

# ***HIVESWAP FRIENDSIM***

## **VOLUME EIGHTEEN**

**'OF ENDINGS, MANY'**

**-- TRANSCRIPT --**

### **FEATURED FRIENDS:**

**LANQUE BOMBYX**

**VIRSCI - SIGN OF THE ALCHEMIST**

**LIFE-BOUND, PROSPIT-SWAY**

**BARZUM & BAIZLI SOLEIL**

**CAPRIUN - SIGN OF THE CARTOGRAPHER**

**CAPRIMINI - SIGN OF THE PERILOUS**

**BREATH-BOUND, DERSE-SWAY**

**DOOM-BOUND, DERSE-SWAY**

**[\[TRANSCRIPT MASTERPOST\]](#)**

You crash landed onto a planet called Alternia. You staggered from the wreckage of your ship.

You were desperate for information, for provisions, and possibly a bit of medical attention. But most of all, you were desperate for...

## FRIENDSHIP.

-Is what you could say, if you were written by a bunch of hacks who cared about the Aristotelian ideal of narrative unity.

Possibly you could make some reference to a circle being complete, in a thoughtless and imbecilic manner.

But we're all in this together, right? And we've all learned and grown enough to know that there's something deep and dark and absurd brewing beneath the surface.

This really isn't about FRIENDSHIP anymore, is it? You've got enough friends, now you need answers, you need-

Oh god dammit.

This was just the intro screen.

LANQUE

BARZUM & BAIZLI

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### > Lanque.

What's next on the docket? Oh, you're really feeling like going completely off the rails.

So it's a good thing the first person to ping you on your palmsk is Lynera. That nutty bitch is exactly the sort of destabilizing influence your life needs right now.

LYNERA: -hello

LYNERA: -my

LYNERA: -!!! FRIEND !!!

LYNERA: -because thats what we are now!!!

LYNERA: -!!! FRIENDS !!!

Cool, that's not a weird at all way to talk to someone. You're really loving this one. You're not sure what it is, but you're positive whatever crackpot caper this loopy troll is about to rope you into is going to be a real hum-dinger. There's a sense of finality in the air. You can taste it.

Lynera does you the courtesy of listening to you say all that shit without getting super put off by how much of a freak you are.

LYNERA: -listen up!

LYNERA: -so i was thinking...

LYNERA: -since us becoming !!! FRIENDS !!!

LYNERA: -has worked out so well...

LYNERA: -im starting to think maybe itd be a good idea to give making more friends another shot after all??? i guess???????

LYNERA: -thats what i was thinking. so theres this party i was invited to...

LYNERA: -you see, the fellow jades in my cloister always sneak out to go to these things...

You gently suggest to Lynera that she should hurry it the fuck up.

LYNERA: -ok so im nervous to go and i want a !!! FRIEND !!!

LYNERA: -to come with me!!! ok!!! is that so crazy!?!?!?

No, you don't think that's crazy at all. You think that sounds fantastic, actually. You don't ask for any details, because who gives a shit.

You show up on the block. We're not gonna talk about how you got there or whatever because what a waste of time. You're just there. Lynera's met up with you too.

Lynera mentioned there might be dancing so you decided to really dress up for the occasion. Oh man, you went fucking nuts. You're wearing a cape and shit, but also like, fishnets, maybe a sexy bra if that's your thing. Whatever you happened to drudge out of some dumpster or another.

Honestly, you can imagine whatever you want here, but know it's complete bullshit and you look like a total slut. Lynera isn't wearing anything special because we would've had to pay someone to redraw all her sprites.

From the looks of it, you're heading over to somebody's... hive... party? You're rolling up on some kind of joint that, from past experience, you can now surmise is an alien domicile.

It's pretty big, and mayeb belongs to someone on the blue end of the spectrum. Back here again: is this block just where all the jade blooded schoolgirls love to get down and dirty?

It hits you like a bucket of ice when you realize whose hive you're walking straight towards this time.

This is Ardata's hive.

Oh, that's just great! Your friend Ardata. Boy, do you love Ardata. Can't wait to see her again!

As you approach you can immediately tell what kind of deal they have going on here. You can hear the tunes bumping from all the way down the block, and when you get near enough to see there are obviously a bunch of teens passed out drunk on the lawn. This is a full blown frathouse rager.

Definitely doesn't seem like Lynera's sort of scene.

LYNERA: -!!! thats because IT ISNT !!!

LYNERA: -oh my goodness i cant believe im doing this

You kind of can't either. You're not even in the front door and you can already feel the sweat pouring out of your armpits. This is going to be so much fun!!!!

You pass all the smashed lawn teens and go up to knock on the front door. You have to rap on it a few times until the telltale sound of clicking heels faintly reaches your ears.

The door opens and you discover that the gracious hostess standing on the other side is none other than YOUR BEST FRIEND, ARDATA. WOO HOO!!!!!!!

She looks surprised to see you for only a moment before her face resolves into a wicked grin.

ARDATA: ah. hahaha.

ARDATA: my, my, my.

ARDATA: look what the purrbeast dragged iin.

ARDATA: back for more so soon, my sweet?

You're not actually sure how much time has passed since you last ran into Ardata, but it doesn't feel like it can be described in any metric by "soon".

You've been physically savaged so many times since then you're not sure what you're blocking out though. You tell Ardata you're really, really, really, really glad to see her, because you totally are. You tell her you weren't expecting her to be hosting a party, though.

ARDATA: oh, iiii don't know iiif iii'd call iiit a party.

ARDATA: more of a friiiendly kiiickback of sorts.

ARDATA: sort of exclusiive, really. all of the world's fiiinest iinfluencers are here.

ARDATA: how exactly diiid you hear about my liiittle shiiindiiig?

ARDATA: whiiile iii certaiiinly consiider you to be one of my fiiinest friiiends, iii don't recall iinviitiing you.

You gesture vaguely to Lynera. She doesn't seem to know how to lie, and immediately cracks under the pressure.

LYNERA: -um. one of the other jades from my cloister told me to come

LYNERA: -his name is lanque but i dont think he was invited either

LYNERA: -i get the impression we kind of always come out here

LYNERA: -basically were crashing???? if thats ok

ARDATA: well, of course.

