was infected with some sort of plague, was quite funny in retrospect. The concept of a dog had been explained to her thoroughly by several parties, and she was sent home to wait it out to see if someone came looking for it. Eventually, someone had, but not before the Calrathiion had discovered she *adored* dogs. She spent the next two months pining after them through a pet shop window. Why she had never purchased one for herself was a mystery.

When Ix suggested they take Onion for a walk her tentacles flared, and she turned slightly to look at him. Somehow, she visibly brightened even more, and her smile grew. As she walked over to him her tendrils swelled over her shoulders, falling across her chest, but she pushed two smaller ones on either side behind her ears. "Could we really?" she attempts to reaffirm, as if the entire notion were too good to be true. "That sounds wonderful."

She stopped short about arms length from him and cocked her head, as if she had just noticed something. Which was exactly the case. He wasn't wearing a suit. Just like he had promised, and though she had noted initially, she'd gotten distracted by Onion. She reached out and hooked her finger between the top two buttons and brushed her thumb over one of the fasteners. "You look nice," she compliments softly. Even though she was taller in heels than she had been in boots the night before, she still had to look up at him. "I find that I am quite *partial* to this color on you."



They would take Onion on all of the walks. They would walk him until he stubby fat legs wore out. And then he would carry him. They would walk that dog until such a time as Nova stopped looking so absolutely delighted about it.

Possibly later he would share his sudden mental image of the large, clothed puppy strapped into a stroller so that they could continue walking after the dog was tired.

He froze entirely as Nova appraised him, and when she slid her fingers along his shirt he swallowed reflexively, breath catching. She'd *noticed*. It had taken him entirely too long to dig through his rejected wardrobe to find a shirt in yellow (Grilka had purchased it as part of a lime green suit), and he wasn't actually sure if he was happy that she realized. It was a little too obvious, wasn't it, wearing her favorite color? She liked big fluffy dogs and the color yellow, and he seemed to think that if he draped himself in all of those things he could trick her into believing that he was also one of her favorite things.

He was very glad he hadn't worn the sweater.

Kreska threw something at him, and he only barely managed to catch it, realizing after he'd done so that it was a leash. "You're gonna hafta attach it t'one o' th' holes in his shirt," she said, "cuzzat collar ya bought 'im's too small."

"It was the biggest one they had," he said defensively, anxiously wrapping and then unwrapping the end of leash around his hand.

"Don' make it fit. Take'm t'th'beach, get some tacos. He'll like tacos." The slender green woman waved dismissively at the both of them, as if they had been excused from her presence.

She was, in fact, exhausted, something that she was unwilling to even attempt to remedy until she had the apartment to herself. She was likely to remain exhausted until she could get back into her apartment, but getting rid of the lovers probably wouldn't hurt.

Ix's fidgeting had lead him to wrap both ends of the leash around two of his hands, and he looked down to where the overpriced faux-leather was pulled taut between them. "Do you... would you. Like. The beach?"



He'd said nothing, so she unhooked her finger from the seam and smoothed fingertips down the line of buttons before pulling away. All his efforts were not in vain, he was quickly becoming one of her favorite things, but that was likely to happen without the addition of woolly dogs and canary colored shirts. This was only her third time in his presence, but she already knew that she felt better when he was around, and thought of him entirely too much when he wasn't.

Nova didn't flinch when the object was launched in their direction, but she turned her head to set sights on the other woman, briefly, before her gaze sought out Onion, who's collar was apparently too small. The sausage of a dog was waddling around the room eagerly, as if he would find something to get in to.

Kreska waved them away, seemingly finished solving their current set of problems revolving around what to do with their day. When Nova looked back to Ixaaliot he had wrapped himself up in the the leash. She smirked, apparently that fidgeting habit of his extended to every situation. Her two larger tentacles twisted together against her chest, as she took a step towards him. "I've never been to the beach," she admits, moving closer another step. "But from what I have heard of the beach, it sounds very...*unobjectionable*." She placed one of her hands, palm down, on the length of leash stretched between two of his. She pushed down on it gently, with the idea that it would force him down to her so she could kiss him. First his tie, and now the leash, she seemed to be forming a habit of finding ways to bring him down to her level.

