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"Can we talk?"

Ix looked up from her book, eyes huge as she stared at Charlotte in fright.

The vampire came into the RC and set a goblet of Wolfsbane down on the coffee table, then sat beside Ix.

"S-sure," Ix stammered, feeling around for a piece of paper to mark her spot. The cuddly newspaper jumped into her hand and rustled contentedly when she tucked it between the pages. She set her book aside and folded her hands, looking at Charlotte anxiously.

Charlotte smiled and reached up to trail a finger over Ix's ear. "Not about anything bad," she said. "Promise. I'm just... a little worried about you. You've been kinda out of it ever since we took out that god-awful fic with Bill and Hermione."

Ix bit her lip. "Just... just stuff, that's all," she said. "I keep having nightmares of Randy coming back."

"I kind of guessed that part," Charlotte said, grimacing. "But I don't think that's the big thing that's been bothering you, is it?"

"...Apecian," Ix admitted. She swallowed; a lump seemed to have appeared in her throat, making it hard to speak. "Lottie, I know you're trying to help me feel better about myself, and I, I've stopped thinking you were just being nice when you said you thought I was pretty, but no matter how much you believe it, that won't make other people look at me the same."

"Good," Charlotte said. "I don't want anyone else looking at you like they want to be with you forever."

"Yeah, and with this face, it's never going to happen," Ix said, jabbing a finger at her scars.

Charlotte cringed. "That's not what I meant," she said, rubbing the back of her neck. "I was trying to make this more lighthearted, not..." She sighed and twisted a lock of hair between her fingers. "I should have known it wouldn't be real funny, considering. I'm sorry."

"S'alright," Ix said. She smiled sadly. "I... I mean—" She took a few short, shallow breaths before continuing. "—I'm just so scared of going out and letting other people see me again. It wasn't so

bad back home when I was used to it, but I've been hiding here for so long. A-and even on days when I think I might be brave enough to try, I don't want to go out without being a boy, but that just brings up a bunch of other problems..."

Charlotte wrapped an arm around her and the two sat in silence for a while. Ix finally leaned forward to grab her Wolfsbane and gulped it down as fast as she could. "Lottie, you don't think I'm pretty just because your vampire soulmate thing makes you think that, do you?" she said, setting the smoking goblet back down.

"Never," Charlotte lied. "Look—" She was at the console a second later, and she activated the disguise generator to become human. She came back to sit beside Ix and gently placed a hand—a warm, soft hand—on the unscarred half of Ix's face, studying it for a moment. "You have a quirky kind of smile," she said, smiling as well.

Ix gave an exaggerated grimace, and Charlotte laughed. "And your eyes are a lovely color of green—like a, a Scottish moor before a rain."

"Lottie..."

"And you have nice eyebrows... uh, eyebrow." Charlotte bit her lip, but smiled anxiously, running a gentle thumb over the brow that wasn't marred, hoping Ix wouldn't read too much into the slip. "I've heard you sing in the shower and your voice is lovely. And you're sweet. Lots of Auror characters tend to be obnoxious showoffs, but you're not. At least, I don't think you are."

Ix put a hand over Charlotte's. "But what do I do for you? All the time I feel like our relationship is just me whining about my problems."

"You make me a better person," Charlotte said simply. "A more real one, instead of just a caricature. Heck, the last time a mini-Aragog fell on me, I didn't even scream! That's huge progress for me, and cross my sparkly unbeating heart, it's because just being with you has grounded me."

"Your old partner couldn't do that?" Ix said skeptically.

Charlotte shrugged. "Jack and Jimmy were cool, but I don't think they ever really saw me as more than an amusement," she said. She didn't sound upset about it, just very matter-of-fact. "I was never anything more than a badfic rescue who didn't get much character development until you came along and... treated me like a real person from the start."

"But you *are* a real person," Ix said. "Why would I want to treat you like you weren't?"