ARDATA: what's an iinformal soiiiree wiiithout a few entiirely uniiinviiited iinterlopers?

Lynera doesn't seem to know if she's being sarcastic or not and you aren't sure if she is either, to be honest. You're like, are you fucking with us? And she's like, ho ho ho, mu ha ha ha, or whatever.

ARDATA: of course not.

ARDATA: iiii just have but one questiion for you, my dears....

Ardata beckons you near. You obey her slavishly. Then she leans in close to your ear and intones:

ARDATA: do you hereby certiiify under penalty of law that you are of age to viiiew adult content wiiithiin your state of legal resiidence, have acknowledged the contents of thiiis volume's accompanyiing mature content descreeptiion, and are comfortable wiiith the prospect of engagiing wiiith challengiing or otherwiiise controversiial fiiictiional materiial?

> You bet, chief! Tell her to let you in!

> oof, you're too scared.

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> Oof, you're too scared.

Oh, man. The sound of that is making you quake in your slutty little boots. Controversial fictional material, you say? Damn, it's almost starting to sound like a woman wrote this. Count you out.

Ardata clicks her tongue. She reaches for the cup of markers she keeps on a table next to the door and pulls one out. You flinch back as she wields it like a weapon to draw a big blue X on the back of your hand.

ARDATA: here.

ARDATA: now all of my fiiine guests wiiill know we've a deliicate liiittle angel on our hands.

And then she turns to Lynera.

ARDATA: and what about you, my sweet thiiing?

LYNERA: -huh?

LYNERA: -oh im not real so its cool

ARDATA: very well, then.

ARDATA: welcome to the bash!

ARDATA: driinks are free but iiiiif you diiie of poiisoniing you're contractually obliigated to croak iiiiin range of one of my cameras!

ARDATA: toodleloo!

Ardata blows you a toxic kiss and saunters off to mingle with her enthusiastic guests.

You and Lynera step past the threshold and have a look around. Lynera is visibly nervous, which is unfortunately a little bit infectious. You ask her where her friend is. She glances about a bit.

LYNERA: -ohhhh, i dont know, hes...

LYNERA: -oh! over there!

You follow her gaze into the living area of the house. It's a far cry from the sight outside: the music's not nearly so bumping as you originally thought it was.

The whole shebang seems to have a pretty chill teenagers drinking koolaid vibe, apart from the fact that's definitely not koolaid. Everybody's milling about, chatting amiably.

You spot a few familiar faces: Diemen, flirting with roasting his frank in the hearth. Elwurd, leaned casually against a doorframe to the kitchen and talking to a cute girl. Skylla, recounting some enrapturing rodeo caper to a group of gathered trolls. It's a real diverse roster of friendly folks.

You spot who Lynera is pointing to at the center of the parlor's arrangement of couches and armchairs, sat among a group of friends on the floor - the only other jade blood in the room.

He's even more impeccably dressed and done up than the rest of the markedly fashion-forward jades you've met. When he catches sight of Lynera, his face lights up, and he rises to make his way over and greet you.

LANQUE: Oh, Lynera! You've made it after all.

LANQUE: I Was starting to think you Weren't going to come.

LYNERA: -haha well

LYNERA: -surprise!

LYNERA: -!!! i didnt !!!

LYNERA: -not come i mean

LYNERA: -i did come.

LYNERA: -hi

LYNERA: -!!! im here !!!

LYNERA: -lol

You cringe but Lanque seems otherwise unaffected by Lynera's astonishingly embarrassing display. He turns to you with a warm smile.

LANQUE: And Who's this?

You can't help but get a little flustered when your eyes meet. His makeup and stylings might lean to the severe and feminine, but he has a contrastively calming and masculine voice that puts you at ease straight away.

He seems to have quite the opposite effect on Lynera - before you can answer yourself, she starts blabbering a mile a minute.

LYNERA: -oh this is my friend i invited them theyre an alien and i guess i almost murdered them because i was jealous of their friendship with bronya lol but i didnt and were friends now and im starting to work past my self destructive obsession with her and they agreed to come with me because im socially anxious and afraid of you! lol

LANQUE: Ah, that's aWfully nice of them.

LYNERA: -!!! hold on sorry !!!

LYNERA: -i know that was a lot at once

LYNERA: -let me reorganize that statement into a clearer digestible list of bullet points

LANQUE: You've absolutely no need to do that, Lynera.

LANQUE: I've understood your points just fine.

LYNERA: -oh ok

Lanque looks back at you.

LANQUE: Thank you for helping Lynera feel more comfortable here.

LANQUE: Why don't you come and sit With us?

Lanque turns and gestures to the other trolls he was speaking with before: a teal blooded boy and an indigo blooded girl, neither of whom you recognize. They both have notebooks in their laps. They give you friendly waves.

LYNERA: -ummmm ok sounds great what are we doing

LANQUE: We Were just in the middle of a poetry reading.

LANQUE: I don't know if you've prepared anything of your own to share, but you might find it relaxing just to listen.

LYNERA: -p

LYNERA: -poetry!?!

Lynera's face has gone bright green. Oh boy.

LYNERA: -wwwwhy would you think ive written any poetry!!!!!!

LANQUE: I, er - I don't, really?

LANQUE: It Was merely a suggestion.

LANQUE: HaVe you?

LYNERA: -well, i, maybe!!!!!!!!!!

LYNERA: -wait

LYNERA: -!!! NO !!!

You put a comforting hand on Lynera's shoulder, intuiting immediately that she has indeed written plenty of poetry but is embarrassed by the prospect of sharing any of it. You remind her she's among trusted friends here, and has nothing to fear.

LYNERA: -oh i guess youre right

LANQUE: Well, then.

LANQUE: Please, come and join us.

Lanque leads you back to his group, inviting you to sit down with them in a circle. Lynera goes to deliberate lengths to insert you between herself and Lanque so that you're the one sitting next to him.

LANQUE: Why don't We pick back up Where We left off?

LANQUE: I Was just about to read my latest piece.

You say that sounds great. Lanque's two friends close their eyes and take each other's hands; you and Lynera are both plenty surprised when Lanque and the indigo blood sitting next to Lynera try to take yours to close the circle.