Kreska be damned apparently; Nova couldn't be bothered to worry about sparing her the sappy details, because between the dog, and the shirt, and the fidgeting, she couldn't resist. It was just a press of lips, nothing too invasive, sort of like a greeting, but too long lasting to just be friendly.

"I've also never had a taco," she announces after she separates her mouth from his. She worked to unwrap the leash from his hands as she continued to speak. "So, it's a lot of firsts for Onion *and* me today. How exciting!"

After successfully untangling the lead, she took it in her own hands and began forming a knot in one end, like a makeshift collar, that she could clip it together with the other end and not choke the poor animal. She turned away from Ix and lowered herself back to the ground and as soon as she did so, Onion was falling over her lap in a matter of seconds. Her glee was obvious as she laughed and ruffled his ears, slipping the leash over his head. "You wanna go to the beach?" she questions the canine, squishing his face between her hands. His tail wiggled from side to side so furiously it shook his entire rear end. "Yeah, you do. Look at you. All excited. You don't know what's going on, you big, goofy, dog."



He really wished she'd stay. And keep her hands on his shirt. And unbutton his shirt. And—

Lots of other things he would choose not to think about while keeping his hand firmly over the right side of his neck. If he croaked in front of Kreska, he would never hear the end of it.

"Beaches are extremely objectionable," he corrected before he could stop himself, leaning down as she bade and kissing her and trying not to kiss her more. "Sand gets in uncomfortable places," he added as a way of stopping them from kissing, before kissing her briefly again to stop himself from talking. "It's difficult to walk on." Maybe kissing her forehead would work better? "It smells weird." It did not work better. "The beach nearby is... fine," he finished lamely, drawing away before he could press his lips anywhere else. Kreska was pointedly fiddling with her phone, which he thought was probably a good sign, maybe. "Artificial freshwater lake. Tropical theme. Very... sterile."

Sterility was not romantic. None of the things he was saying were romantic. If he didn't stop himself now he would wind up giving her a lecture on tacos and that would lead into a discussion on the legal definition of a sandwich, and soon he would have sucked the fun out of everything so thoroughly that he would finally — as Kreska had long claimed — have to kick his

own ass.

"Hopefully you'll like them," he said, "but I am not feeding that dog a taco. You'll understand why when you've had one." He watched her unwrap the leather from his palms, forming it into something that could reasonably be used to walk a dog. It was hard to pull his gaze away from how much she absolutely adored the fluffy little idiot already.

He turned his attention to Kreska, anyway, while Nova was busy. "Stay here," he warned, because he didn't want her tailing them, but also didn't want her leaving the high-security facility that was his apartment.

"Y'ain't th'boss o' me," she said reflexively, though she had no intention of doing anything but trying to nap.

"I would have fired you by now," he agreed, and Kreska snorted.

"Y'left your glasses on th' counter," she pointed out as he headed for the door, and he detoured into the kitchen and back as if that was what he'd intended all along. He slid them on before he opened the door, holding it for Nova and her fluffy bundle of wiggly barks.

"Shall we?"



She smiled at the fleeting presses against her lips and forehead, and at the way he began a discourse upon her previous statement. She was just beginning to think he was being, in her opinion, uncharacteristically quiet. "Hii'jai," she begins, not quiet interrupting him; her tentacles slithered back over her shoulders and fell against the line of her spine. Whatever she had said sounded very similar to a scolding. "Don't try to ruin it," she punctuated her warning with a kiss of her own, rising up on her toes to do so. "Besides, I will be there with you, so even if it turns out I *loathe* the beach, it'll be worth it." The shrug that followed seemed to indicate that that was all the reasoning she needed.