Charlotte poked her in the chest. "Ask yourself the same question, hon," she said. "And no 'I'm a werewolf so it's different' talk from you, okay? Lupin is a *huge* favorite among agents here, and

you're an Auror—"

"I got kicked out before I could graduate—"

"You're as good as, and you come from a beloved continuum. Ix, if I can come from *Twilight* and not get a cold shoulder from most agents for it, you've got way better odds of a warm welcome."

"But Apecian—"

"Has a habit of putting his foot in his mouth, from what I can tell," Charlotte said calmly. "I *really* doubt other agents would be so thoughtless. Has anyone ever given you trouble in the halls or the Cafeteria?"

Ix hesitated. "Well, no..."

"Then come on!" Charlotte jumped to her feet and held out her hands. "You've been here for over a year and you've seen hardly anywhere of this place outside of Medical!"

"I went to Rudi's the other day," Ix protested, but she took Charlotte's hands and stood.

Charlotte shook her head. "That doesn't count, you got spooked and left as soon as we got there."

Ix shuffled her feet. "Well, what about the Cafeteria?"

"Have you ever spent more than five minutes there?" Charlotte said, raising an eyebrow.

"...No."

"Then we're going to the courtyard," Charlotte said, grabbing the cane leaning against the sofa and handing it to Ix. "And we're going to have a nice outing there, and talk to any agents that we might run into, and just enjoy the sunlight."

"Wait, there's sun here?" Ix said, letting Charlotte drag her to the door. "There isn't a lunar cycle here, but there's a sun?"

"I dunno if it's fake or not, but it certainly doesn't seem to ever set," Charlotte said, leading Ix along the corridor. "At any rate, it's—"

"Lottie, wait, let me go back to the RC," Ix said, digging her heels in.

Charlotte turned to look at her. "Why?"

Ix glanced up and down the corridor to make sure they were alone before gesturing to her flat, distinctly male chest.

"Would you be happier if we did that?" Charlotte said skeptically.

"I'd feel a lot safer if we did!"

Charlotte sighed and put her hands on Ix's shoulders. "If you want, when we get back to the RC, I can pull up the number of missions that list transphobia as a charge," she said, "but can you maybe try to wait to go back? Trying to break you out of your comfort zone, remember?"

Ix hesitated, shooting a nervous glance back at their door.

"Do it this one time and I'll go get your food from the Cafeteria for you for the rest of the month," Charlotte wheedled.

Ix let out a long breath. "Fine."

Charlotte pressed a kiss to her cheek and skipped off; Ix hitched her cane off the ground and ran lurchingly after her.

They burst into the courtyard minutes later, Charlotte laughing and cartwheeling across the grass while Ix just stared in amazement at her first glimpse of real sky in over a year.

Well, at any rate, it was more real than the pale imitations she saw in missions.

She leaned back against the wall and rubbed her knee, drinking in the trees and flowers and sunshine and wind. It had felt good to run, she had to admit, and not having to worry about how strange her gait looked was weirdly freeing. Still, she couldn't keep from blushing when a green-skinned, yellow-haired agent looked up at the whooping, wheeling Charlotte, and she put her cane back to the ground. It would slow her, but it at least made her walk more steadily.

"Ix, c'mere!" Charlotte had wound up beside the green agent and was waving frantically. "I want you to meet someone!"

So soon?

But she *had* promised, so she reluctantly limped over to Charlotte and the other agent, who, upon closer inspection, turned out to be a *Steven Universe* Gem.

"Ix, this is Olivine—she's the one who does a lot of tech support for HQ, we've been pals since she repaired a console I'd, uh, smashed. Olivine, Ix. She's been my partner since—holy crow, last year! I haven't seen you in ages!"

Olivine, a dead ringer for Peridot, smiled and held out a limb enhancer-covered hand. Ix shook it. Olivine's smile faltered when she got a good look at Ix's face, and Ix ducked her head.

"Hang on, look at me?" Olivine said, and Ix raised her head immediately at the order. It was never a good idea to disobey.