At your obviously shocked expression, Lanque explains:

LANQUE: We find physical contact helps us feel closer on a spiritual level during our poetry sessions.

LANQUE: But if you aren't comfortable With it, you're under no obligation.

You feel really respected right now, so you and Lynera both assent to join the circle - she even takes the initiative to hold your hand first.

Lanque reaches out and takes your fingers gently in his. You don't know what it is, but you can't help yourself from blushing shyly. His hand is soft and warm in yours, short red nails immaculately manicured.

LANQUE: Then, let me begin.

LANQUE: This is a short poem I've Written in free Verse, based on something haunting me as of late...

LANQUE: Reflecting back on one of my most complicated and passionate past relationships.

LANQUE: Forgive me. This might be a bit raW.

LANQUE: It is as of yet untitled.

Lanque draws a deep breath and closes his eyes. His notebook is open in his lap - you can see the poem written there in an elegant hand, but he doesn't need to look at it to recite the words.

LANQUE: What is the meaning of a memory?

A question I oft ponder

Intangible and untraceable by anything but the mind

Yet so potent as to leaVe one sick

As if poisoned or Wounded in a literal sense.

LANQUE: And What meaning is there in regret and longing?  
Can my lamentations change the past?  
Will they moVe the future?  
Shall they amount to much more than What unmoors my here and noW?

LANQUE: If I restrict my World to that but Which is before my eyes  
To those Whom I may touch, to that Which I might alter;  
One Would no doubt conclude that thoughts of You  
are last among What I could consider to "matter".

LANQUE: And still You haunt me yet, like a scar,  
like a disease uneager to abate.  
Who are You  
and Who am I, after so long Without You?

LANQUE: I know  
I don't know  
I Won't know;  
What do I know but What I know and What can it eVen mean to KNOW?

LANQUE: Know, Know; No!

LANQUE: Agh, though it so Vexes me,  
Though so little I Valued it When it Was before me,  
a thing and a You I could touch and see and know and hate and Wonder.  
(reVile/Worship).

LANQUE: NoW it, and You, are a traceless ghost, and I preoccupy myself With  
nothing but futile tasks of (RE)definition and (RE)interpretation and  
circuitous dWellings on that Which I understand eVen less noW.

LANQUE: than in the times When my Wonderings might've been so easily answered  
With a question or a bite of a kiss,  
or eVen a single Word, spoken honestly.

LANQUE: Pressed though I am to giVe color to our bond  
I look not to onyx nor ash but that Which pulses Within our Very Veins: that  
so blinding jade, hard as the stone for Which it is so named,

LANQUE: tWisted and pulled  
hammered and forged  
shaped, unnaturally  
as if a chain.

LANQUE: A structure Within scriptures;  
a certain so meaningful tincture.

LANQUE: Resent You though I must,  
Envy You though I may,

LANQUE: NoW leagues and leagues stretch betWeen us  
And I make peace With not but What I say.

LANQUE: You are only that Which is Within me,  
my blood and my mind  
and that is  
at once nothing,

and the most elementary definition  
of eVerything.

You realize you were holding your breath when Lanque finally finishes. The circle falls into meaningful silence, taught as a wire. The tension breaks when his eyes flutter open, tears spilling over his long lashes.

You squeeze Lanque's hand gently. He weeps silently and beautifully. Such powerful art.

He musters a wan smile as he gazes across the circle at Lynera.

LANQUE: Lynera, Would you like to read next?

Lynera looks stunned. There's moisture gathering in the corner of her eyes. Of course, anyone would be moved by something so emotional and raw...

LYNERA: -um

LYNERA: -i guess i have a poem i could read

Lynera takes out her planner and opens it, breaking the circle of held hands. She can't recite it from memory like Lanque.

When she speaks, her voice is small and timid.

LYNERA: -this ones called still...

LYNERA: -...

LYNERA: -im still.

-i sit still. i do what im told, still

-i wonder about the way that i am and i think:

-still?

LYNERA: -i see her every day and i still miss her.

-she hugs me and i still feel cold

-im surrounded by people and im still alone.

LYNERA: -im still me

-i still love her

-and i still hate that.

Wow. You're really proud of Lynera for opening up like this. She's crying too, now - you reach out to take her hand back in yours. The indigo blood beside her comfortingly strokes her shoulder.

LYNERA: -sorry

LYNERA: -its not really good and long like yours lanque

LYNERA: -im not really a poet or anything

LYNERA: -i just wrote down how i feel

LANQUE: Lynera, it's fine.

LANQUE: I thought it Was beautiful.

LANQUE: Poetry is about expression yourself.

LANQUE: It's not important that it be any set length, or sound any certain Way.

LANQUE: All that matters is that you've spoken your bloodpusher.

LANQUE: And I think you've accomplished that remarkably.

LANQUE: We're all Very proud of you.

You find yourself drawn into a group hug by Lanque and the other trolls. Lynera is sobbing openly now, and her raw emotion seems to have inspired similar pathos in the others. Before you know it, you feel yourself tearing up too.

It feels good to get it all out. But before long it's becoming clear Lynera is kind of reaching her limit. She pulls back and sniffles out something about wanting to go home.

LANQUE: Of course, Lynera, if that's What you need.

LANQUE: I'll talk to you back at the cloister.

LYNERA: -!!! \*SNIFF\* !!!

LYNERA: -ok

LANQUE: See to it that she gets back safe, Will you?

You tell Lanque that of course you will, and take Lynera carefully by the hand to lead her out of the party. She squeezes your fingers back to let you know she appreciates you.

You walk back from the party in a comfortable silence for a while. When you glance over at her face, it occurs to you that you've never seen Lynera this happy.

Of course, this is literally the second time you've ever seen her, so you guess you don't actually have much frame of reference for what her normal emotional state actually is.

You really want to encourage her on this path of recovery she's going down and all, so you ask her about, you know... her and Lanque.

LYNERA: -what??

You know. Her, and Lanque?

LYNERA: -what were just friends

LYNERA: -i mean its not like i have a crush on him or anything

LYNERA: -i know ive had romantic feelings for a girl before so itd be really problematic if i liked a boy now

Oh, you say, you're sorry. You didn't know.

LYNERA: -its ok just dont let it happen again

Lynera gives a warm smile and reaches out to pull you into a hug.