"Uh oh. Ix says no tacos for you." She released the dog's face and he immediately presented her with his belly. Nova was quick to oblige the invitation, with affectionate scratches, cooing compliments on his adorableness in Calrathii. Whatever it was about cute, fluffy animals that reduced her to such a cheesy, baby-talking coddler was impressive to say the least. It was already obvious that she was going to spoil the canine endlessly, tacos or no tacos. He had her wrapped up in his massive, furry paws.

As Ixaalot and Kreska went through their exchange, she stood and walked back to where she had left her bag, despite how forlorn Onion managed to look about her taking her attention of him. She pulled her sunglasses from the side pocket she had slipped them into, before draping the whole thing over her shoulder. Onion seemed to pick up on the fact that they were going somewhere and proceeded to lose his mind over it. He ran excited circles between Nova and Ix, barking his apparent glee the entire time. She put her own glasses on and managed to snag the leash again when the dog came by for another lap. She secured the strap around her hand, and he pulled against it, panting and wriggling. "He doesn't have, like, any training, does he?" She sounded amused, and she tugged gently on the leash, trying to establish a sense of dominance.

It did not work.

She allowed the animal to practically pull her towards the door Ix held, figuring there was plenty of time to train him in the near future.

"Bye Kreska," she called back, just before Onion could direct her beyond the threshold. "It was nice meeting you."



"He is not even remotely trained," Ix confirmed. "They may have tried to train him to fight, but it doesn't seem to have taken." The only thing he seemed to be fighting was his leash, which was preventing him from bounding out into the hall at the maximum possible speed.

"Byyyye," Kreska called with a wave, at the same time as Ix said, "Don't encourage her, she'll think she's people." Her undignified laughter followed them into the hall as he closed the door behind them, and he adjusted his shirt collar, unused to not having a tie knot to fidget with. His pants still had pockets, at least, so two hands remained firmly planted inside them.

"We should just be able to walk to the beach," he said, stopping and starting as he walked toward the elevator to give Onion time to figure out what was happening and follow. "We could take a car, if you want—" He sidestepped awkwardly as Onion tried to wrap his leash around his legs. "—but they charge extra for dogs. And he could probably use the exercise."

The elevator was roomier than was entirely necessary, possibly on the assumption that he would someday want to entertain multiple guests. "Did I. Did I already mention that you look nice today? Good. Wonderful. Not that you don't always. I like the skirt. On you. Not that I don't like... not skirts."

This was not the seduction he had envisioned.



"Yeah, I am starting to gather that," she replies, taking short, quick steps in her heels to keep up with the dog that was trying to pull her arm off. Tentacles flared at her hips, as she forced a stop and drew back on the leash. Onion pulled once more, but seemed to quickly realize he wasn't making any headway. He honk-barked in protest and Nova made the same clicking noise with her teeth that she usually used with wayward tentacles. It seemed to spark something, because the dog flopped down into a sitting position. "Hey, look at that," Nova sings, entirely too pleased as she looked to Ixaalot and pointed with her free hand.

"Oh, but she seemed nice, A bit rough around the edges, maybe, but nice either way." It was an alternating system of checks and balances with Onion as he led her towards the elevator. He would pull forward and she would pull back, like an ongoing game of tug-of-war. Nova was determined to establish a bit of leash training with the canine, if nothing else. She had never actually owned a dog, but appeared to know quite a bit about them. She may or may not have spent entirely too much time reading about dogs and dog ownership once upon a time.

"I'm fine with walking." She maneuvered around with the animal as he attempted to get himself tangled around Ix. At one point they both ended up circling him completely while the woman giggled about it.

Nova convinced Onion to sit once more when they were in the elevator and looked down at herself as attention was brought to her skirt. "You had not mentioned it," she responds, expression settling back into her half-smile, smaller tentacles curling at either side of her jaw. By now, it was probably pretty clear that this gesture happened when she was pleased. She chuckled lightly. "It's okay. I know what you mean. Thank you."