Olivine squinted at her, and Ix shivered under her gaze. "Okay, that's really weird," Olivine said. "I'd have to see the photo again, but I swear you look just like my colleague's sister. Well, her first body, anyway. Not much resemblance between the two of you now."

"Wait, what?"

Olivine shrugged. "Yeah, it's probably just me. I mean, loads of people from my homeworld look similar to each other, no reason why humans can't be the same, right? Anyway!" She immediately glomped Charlotte, and the two agents fell over each other, Olivine laughing, Charlotte gasping as the air was knocked out of her.

"Ollie! Human now, human!" she wheezed.

"Oops!" Olivine let go and Charlotte sat up, coughing.

"She'll be okay," Ix said to a worried-looking Olivine. "She forgets and hugs me too tightly sometimes, too."

"That's karma for you," Charlotte said cheerfully. "Ix, c'mere, sit with us!" She patted the grass beside her, and Ix awkwardly sat.

She didn't get much time to settle down before Olivine grabbed her in a hug as well. Ix squeaked, sure Olivine would notice her chest, or lack thereof, or comment on the ridges of scar tissue under her shirt, but a bone-crushing moment later, she was released.

"It's seriously so cool to finally meet you, Squishy," Olivine said, holding her at arm's length. "I hardly ever leave my workbench, but there was a bit of a fire today and we had to evacuate, so here I am!"

"You should leave your work more often," Charlotte said, smacking her on the arm. "Or at least answer your messages more!"

"I just get so distracted," Olivine said, grinning sheepishly. "Can't really help it, you know?"

"Yeah... and in all fairness, I've been pretty busy, too," Charlotte said. "I transferred to ESAS back in November, so that's been taking up a load of my time."

"ESAS? Wow, so that must mean you're really something special," Olivine said, looking at Ix.
"Hm. Pink hair, so you can't be human..."

"I, er, I dyed it," Ix said.

Olivine looked at her blankly.

"Colored it?" Ix said.

"...Humans are weird," Olivine finally decided. "So, just a human? In ESAS? Are you genetically modified or something?" One of the fingers of her limb enhancers detached and began to scan her with a bright green light, but Charlotte snatched it out of midair.

"Let's not go scanning people without their permission," she said quickly, looking over her shoulder at Ix and mouthing an apology. Ix just shrugged at her; it had worked out for the best, in the end... not that she wanted to repeat the experience.

"Sorry." The finger reattached to the limb enhancer, and the digits whizzed as they spun around. "Glad I ran into you guys. I was getting seriously bored. Like, how long can it take to clean up a little fire?"

"Olivine-little or actually little?" Charlotte asked skeptically.

Olivine pouted at her. "It was only a few benches destroyed, no biggie."

"...Uh-huh," Charlotte said.

"Am I missing something?" Ix asked hesitantly.

Charlotte grinned. "She blew up the console she'd come to repair."

"Only because you broke it in the first place," Olivine retorted, flipping a braid over her shoulder. "If you hadn't smashed the cooling circuits so badly it *overheated*, it wouldn't have exploded when I cracked it open!"

"Hey, you poofed and I jigsawed," Charlotte said. "We were *fine*."

"Just so long as you don't go exploding anything around me, I'll be happy," Ix said quietly.

"Ah, you'd find some way to dodge it, anyway," Charlotte said, draping an arm around her. "Ollie, seriously, this girl is incredible. She's put me back together so many times I've lost count."

"Two hundred and forty-three times now," Ix said tiredly.

Olivine *tsked*. "Lottie. Girlfriend. Seriously. When are you going to learn how to dodge?"

"I'm *fine*," Charlotte insisted. "I don't need to know how."

Ix bit her lip. "Uh," she began, but clammed up when the others looked at her.

"What is it?" Olivine asked.

"Er, well, Lottie, is it okay if I tell her that you...?"

"Huh? Oh!" Charlotte nodded. "Yeah, Olivine, ESAS—the reason I transferred. I made a deal with the Flowers. I'm gonna become human again, permanently!"

There was a long silence while Charlotte beamed, Ix watched with bated breath, and Olivine frowned.