LYNERA: -thank you for helping me

LYNERA: -i was really nervous and i think if it hadnt been for your help i wouldnt have been able to come at all

LYNERA: -but i did so... thanks

LYNERA: -it wasnt perfect but i think i really opened up tonight

LYNERA: -ill see lanque again

LYNERA: -and you i hope

LYNERA: -and in the future

LYNERA: -things will be... easier

LYNERA: -right?

You're certain they will. You put a comforting arm around her shoulders, and walk her the rest of the way home.

You feel like this night really taught you an important lesson. Not everything is about collecting the largest quantity of friends as is humanly possible. Sometimes strengthening your bond with someone you already know can be just as rewarding.

So screw you, you say, to the concept of good endings and bad endings and narrative railroading. This route makes you feel heckin' valid, and that's fine by you.

**VALID!**

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> You bet, chief! Tell her to let you in!

ARDATA: ha ha ha.

ARDATA: he he ho.

ARDATA: that's good to hear.

ARDATA: why don't you come riiight iiin, then, my dear?

ARDATA: iii don't want to see you makiing any liiittle posts onliiine about how my party was too fuckiiin problematiic for you, though.

Ardata steps back and welcomes you again into her abode with a grandiose gesture. You're very, very excited for Ardata's party, and know definitively that you will enjoy absolutely every second of what she has in store for you.

Once you've stepped in past the threshold, Ardata blows you a toxic kiss and saunters off to mingle with her enthusiastic guests.

The first thing that hits you once you're in the door is the music - it's a solid wall of bass that reverberates through your body down to your bones.

The intense dance track is blasting so loud you can hardly hear yourself think. It has to be this loud to drown out all the shouting coming from the living room.

As you apprehensively advance it becomes quickly clear that Lynera is completely out of her element here. She's a bundle of nerves beside you, practically glued to your hip. When you actually step into the living room, she physically attaches herself to your arm.

LYNERA: -!!! WOW THIS IS !!!

LYNERA: -!!! MORE THAN I WAS EXPECTING !!!

You too. It's a scene of absolute chaos: the living room of the house is filled to the brim with rowdy teens, dancing rhythmlessly to the pounding music.

The furniture has all been knocked over or otherwise destroyed, and you can make a pretty good guess of what's filling all the red cups you see in everyone's hands.

You're about to tell Lynera you wouldn't blame her if she wants to dip, but you can't get the words out before you're being flagged down by a jade-blooded boy who's just muscled his way out of the throng of partygoers with a few of his friends in tow.

LANQUE: Lynera! You made it!

Lynera all but flings herself away from your body and freezes like a scared animal as the troll approaches.

For all the commotion and ruckus, he's still remarkably well put-together - the vigorous dance huddle doesn't seem to have disturbed his sharp makeup or his impeccably coiffed hair. There is a curious red stain down the front of his white shirt, though.

He has a slutty looking indigo blooded girl on his right arm and an even sluttier looking teal blooded boy on his left, though he shakes them off and waves them away by the time he reaches you and Lynera at the entryway to the room.

LYNERA: -um hi lanque

LYNERA: -yeah im here

You watch with amusement as Lynera practically bursts into flame under his gaze - and it only gets worse when he sidles up to give her a startlingly intimate embrace.

She squeaks and tries to hug him back, but is too timid to actually touch him with her hands. You can see sweat pouring down her face.

After a solid five seconds that seems to include Lanque smelling Lynera's hair, he pulls back to smile down at Lynera with a heavy gaze. Lynera's face is bright green and her eyes are bugging out of her skull from how flustered she is.

But she's not... NOT into it, you don't think? It's hard to tell, but you kind of get the impression he'd be dead by now if she weren't.

Either way, it's awkward. Lucky for Lynera, Lanque either doesn't notice or doesn't care. He settles into a comfortable (for him) posture with his arm casually around Lynera's waist, and turns to you.

LANQUE: Oh, Who's this?

LYNERA: -um this is my

LYNERA: -f

LYNERA: -f

LYNERA: -fr

LANQUE: Friend?

LYNERA: -!!! YEAH !!!

Lanque quirks an eyebrow.

LANQUE: You haVe friends?

The question seems to leave Lynera speechless, so Lanque takes the opportunity to look back at you. His eyes rake up and down your body in a way that leaves you feeling distinctly objectified.

LANQUE: Oh, aren't you interesting.

LANQUE: Is there a reason you look like... that?

What a question. He doesn't explain what "that" is specifically referring to, and given both your alien status and your state of dress it could mean any number of things.

You might take it as an insult if not for the way he licks his lips after he says it. He can't seem to pry his eyes off you. You look at Lynera for a cue but she's too out of it to give you any sort of intelligible sign.

So you just explain how you crash landed on this alien planet an indeterminate amount of time ago, and you don't really know what you're doing or much of anything about anything.

The fact of your appearance could be due either to this, or that you're generally a disaster of a being irrespective of your planetary origin.

LANQUE: HoW fascinating.

LANQUE: I'Ve neVer met an alien before.

Well, you have. Lots of times. In fact, literally everyone and everything here is alien to you. You find your word diarrhea becoming more and more awkward and embarrassing as Lanque's eyes start burning a hole in the center of your chest.

LANQUE: Haha. There's no need to be so shy.

LANQUE: I don't bite until asked.

Lanque disconnects himself from Lynera as he rounds on you. It's like he's lost any interest in her existence now that you're in front of him. Lynera looks at you with a completely pathetic expression that readily informs you as to what your response needs to be.

You'll be damned if you aren't going to be the best wingman possible, so you deftly ignore Lanque's blatant pass and turn the conversation back to Lynera. You ask Lanque how long he and Lynera have known each other. Lanque raises his eyebrows at the question.

LANQUE: Er, Well. I suppose since she Was chosen for the cloister?

LANQUE: Some number of sWeeps ago.

LANQUE: I don't remember, really.

LYNERA: -it was 2.43 sweeps

LANQUE: Oh, right. Then - that many, I guess.

LANQUE: Huh. That's a pretty long time, actually.