"So, I've never actually been this far into the Upper Western," she admits, her gaze sliding from her skirt, to Onion before she cocked her head and accessed Ixaalot in her peripherals. "It's nice."



Ix sighed as Onion seemed much more amenable to obeying Nova than it had been for him. Not the bizarre rapport he had with Kreska, which he suspected had to do with being half-feral little monsters, but something almost resembling obedience. "It would seem that I am approximately as authoritative as a potato," he muttered, since even animals didn't seem much concerned about the consequences of disobeying him.

"Rough around the everything," he corrected, "like a *shenaii*. Or a cactus." It was hard to stay annoyed with the little bear cub when Nova looked almost as excited as he did.

Being able to tolerate Kreska was a good thing, but actively liking her seemed like it could end badly for him.

He liked it when her tentacles curled around her jaw. It made him feel... comforted. He hoped that she didn't really know what he meant, since he was pretty sure what he'd actually meant was *your legs look fabulous* or maybe *the way your skirt hangs off your hips is fascinating* or *you're wearing a lot of things I could slide my hands underneath*. None of which were polite things to be thinking about someone at the beginning of a second date when they were trapped in an elevator with him. He found himself standing a little nearer to her, reaching out with the hand not in his pocket to tentatively brush against

her fingers, an invitation to lace their fingers together.

"Most of the people who live here are assholes," he said automatically, and he did not exclude himself from the description. "My first few decades I lived in Lower Eastern, until I was evicted." He considered how that might sound. "For very respectable reasons." This was not entirely true, but he was of the opinion that it should have been respectable, which was almost similar. "The landlord here is a friend of a friend," he said by way of explanation, lest she think he'd chosen a place this expensive due to personal taste. "Not that there aren't... benefits. Apartments around here are more amenable to changing things for non-Terran occupants. Security is... secure."

As the elevator opened on the first floor, he nodded his head toward the coffee shop across the lobby. "Did you want to try it now," he wondered, "or wait until next time?" Or maybe it was presumptuous to assume there would be a next time, dog or no dog. No amount of reassurance on her part would stop him from feeling as if he were far more attached to her than she to him.



"I listened to you," Nova quipped, pushing her glasses back up her nose with a larger tentacle. Their position having been jostled by attempting to wrangle in the pup. Her tone seemed to resemble that of someone who felt they were upgraded to an elevated sense of status by doing what they were told. "Went to bed and such. Called you first thing; if that makes you feel better." Another light-hearted chuckle.

"Isn't that just an act, though?" She still spoke of Kreska and her apparent abrasiveness. Nova had few things to base this conclusion on. The other woman had been determined to embarrass him when Nova had first arrived, but then she had suggested they go the beach. Which seemed rather amiable. "Regardless, I think we will get along. I guess we'll kind of have to, since she's sort of your roommate."

As it turns out, she did not actually know what he meant. Thinking that it was simply a compliment, and less of a testament to all those things he happened to be thinking. The two of them just made a habit of carrying on with normal threads of conversation while harboring mutual thoughts less suited for the situation.

"You always sound as if you don't like anything," she points out, musing over his initial dislike of the beach, and now his apartment complex. Weaving their fingers together at his invitation, there was no suppressing the smile that was brought upon by standing there holding hands with him. "I'm almost surprised you bother leaving your apartment," she teases. She didn't ask him to elaborate on the eviction. It was possible that he would have spoken more on it had he actually wanted to. "Changing things? Like what?"

That one just sort of slipped out.

Onion had been doing a decent job of sitting at her feet, his tail still waving back and forth. His tongue seemed to constantly loll out of the side of his mouth as if it were too big to be properly contained within it. This pseudo-behaving was shattered, however, when the elevator doors opened. It was immediately back to the excited pulling as if he had any sense to where they were going. Nova easily dragged the puppy back to her. Hopefully, he figured out this walking on a leash thing before he got any bigger.