"But... why?" Olivine finally said, brow furrowed.

"To be with Ix, of course," Charlotte said.

Olivine's frown deepened. "But... why?"

"Because I love her?" Charlotte said, her implied 'duh' as strong as any teenager's.

Olivine wrinkled her nose. "I thought you got me because you were more Gemlike than the others, but you've totally lost me there," she said. "But whatever makes you happy, I guess."

"I know I'm not good enough for her," Ix began, but quailed when both Charlotte and Olivine began protesting.

"Ix, don't say that about yourself!" Charlotte said fiercely, and Olivine nodded rather than continue to speak over her. "Ollie's just wired to think about love differently from you and me, it's not her voicing a dislike of you!"

"What she said." One of Olivine's mechanical fingers detached itself to poke Ix in the shoulder. "I've been at the PPC for ages now and I've seen all sorts of romances bloom and fizzle. Heck, now I'm having to watch Dives moon after Bowman and Ilraen coming in to ask after Farilan, and even being around so many hormones and pheromones and other 'mones, I still don't get it." She smiled. "But Charlotte's messages to me have been nothing but Ix this and Ix that—at least, the ones I've gotten around to opening, that is. So." She looked back at Charlotte. "Good luck with the human thing, but that really means we'll need to get you into fighting shape before

you're all squishy and vulnerable!"

Charlotte shrugged. "I was planning on getting around to it," she said, but Ix coughed.

"Two hundred and forty-three times," Ix reminded her gently.

"...Fine."

Olivine jumped to her feet and the peridot on her forehead glowed; she reached up and pulled a green claymore from it. "I used to be a Crystal Gem in my homefic," she said to Ix, winking when she saw her jaw drop. "So I like to think I know a thing or two about fighting."

"Hm. Ix?" Charlotte nodded at the sword. "Thoughts?"

"I was honestly planning on starting you off with Muggle fighting—er, sorry. Hand-to-hand." Ix bit her lip. "But this works, too."

Olivine, however, *hmm*ed. "Maybe you're right," she said, studying Charlotte's frail human body. "Better to start her off with something that won't likely result in me lopping off a limb on accident."

"Gee, thanks."

Even Ix couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, if she's so bad at dodging as a vampire, I'd hate to see how she fares as a human."

Charlotte reached out to smack her upside the head, but Ix ducked, grabbed Charlotte's arm, and twisted it behind her back, pushing her to the ground.

"Lesson one: don't make your movements so obvious," Ix said, stepping back.

Olivine whistled. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"She used to be an Auror," Charlotte said proudly, getting up and brushing herself off.

"Auror in training," Ix said immediately.

"Really? Cool beans. Explains why you're in ESAS." Olivine sat down on the grass to watch, her weapon fizzling out of existence. "Go ahead and do your thing; I'll just shout mocking comments from time to time."

"You'd have to think of them first," Charlotte shot back, and Olivine cackled.

Ix took a few paces back and assumed a ready stance, feeling very self-conscious. Charlotte copied her, but almost immediately, Ix shook her head. "Too wide," she said, moving back in. "Wide is good, because it lowers your center of gravity, but too wide like you've got leaves you unbalanced, and..." She reached out and gave Charlotte a small shove; Charlotte toppled easily, landing on her backside.

From the ground, Charlotte aimed a kick at Ix's bad leg, but years of enemies aiming at that point had given Ix enough experience to pivot easily out of the way.

"Don't always go for what looks like the obvious weak point!" Ix said. "I've spent years compensating for that leg, you think I don't know how to deal with it?"

In response, Charlotte tackled her around the knees, but Ix rolled with the motion, flipping Charlotte up and over her, using her momentum against her. They ended up nose to nose, Charlotte lying on her back in the grass.

"If you're going to try to pin someone, don't leave their arms free," Ix said, and was interrupted from saying more when Charlotte kissed her. She jerked back in surprise and found herself pinned instead; Charlotte winked and kissed her again. Ix just closed her eyes and returned it, smiling when she felt Charlotte let go of her wrists to run her hands through her hair.