LYNERA: -ha ha yeah

LANQUE: Pretty impressiVe that you managed to go a solid 2.4 of them Without saying a single Word to me that Wasn't circulated to me second hand from your snide gossiping behind my back.

Uh, wow. Talk about whiplash. Lynera's eyes get big like saucers.

LYNERA: -wh

LYNERA: -wha

LYNERA: -!!! what !!!

LYNERA: -what are you

LYNERA: -!!! i dont know what youre talking about !!!

The tone of the conversation has totally morphed from fire to ice in an instant, though neither Lanque's expression nor demeanor have changed much. He slips in the knives with all the calm composure of a casual statement.

LANQUE: What, are you going to pretend you DIDN'T spend the better part of the past tWo and a half sWeeps complaining about hoW much I disgusted you?

LANQUE: Come, noW.

LANQUE: You DO knoW that eVeryone is aWare you're a nasty little bitch, right, Lynera?

LYNERA: -i

LYNERA: -um

LYNERA: -i

LANQUE: I mean, don't take it the Wrong Way. I really don't mind.

LANQUE: I'm hardly in a position to criticize.

LANQUE: I Was just curious What caused the sudden change of heart, after so long decrying my "Vain and slatternly lifestyle".

LYNERA: -i dont

LYNERA: -i

LANQUE: HaVe the impending Ordeals finally made the little clock start to tick doWn in that dry, dusty nook of yours?

LYNERA: -!!!

LANQUE: Did you figure I Was the only one Who might be loose enough to be Willing to clean out the cobWebs before you get shipped off to space church and neVer haVe the chance again?

LANQUE: Just Wondering.

There's a long, excruciating moment where Lynera says nothing - she just stares up at Lanque beside her with a completely shell-shocked expression. But before you can try to pipe up in Lynera's defence, she bursts into tears.

Oh, no.

When Lynera suddenly turns and makes a mad dash to run out the door and away from the party, you're torn between running after her and giving this jerk a real piece of your mind.

Your mind's made up when you look back at Lanque just in time to catch him rolling his eyes. Hey, you say. That was kind of rude, don't you think?

Lanque snorts.

LANQUE: Me? Rude? Hahahahaha.

LANQUE: Are you perhaps attempting to fuck With me?

LANQUE: Clearly you haVen't spent much time around this bitter pill if you think that Was anything short of precisely What she deserves.

You concede you maybe don't have a full enough grasp on jade blood cloister social dynamics to make a definitive judgment on whether or not Lynera deserved to have been so ruinously owned. But she's your friend, and what good are you if you don't stick up for the people you care about?

LANQUE: I haVe no idea What eVen got her so upset.

LANQUE: Like I said - it's not like I really care What she says about me. But you don't get to spend as much time as she does being such a Venomous little snake and act surprised When someone calls you out on it.

Then why did you invite her, you ask? It seems needlessly cruel of Lanque to lead her on under false pretenses, if he never intended to be her friend at all.

LANQUE: I promise you I had no such designs.

LANQUE: The only reason I eVen inVited her to this thing is that my ex is being a real blood-sucking bitch and no one else Wanted to go.

LANQUE: I Was Willing to giVe her an honest shot, but I'Ve no time for a Vicious, slandering nag Who can't eVen admit What she is.

LANQUE: I thought it might be interesting to see What that crusty little shreW might be like if you could manage to Wrest her bulge free of Whatever excruciating knot she's got it tied into, but I guess noW We'll neVer know.

Welp. This is clearly a conversation you're going to have to Switzerland out of pretty soon.

LANQUE: What?

You try to explain the historical significance of Switzerland's political neutrality on your home planet. Lanque's eyes glaze over like he's listening to you recite a sports almanac of cricket stats.

LANQUE: That's nice.

LANQUE: AnyWay...

LANQUE: Since I seem to haVe scared aWay my date, Why don't you stay a While so you and I can get to know each other a little better?

LANQUE: You seem much more interesting than she is anyWay.

When did Lanque get up so close to you? Your heart beats a little faster when he smiles at you like that, so poisonous and shamelessly laced with intent. Lynera is definitely not the only one coming off like a snake here.

LANQUE: I'Ve less time to Waste than most, my dear.

LANQUE: NeVer seen the Value in beating around the bush.

Well, maybe it'd be socially prudent for you to go after Lynera and make sure she's okay. But it's also not her volume of the friendsim, so instead of doing that you're going to stick around and see what this spectacularly briery primadonna is all about.

You had your fucking chance to bail out of this shitshow, but all that's left to do now is barrel downhill as meteorically as you can manage.

LANQUE: Fantastic.

LANQUE: Care to dance?

Why the fuck not?

Lanque laughs pleasantly and reaches out to take you by the hand. The contact gives you a little thrill despite yourself - he's got nice hands, soft and warm and well taken care of, and you know it's going to be one hell of a ride, wherever he's taking you.

LANQUE: Come With me.

You do. He doesn't lead you straight to the dance floor, though - he takes you around the throng of dancing partygoers over to the kitchen of the house first. You weren't expecting to find familiar face waiting for you there.

ELWURD: heh. fancy meeting you here

You don't find it that surprising honestly.

LANQUE: You tWo knoW each other?

ELWURD: you couLd say that

LANQUE: That's just great.

LANQUE: Do you giVe discounts to friends?

ELWURD: i sure fuckin don't.

ELWURD: you know the price, prettyboy. pay up

LANQUE: Hmph.

You're a little confused. What is being purchased here, exactly?

Elwurd gives you a funny look.

ELWURD: you a drone?

What?

LANQUE: Hush.

You do as you're told and watch as Lanque and Elwurd carry out their shady transaction. Lanque hands over the credits and receives an opaque little baggy of something in return.

Oh, well. You guess you don't really need to see what's in the thing to figure out what it is, at this point.

As soon as the deal is done, Lanque has his hand at the small of your back and is deftly guiding you away from the scene of the crime. IS buying drugs a crime here?

You aren't really well versed about the laws of Alternia but it honestly doesn't really seem like anybody would give much of a shit about anybody doing drugs out here. You guess the clandestine transactions are just for the aesthetic.

Lanque's got you back in a shady corner of the party and is pressing one of the tablets he bought into your hand with a sly grin. He expects you to join in.