"I think we should wait until next time," she agrees, smiling up at Ix and drawing small circles across his skin with her thumb. This also happened to be her own way of implying there should most certainly be a next time. That there should be even more times after that was not implied, for now.



"So I can get pretty women to go to bed—" he began, before stopping abruptly. "That's not. I meant. I was trying to be. Self-deprecating. I don't think it worked." He was flattered enough by the reminder that she'd listened to him to be almost embarrassed, like a gift he didn't think he deserved. "Thank you. For that. I hope it was worth it." He looked down at himself, then immediately looked away with a slightly disgruntled expression. He really needed to buy some clothes.

"Masks say as much about a person as what's beneath them," he said, "and you shouldn't hug a cactus just because it's soft on the inside." That was really entirely too philosophical, when all he really wanted to say was *I don't want to think about other people when you're with me*. "It's possible she has a few redeeming qualities," he admitted, "but it will hopefully be an extremely temporary arrangement."

"I like a lot of things," he countered, as if it should somehow have been obvious, squeezing her hand slightly. "I just. Think it's good to be honest. If you only like things you can pretend are perfect, you don't really like them. In my opinion. Objectivity is... good. You can be objective without sacrificing your subjective opinion."

Her next question was slightly more difficult, and he was happy to have Onion's misbehavior as a temporary distraction. "Siladen don't. They. We." It occurred to him that she may have only been asking in the abstract, rather than asking the changes he specifically had made. It was a bit too late for him to switch gears, however. "Until I moved into this building," he said finally, by way of explanation, "I slept in a bathtub. It was. Uncomfortable. But less uncomfortable than a... mattress. I was able to have the bedroom modified so that I could get a good night's sleep." That was less specific than he could have been, but it probably got the idea across. "I understand if you don't want to spend the night any time soon," he added, with a wry curve to his mouth.

The coffee shop proprietors probably wouldn't appreciate having Onion running around, but he'd thought he ought to offer anyway. Onion seemed very determined to drag them outside so that he could frolic in the poorly protected flowerbeds. "Probably better to save room for tacos."



*I'm sure you can get pretty girls to do a lot of things*, was almost her response; automatic and offhanded, but at some point just after she opened her mouth she thought better of it and snapped it closed again. "No, it did not work," ended up being her chosen response, accompanied by her smirk. "It really almost sounded like you were *bragging*." The tentacles that weren't pinwheeled against her jaw, twisted over themselves behind her back. "It's been worth it so far. Got a good night's sleep, I'm getting to hang out with you first thing in the morning. And you got me a dog. Still quite blown away by that part."

The leash slid further up her arm as she lifted her hand to trace the curved ridge where her tentacles began, brows climbing her forehead. Nova didn't quite think she should respond, since Kreska seemed to be the last thing he was actually interested in talking about. She dismissed the subject with a thoughtful noise and a shrug of her shoulders.

She also had no response, clever or otherwise, to his brief lecture, but she smiled and squeezed his hand in return.

"Oh, no. You're not getting out of it that easy," she begins, quite matter-of-factly. Clearly unperturbed by his explanation. It was all a learning curve: getting used to each other's habits and needs, and she wasn't going to let something like this seem off-putting. Assuming she had correctly put two and two together. "You already said that the next time I had a few days off we'd start on all that research." She paused, pale hues flickering to the side briefly before coming back to settle on his face. "I...may have a few days off. By the way." Tentacles flared around her shoulders. That had not been the way she was planning on revealing that information.

"And I don't think he has the patience for coffee," she adds, jutting her chin in Onion's direction. He'd exhausted the length of his leash, and even with Nova's arm fully extended from her person, it was not enough to please him. The couple was clearly not moving along at a speed he appreciated. Which was no surprise, Nova thought, he had probably spend most of his life in a cage; though possible isolation and abuse were not at all evident in his personality. All of his newfangled freedom had him in a frenzy.