"Hey, this is a training session, not a make-out session, you two!" Olivine called, and they broke apart, both slightly out of breath.

"That probably won't work against a Sue," Ix panted.

"Probably not," Charlotte agreed, getting up and holding out a hand. Ix let her pull her to her feet. "So, wide stance, but not too wide, be careful when pinning, don't telegraph my moves—what next?"

"Show her how to hit stuff, Squishy!" Olivine yelled.

"Er—yes. That." Feeling very self-conscious, Ix threw a few demonstration punches at the air. "You don't want to wind up and swing. Short, hard jabs are better for conserving energy and catching your opponent off-guard. Try to dodge." She drew back her fist and let fly; Charlotte ducked it easily. "Again." A shorter jab. She stopped it just before it connected with Charlotte's stomach. "See?"

Charlotte nodded. "So, do I try to hit you now, or what?"

"Go ahead," Ix said. "I don't expect you'll be able to do muOOF!" She doubled over, wheezing and clutching her stomach.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry!" Charlotte cried, flapping her hands as she tried to think of what to do. "I'm so sorry, Ix, I'm sorry, I'm sor...ry?"

Ix's wheezes for air had turned into wheezing laughter. "You caught me off-guard," she said. "Don't try—" She broke off, coughing for a moment. "Don't try to do that again unless we're sparring, but you definitely had the right idea. And a nice right hook," she added, pulling up her shirt to show Charlotte the bruise that was already forming over top of the thick, ropy scar across her stomach.

Charlotte still looked miserable, so Ix pulled the wand from her belt and tapped the bruise. It faded almost instantly, and she smiled. "See? No harm done."

"I'm still sorry," Charlotte said, hanging her head.

Olivine blew a raspberry and waved a dismissive hand. "Come on, Charlotte, she said she's fine! Though maybe you should use me as a punching bag since it's a lot harder to hurt me?"

"I think that would hurt Charlotte's hands," Ix said quickly. "Is there a training room or something that we could use...?" She ducked her head when Olivine slowly turned to stare at her.

"You've been an agent for how long and you've never seen the gymnasium?" Olivine asked incredulously.

"We don't get out much," Charlotte said quickly.

Olivine hummed something that sounded suspiciously like 'bow chicka bow-wow', and Charlotte ripped up a clump of grass to throw at her.

"Not because of that, you perv," she said. "For a space alien rock, you really have a dirty mind."

"I've spent too much time around squishies," Olivine said, shrugging unabashedly.

"Ix just doesn't like talking to people," Charlotte said, still defensive.

"Shame, because I like talking to her," Olivine said. "We should get together more often, seriously. At any rate, I'd love to spar with her sometime... if you'd like?" she added, turning to Ix.

Ix smiled shyly and nodded.

"If we can ever drag you away from your desk, that is," Charlotte said.

"Or you can come and visit me," Olivine said. "And I'll see if I can't get Dives to show me that

photo again. Seriously, the resemblance is uncanny." She clapped her hands together. "But! Gym in the meantime?"

"Gym," Charlotte agreed, snatching up Ix's cane before linking her arms through Ix's and Olivine's. "Heck, why not give her a full tour while we're at it?"

"Yes!" Olivine said excitedly.

Ix swallowed. "M-maybe we can just stick to the gym for now?" she suggested.

"That's fine, too," Charlotte said, bumping her shoulder.

As they set off back into the dreary grey corridors, Ix glanced at Charlotte. "By the way, Lottie?"

"Mmhmm?"

"I... I don't think you need to keep your end of the promise."

A huge grin spread across Charlotte's face. "So that means you'll try to get out more often?"

Ix glanced across Charlotte to Olivine, who was happily engrossed in a holographic display projected from one of her limb enhancers.

That meeting hadn't gone nearly as badly as it had with Apecian.

"Sure, Lottie." Ix smiled. "I think I'm actually kinda looking forward to it, too."