You're like, uhhhhh. Hold on a minute. Your experiences with alien drugs haven't really been that great, honestly, and you're not sure you're that excited for a repeat performance. Lanque's immediate response is to sneer.

LANQUE: Oh, I see.

LANQUE: You're one of those people.

One of WHAT people?

LANQUE: You know...

LANQUE: A bit... boring, maybe?

There are many words that could be used to describe you, but you don't think boring is a remote contender. You're always doing all kinds of unbelievably stupid shit, and getting into uncountable wacky and life-threatening situations.

Is it really that fucking much to ask for there to be ONE time you don't rush head first into doing something you know is going to fuck you up and be totally awful?

Lanque's lips press into a thin, annoyed line.

LANQUE: These things aren't cheap, you know.

LANQUE: I bought them for you.

Well, you didn't ask him to do that, did you?

LANQUE: Oh, come on. You're really going to be like this?

Yeah, you totally are.

Lanque sighs dramatically.

LANQUE: Fine.

Lanque casts around for the nearest victim and grabs his attention with a hand around his wrist. To your dismay, it's your sweet and innocent hot dog chum, Diemen!

Alas, there's nothing you can do to stop him from falling prey to Lanque's wicked designs.

LANQUE: Here. HaVe these.

DIEMEN: (| oh yeah great |)

DIEMEN: (| thanks. i love to put Drugs on my Wiener |)

What a tragedy. But before you know it, Lanque has a hold of you again and is dragging you off.

LANQUE: Let's just dance.

LANQUE: You're not too much of a square to do that, are you?

Of course not. Dancing is basically the one thing you actually planned to come here and do, so that's just great.

You go along with Lanque enthusiastically when he pulls you over to the writhing mass of bodies bumping and grinding on the dance floor.

You get down to it. You soon discover that Lanque has a, uh, very interesting dancing style. And by interesting you mean it primarily consists of directly grinding his body against yours in an incredibly shameless fashion.

But pressed in as you are from all sides by sweaty and inebriated bodies, there's not exactly much room for troll jegus to begin with.

Lanque is up on you so close it's hard not to sweat. He has his hands at your hips, and your face fixed with sharp eyes. His heavy stare is nearly hypnotic, so blatant and undisguised in his expression.

It's clear what he wants. And maybe that's more than you're prepared to give, but when he looks at you like that, it's impossible to look away.

You just go with it. Why not. It feels good and it's not like anyone else is watching. You're surrounded by trolls, boxed in and pouring sweat, and yet it feels like you're the only two people there.

Lanque draws in, teeth by your ear, and this close you can hear him easily even over the overwhelming pound of the bass.

LANQUE: You haVe the palest skin I'Ve eVer seen.

Yeah. You tell him you're literally FFFFFFF white, which is like, blank. That makes you super racially inoffensive, FYI. You let Lanque know he can see you any way he wants, which is even more woke than making a decision.

LANQUE: Thin as paper.

LANQUE: I can see all the Way inside of you.

LANQUE: All your Veins and your red blood.

LANQUE: You smell like candy.

LANQUE: I Wonder hoW you'd taste.

Wow, haha, you say. That's like some shit a vampire would say.

LANQUE: Presuming I'm a RainboW Drinker Would be an aWfully reductiVe and literal reading of my character.

LANQUE: I'm just making a blatant sexual pass.

Oh OK. Good thing that's all cleared up. You take this as an opportunity to really let loose, showing off everything you've got in the sexy dance acumen department. Lanque is a little bewildered.

LANQUE: What are you doing?

You're like, what AREN'T I doing. There's a fire on the dance floor and you struck the match. You're just fuckin it up in here. Really getting it. Breaking it down. Bopping and krumping and whatever. You're smashing your ass into everyone around you and getting hot and heavy with those lusty moves.

There's a point where Lanque has to step back, you presume to properly behold your art in all its glory.

But it soon becomes clear that it's not your prodigious dancing skills that have given him pause. You follow his startled gaze and see the cause for alarm: Bronya is here, and she looks pissed.

LANQUE: Oh, shit.

Bronya is still standing in the entryway contending with Ardata, and it looks like she hasn't caught sight of you yet. But Lanque isn't wasting any time.

Before you realize what's happening Lanque has you by the wrist and is hauling you away from the dance floor, and off down the hallway.

Lanque finds safety in a bedroom - "respitblock", you remind yourself, when you take stock of the conspicuous absence of any bed, and the presence of the revolting looking slime cocoon in which trolls allegedly spend their repose.

You hold each other in a tense and nervous silence pressed against the locked door. What feels like an eternity passes, your breath held. The sound of your blood rushing through your own ears is almost enough to drown out the music.

Seconds turn to minutes and nobody comes to find you. It seems, for now, you've escaped Bronya's notice.

When you turn your head to look back at Lanque, you find he's been staring at you for some time.

LANQUE: I haVen't been able to take my eyes off of you since the moment I first saW you.

LANQUE: You're just so interesting.

You freeze like a hare staring down a snake. Lanque lifts his hand to brush a thumb across your cheek, fingers curling under your chin.

You meet his eyes. His pupils are so black.

LANQUE: I Want to knoW What it'd be like to kiss you.

Lanque's tongue darts out to wet his painted lips.

LANQUE: Do you Want to kiss me?

Whoa.

Well, you've already clicked on at least two mature content disclaimers to get this far. Why the hell not?

Lanque leans in and presses his lips against yours.

He kisses much more sweetly than he looks. His lips are soft and wet and taste like blackberries. This beats making out with a couple of greasy teens behind a dumpster, that's for sure. When one of his sharp fangs knicks your bottom lip, you don't even care.

But when a drop of your blood beads out onto his invasive tongue, Lanque draws back, just an inch.

LANQUE: You taste sharp and dangerous.

LANQUE: Like a Weapon.

Is that a good thing?

LANQUE: It's not a bad thing.

Lanque pulls back further. His hand slips from your cheek and his fingers trail down your neck to rest on your collar, thumb brushing against the thrum of your pulse.

LANQUE: HaVe you eVer pailed before?

Lanque shrugs off his jacket and starts unbuttoning his shirt. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Is this really gonna GO there?