"Absolutely not," he said. "Not that you aren't. Worth bragging about. But that sort of. Makes you sound like an accomplishment of mine. Rather than your own person. Whose interest I have been lucky enough to have." He squeezed her hand again, his eyes on the sidewalk ahead of them rather than at her. "I'm glad you like him," he added as an afterthought, and he ventured to lean over briefly to kiss near the base of one of her tendrils.

Now that they were outside he pulled a battered pack of cigarettes from his pocket, stuck a stick in his mouth and put it back to hunt for his lighter. This search was derailed by the information she divulged, and the unlit cigarette hung from his mouth as he did his own mental math. "You—? You. Oh. Oh." Was that just a statement of fact, or was it intended as the invitation it sounded like? His eyes went slightly vacant as he considered all the most improbable ways they could spend the next few days, alongside the more reasonable possibilities. Most of his more elaborate fantasies were immediately interrupted by dogs and green-skinned women, because even his imagination couldn't let him have nice things. "That's... nice," he said lamely, blinking away a particularly vulgar mental image. He retrieved his lighter, and focusing on getting his cigarette lit made it easier to hide any expression he may have had.

*That's disgusting and I'm disgusting and I should be ashamed of myself what is even wrong with me.*

"I can't even imagine that dog with caffeine," he said, because Onion was already bouncing off the proverbial walls. Another drag of his cigarette, and he exhaled smoke away from Nova, letting her set the pace. Otherwise, his long legs and Onion's enthusiasm would probably have them moving entirely too quickly to be comfortable for her.



Nova looked down to where their hands were clasped together. The natural lighting reflected off her scales, drawing out the pinks, purples, blues and greens within them; casting shifting rainbows across her skin as she moved. "Lucky enough?" she repeats, before turning her head and stealing a kiss of her own before he could draw away from her. "It was hardly luck. I think you severely underrate your charms."

As he began to respond she felt the bridge of her nose grow warm, likely accompanied by a magenta tint, and all of her tentacles fell motionless. *That's nice?* Was that it? She turned her head as if there was something particularly interesting across the street and pulled her lower lip between her teeth, an attempt to offset any appearance of embarrassment. Had that been too forward of her? Or perhaps too presumptuous? Was it possible that she had misinterpreted what he had meant the night before?

The leash remained situated at the crook of her elbow, seeing as she kept using that hand for various tasks. More accurately rubbing over the bridge of her nose as if to force away the blush that had settled there. "Uhm, yeah..." was her pathetic effort to bridge the silence as he lit a cigarette, she fidgeted with the strap of her bag where it fell across her chest. Her tentacles had coiled up against her shoulder blades, though not as tightly as they tended to do when she was annoyed. "It's kind of sudden?" she begins again, forcing her voice to remain at it's normal octave as she gave him an excuse to get out of the whole situation. "So, I totally understand if you're busy, or...something."

"I don't *want* to imagine him with caffeine," she jokes lightly, watching as the dog made zig-zags down the sidewalk with his nose pressed to the pavement as if he would smell everything. She kept strides that were quick enough to keep Onion from dragging her along, she was beginning to wish she had chosen better footwear for the day's adventure. Not that she had had any idea that walking an over-eager puppy to the beach was going to be on the agenda. "I'm sure he'll calm down as he grows up. I think all this freedom is just new to him."



"Yes. My charms. With my many charming habits. Such as. Filling the air with poison. Making unsettling noises at women as an evolutionary holdover. Flirting with women in their place of employ when they cannot escape."

His brows briefly moved into a furrow as her tentacles fell limp, coiled near her collarbones. That was bad. He was pretty sure that was bad. Her tentacles didn't move like that when she was happy, he didn't think. "It's not – I'm not busy. I'm. Trying not to jump to conclusions. Being available doesn't mean you're... available. So to speak. I would... ideally. I would like to be romantic. Rushing into things is not romantic." He tugged her closer so that the upper arm on that side could wrap around her shoulders, the lower holding her hand. "And I think if I pinned you to a wall in an alley, Onion might get the wrong idea. Even if it's sunny out, and even if it's a very nice alley."

He wasn't sure if he was kidding.

"Let's hope," he said, "because otherwise he's going to be a nightmare." Onion was snuffling as if there were truffles buried in the concrete, and the combination of his drool and his wet nose left a trail like the world's fastest slug. "The taco, uh. Place. Isn't too much further," he reassured her, because her shoes could not possibly be comfortable for this long of a walk. "And there's other places," he added, "if you change your mind about tacos." Considering the place in question, it was entirely possible that she would. He turned his head away to take another drag on his cigarette, squinting suspiciously at brightly colored storefronts.



"I don't think you can count that last one, since I am pretty sure *I* was doing most of the flirting," she contradicted, looking up at him pointedly. "I find you *quite* charming. Admittedly, there isn't anything I don't like about you. So far. You're funny, smart, sweet, thoughtful. And I find you ridiculously attractive..." She stopped abruptly, but she could have kept going. Even though he had mentioned he liked it when she rambled, she continued to cut herself off when she noticed it was happening.

She pulled her hand away from her face, because it's not like the gesture was helping disperse the flush that had gathered. Her tentacles flared automatically, to fall over his arm rather than get trapped beneath it and she leaned against him. She didn't quite look like she was pouting, but it was very, very close. "It's okay. Totally okay. I understand," she managed to find several things to look at that were not him. "I'm not opposed to romance."

It was very unlikely that this blush was going to disappear any time soon if he continued to send her mind wandering by suggesting things like pinning her to walls.

"He does seem quite attached to me," her attentions fell on the topic of conversation. Onion had stopped to stick his entire face in a shrubbery. "You probably *would* get mauled if you tried to pull that off."

"I don't mind tacos. Granted, I've never had a taco, and I have nothing to base this on, but they can't be terrible, right?" She finally stopped avoiding it all together and looked up at him; but he'd turned his attention to the shops as they passed.



"That was, I assure you, about as flirtatious as I get." His instinct was to rebuff any claims of his own attractiveness, but he stifled that, having discovered that it could be seen as an insult to someone's preferences. He thought he'd done an almost adequate job of not insulting her thus far.

The first of their destinations was coming up, but there were things he wanted to say first, because she was expressive enough that even he couldn't miss certain signals. He pulled her close to stop her walking, and Onion objected to this until he found something stuck to the pavement. He brought his face near to hers, as if he was pointing something out in a nearby shop window, murmuring in his usual resonant thrum. "I err on the side of caution. If I didn't, my enthusiasm for *research* might be unsettling for you. In that I have already formulated a number of extremely detailed hypotheses that I would like to test."

It was proving very difficult to find a good balance between being deceptively opaque and outright admitting he'd been having not-particularly-romantic fantasies about her.

"And the reason you might not want tacos," he explained, standing straighter, "is because we're getting them *there*." The hand that held his cigarette pointed a little ways down the sidewalk, to a battered metal cart covered in crude signage and equipped with a deep fryer. Behind it stood either a very small and very old Terran woman, or a very large walnut with delusions of grandeur. "People have been trying for years to get rid of her," he said, "because she's an eyesore, or a health hazard, or what have you. Dragged her cart all the way here from Lower Eastern when they were building the Quadrant, never left. If she can speak Terran Standard, you'd never know it. She looked like that when I moved here, so your guess is as good as mine how old she is."

Onion had apparently taken notice of the smell of frying meat, and was now very determined to eat the entire cart, straining against the leash toward his goal.



"You *do* remember that you insulted my drink choice, and lectured me on, what I am pretty sure was, the legal distinction between parenthood and possession, right?" Her tone was bit doubtful, implying that no one should consider these topics a flirtation. Nonetheless, here she was on date number two; in no position to be questioning his methods.