You're like, well, no. You've never done any alien intercourse with a bucket, but it doesn't look like he even has one on him at the moment. That was apparently the wrong thing to say, because Lanque's face scrunches up in displeasure.

LANQUE: Don't mock me.

LANQUE: It's my first time.

You figure laughing would constitute mocking him, so you don't. But the look you give him seems to say enough.

LANQUE: Us jades who liVe in the cloisters haVe been chosen for a Very special duty.

LANQUE: We're expected to adopt a chaste and ascetic life in serVice to the continuation of our species.

LANQUE: And When We undergo our Ordeals and are sent offWorld, there's no such thing as "sneaking out of the caVerns".

LANQUE: If I don't do this noW, When?

LANQUE: My life is nearly oVer.

LANQUE: Will you help me feel aliVe?

But before you can answer, Bronya's voice starts to shrill above the heavy music.

BRONYA: vV Lanque! Vv

Lanque's hands shoot out at lightning speed to draw you close. Before you can so much as gasp, he presses one of his palms over your mouth to keep you quiet.

Oh, shit. She's close. And from the sound of it, she's getting closer.

BRONYA: vV LANQUE! Vv

BRONYA: vV I KNOW YOU'RE HERE! Vv

BRONYA: vV YOU NEED TO COME OUT AND COME HOME RIGHT NOW! Vv

Lanque leans in close to your ear.

LANQUE: Shhhhhhh.

What will you do?

> Call in his mom. This has gotten problematic enough.

> Keep quiet. You want to see where this goes.

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> Keep quiet. You want to see where this goes.

You keep your mouth shut and wait for Bronya to pass.

She only shouts for a little while longer before the sound of her voice fades away. There are too many blocks in this hive for her to be trying to break down the door to every one, and she didn't look too closely at this one. You've lost her.

When it becomes clear Bronya is gone for good, Lanque lets his hand fall away from your lips. You feel him smile against your ear.

LANQUE: Where Were We?

You turn in Lanque's arms and look up into his blazing eyes. How can you alien pail without a bucket?

LANQUE: I don't mind doing it Without one.

LANQUE: Sometimes it can be fun to get a little messy, don't you think?

You're like, weren't you just saying this was your first time?

Lanque answers you with another kiss. This time, he means business.

KYAA | M.C.-CHAN...

Whew. You go all the way with this super slutty alien, and then you slump out on the ground completely wasted.

Maybe this all went kind of off the rails, but you have to admit it would've been a real shame if you got through this entire extraterrestrial adventure and never got to smash even a single alien. What would be the fucking point, honestly?

This guy really did a whole number on you. You're lying spread eagled on the floor as Lanque is putting his clothes back on.

Man. This is probably your most accomplished friendship to date. You're not quite ready to move just yet, but since you and Lanque are such good chums now, you figure now's a good a time as any to ask for his Chittr.

Lanque seems surprised to even hear you speak.

LANQUE: Huh?

LANQUE: You Want to add me on Chittr?

Yeah, you say. Isn't that what friends do?

LANQUE: Oh, uhhh...

LANQUE: Sorry, I can't. My palmhusk is broken right now.

Lanque says, while typing away furiously on his palmtop. He doesn't even look down at you. You're like, uh, but you're using it right now?

Lanque rolls his eyes.

LANQUE: I thought you would take the obvious hint.

What obvious hint? Lanque huffs.

LANQUE: Look, I was TRYING to be nice, but...

LANQUE: You just weren't that good, babe.

LANQUE: I don't often ring the same bell twice, but if I were going to consider it...

LANQUE: You'd have to show me a better performance than THAT.

Whoa.

Holy shit.

That's that, you guess. Your lowest low. Your first time banging an alien, and you couldn't even satisfy him.

A little seed of worthlessness takes root inside of you and germinates so explosively that it fills you up until there's basically nothing left. You die of shame instantly.

## SHAMED 2 DEATH

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> Call in his mom. This has gotten problematic enough.

You rip Lanque's hand off your mouth and start yelling for Bronya.

LANQUE: What the fuck, dude?

Lanque tries to scramble away from you to make some sort of last ditch effort to escape, but it's no use. Bronya hears you and comes running, furious.

She hurls the locked door off its hinges before you can even get up to let her in. You duck under flying chunks of alien architecture and scuttle off to avoid what you fear might be further alien fists.

BRONYA: vV LANQUE!!!!!! Vv

As angry as her voice is, some of the fury goes out of her face the moment her gaze lands on Lanque's state of partial undress. She reflexively brings a hand up to shield her eyes.

BRONYA: I - what in the world!?

BRONYA: Put your clothes back on right this instant, young man!!

Lanque freezes where he stands, apparently accepting that he's been caught. There's nowhere left to run, if he doesn't intend to fling himself out a window. A sneer uncoils on his face.

LANQUE: Oh, please. SaVe the purity act.

LANQUE: Like this is anything you haVen't already seen a dozen times before.

Bronya's face goes bright jade.

BRONYA: What!?

BRONYA: What in the world are you implying???

BRONYA: vV I would never!! Vv

LANQUE: Forget Lynera - you've always been the craziest bitch in the Whole cloister.

LANQUE: You know you aren't actually our lusus, right?

Bronya marches right up to Lanque and slaps him hard across the face.

Lanque makes an undignified noise as he recoils from the blow. It looks like that really hurt - his face is stinging bright under the handprint. He forces out a strained laugh.

LANQUE: My Word, Bronya.

LANQUE: If you Wanted to join us, all you had to do Was ask.

Damn. You wish you had some popcorn right around now. You just kind of sit back and take it all in.

Lanque's invective has its apparent desired effect: Bronya is all but steaming at this point, hands balled into fists at her sides. You kind of want to say hi to your friend, but she's a little preoccupied, it seems.

BRONYA: vV I am not going to rise to your petty baiting! You know you're in the wrong here! Vv

BRONYA: 1. We've spoken time and time again about recklessly sneaking out to these parties, and now you're dragging Lynera into your mess!

BRONYA: 2. Lynera has told me all about the things you've been saying and doing to her, and it is completely unacceptable, Lanque!

BRONYA: 3. You've had more than enough lectures about the way you treat your flushed quadrant partners and it absolutely needs to stop.

BRONYA: 4. You are coming back with me to the cloisters. RIGHT. NOW!