Nova stopped when she was pulled closer, as was his intention. She allowed her arm to extend to the side as Onion did his best to continue pulling her along. She probably should have been investigating what exactly the dog had found on the ground, but instead she was staring into the window of the shop they'd halted in front of. She was focused more on their reflections, than the items on display. As he spoke all four of her smaller tendrils looped against her jaw, but a larger one curled beneath Ixaalio's chin, as if it had done so a thousand times. She smiled, and was relieved that the blushing did not return, because when he was this close his voice resonated across her skin, and she quite enjoyed the sensation.

"Well, then. While it seems you underestimate my own enthusiasms, I look forward to comparing theories. When the time comes, that is."

She looked to where he was pointing, tentacle falling away from him as he straightened. When she saw the cart, she brightened visibly, obviously more excited than repulsed. "*Oh!* Reyr talks about these all the time. She, ah-" she made a thoughtful gesture with her other hand the best she could, while trying to keep Onion under control at the same time. "She says that the market streets on Mars are littered with them. All different kinds, selling different things. She says that they're always the best."

She wrapped a few lengths of Onion's leash around her hand as they approached, giving him wildly less room to maneuver, therefore less to go absolutely crazy in. His excitement had practically reduced him to a panting, slobbering, and wriggling mess. "*Kii'sa*, look at him," she stares down at the fluff ball, incredulously, pulling him closer to her side, but not without some effort. "He's lost his mind. Am I the *only* one that's never had a taco?" she complains jokingly, with a chuckle.



"So you understand my incredulity, then," he said, "when you flirted *back*." He had, indeed, expressed significant disbelief when she'd confessed that was what she was doing; until that point, he'd seen any flirtatiousness as either her usual manner, or optimistic projection on his part. He had no trouble admitting that his methodology was flawed, and the beautiful woman by his side baffled him more than anyone. It reassured him when her tentacles formed the smaller curls along her jawline that he associated with having made her happy. Less familiar, but pleasing in its own way, was when one of them curled at his chin, as if he had become a natural part of her unconscious display.

She looked so delighted when she glimpsed the little cart that he found an exclamation of his affections on the tip of his tongue, but he restrained it. She always seemed to surprise him in the strangest and best ways. Not that he knew her well enough to be justified in surprise, only a few days now... but he felt as if he knew her.

Rather than say anything, he suddenly tilted her face towards his so that he could kiss her with a brief intensity that seemed not at all justified by the anticipation of tacos. "I am *very* glad," he said, "that you took the day off."

He released her so that he could try to maneuver himself nearer the cart with a foot blocking Onion's access to the taco cart. If he'd been wearing a decent pair of pants, the dog would have ruined them with the force of his attempts to get by, little claws scrabbling at fabric as if he were just another part of the landscape to traverse.

The woman at the tiny taquería showed no recognition of a familiar face, but he didn't think she ever did. "Ah... *tres... tacos de papa...*" he began slowly, because he did not actually speak Spanish except to occasionally order here, "and... *carne asada? Tres carne asada. A lo pobre?* Uh. *Avec... no, con. Con avocados and queso. And tamarindo and horchata. Si?*"

He was pretty sure *carne asada* was the thing Nova would like. Hopefully he hadn't ordered too much food. Technically he had just ordered a pile of fat for the both of them, which could not possibly be healthy. "I hope you don't mind that I ordered for you," he added to Nova, entirely too late for either of them to do anything about it. He dug a credit chit out of his pocket for thirty, which was more than the old woman charged but as much as he was willing to pay, and she took it without complaint before beginning to assemble their food. She handed them their drinks first, in collapsible disposable cups as large as his head, and he took both to offer Nova the *tamarindo* while he sipped at his *horchata*.

The never-talkative woman who worked the cart surprised him by suddenly tossing a piece of raw steak over the cart for Onion to take. Onion was also surprised, but immediately recovered to scarf it down without chewing.

Apparently she liked dogs.

"So Reyr is a friend of yours?"