BRONYA: vV When we're home, we're going to have one last serious talk about this. And if there aren't changes, there are going to be consequences! Vv

Eventually, Bronya's overbearing hollering seems to finally break Lanque down. He sighs, shoulders slumped, and rolls his eyes.

LANQUE: Fine, fine.

Bronya crosses her arms indignantly as she waits for Lanque to finish fixing his clothes. Lanque buttons his shirt, puts back on his jacket and his tie, and then he has to go retrieve his palmsusk, which he seems to have discreetly slid over to where you're standing.

He casually saunters his way over, and instead of picking up his own device, snatches yours out of your hand.

LANQUE: Hey. I've got to go, but let me give you my Chittr information.

LANQUE: Maybe We can pick up Where We left off later, sWeetheart.

Bronya stomps over to grab Lanque by the ear and drag hi maway, but not before he's finished putting his Chittr contact into your palmsusk. He shoves it back into your hand, mouths you a "see you later", and is then fully hauled out of the room.

LANQUE: Hypocrite!

BRONYA: vV You need to shut your mouth! Vv

And then they're gone.

Fr...iendship accomplished??? You guess???

## CHITTR MUTUALS!

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### > Barzum & Baizli.

You've gotten pretty good at the ol' friend-making game by now. But even an old hand at palling around like you - a real platonic lothario - has bad nights sometimes. Tonight was one of those nights.

It's getting close to morning, and not a new friend in sight. You'd met new people, sure, but none of your conversations had panned out the way you wanted them to.

Every interaction had come to a close with your friend count no higher than when you'd started, no matter how many compliments, offers to help, and other tried-and-true friending strategies you'd whipped out.

You won't stand for it! You're determined to finish out the night with at least one more new buddy's name in your little black friendship book, but with the usns about to rise you have to admit you're cutting it a little close.

As each minute ticks by, the sky gets a little lighter, and the possibility of dying an agonizing, fiery death gets higher.

Maybe it'd be best for you to just pack it in and find somewhere to spend the day.

You pick up your trusty palmsusk and call up one of the many friends you already have to ask if you can crash. Hell, maybe Skylla will be up for sharing a recuperacoon again. The soothing ooze has kinda grown on you, and sleeping next to Skylla always makes you feel so comfy and safe.

Turns out Skylla is more than down with you coming over. Time to make tracks! You turn tail and hurry in the direction of Skylla's digs, but it's not long until you run into a distraction.

That distraction is in the form of a house. It's a dark, crooked thing hulking close to the ground. Slatted wood walls, sloping roofs. Vines cling to it like dust and cobwebs cling to forgotten things in the attic. Something about it feels off.

It possesses a certain energy that sends shivers up your spine, making your hair stand on end. An instinct deep in your gut is telling you to give it a wide berth.

On the other hand, it's shelter. Skylla's place is a ways off yet, while the house is right here in front of you. It could be worth seeing if whoever lives here is willing to put you up for the day.

> Approach the house.

> No fucking way.

---

> No fucking way.

Yeah, no, that's not happening. Didn't you just establish that this place gives you the heebiest of jeebies? Plus there's always the chance that the inhabitant will cull instead of help you. You're sticking to your original plan, thank you very much.

Firmly ignoring the house, you continue on your way.

You make good progress for a while. Your maps app says you're heading in the right direction. Except -

Oh what the fuck. Why are you here again? Did you take a wrong turn somewhere?

Whatever. You're not gonna dwell on it. Time is running out, and you need to get away from this stupid house, pronto. You'll make sure to do it right. This time, you'll go...

> Left.

> Right.

---

> Both.

Okay. You split, breaking into a jog. The scenery flicks past you as you pick up the pace, urgency spurring you on. It's getting even lighter. Won't be long now.

What.

You check your palms again. You're right back where you started, even though just a moment ago the map's GPS put you at a decent distance away.

This is ridiculous. There's obviously something weird going on, but the suns are creeping over the horizon.

Time's up.

---

## > Approach the house.

There's nothing else for it: you make your way towards the house. Even though everything inside you is screaming at you to stay away. Even though with every step you take your chest tightens and your hands tremble.

By the time you reach the door you're shaking like a leaf. Adrenaline zings through you. You could choke on it. You want to run, but you force yourself to keep moving forward.

It's a slow-motion race between you and the sunrise. At this rate the sun will make it all the way into the sky before you can even knock.

You drag yourself the rest of the way, stumbling onto the front step. The door knocker is an intricate yet grotesque thing, an undulating tongue lolling out of a set of sharp teeth all in cast iron. You grab the lumpy end of the tongue and bang it against the door.

Nothing. Fuck. Maybe you'll get lucky and the door will be open? Out of options, you reach out and turn the doorknob. You can feel the first licks of sunlight against the back of your neck. Is it just you, or is your skin starting to blister?

But today's your lucky day. The door opens.

You should feel overjoyed at your life being spared. Instead, your focus is fully on how the roiling in your belly has bloomed fully into nausea. In the distance, inexplicably, is the peal of sirens, an insistent whining noise that only continues getting louder.

You shouldn't have come here, but it's not like you had another choice. You might as well see what awaits you inside. But as soon as you cross the threshold, the world lurches and you pass out.

You come to in a different room than the foyer, head ringing like someone just whacked it. When you move to sit up, there's the sound of skittering all around you, like hundreds of tiny insects are scurrying away to safety. Had they been roving the floor while you were knocked out? Gross.

You prop yourself back on your hands and take a look around. Your impromptu nap has done nothing to assuage the deep sense of wrongness you have about this place.

But, hey, maybe you've managed to sleep through the day. Maybe the sun has set again so you can get the hell outta here. This sense of optimism is misplaced, probably, but it's not as if you can check. There are no windows.

You cast your eyes around the room. Underneath the floral, peeling wallpaper the walls are riddled with damp and mould. And on the other side of the room... an open door, thank fuck.

You aren't locked in, then. You can go look for somewhere else in this place that might have a got damn window.

You step into a long, winding corridor. It's so cramped you feel almost as though the walls are closing in. While it had been warm enough outside, in here a deep chill settles over you, sinking deep into your bones. You're half convinced you'll never be warm again.

Emanating from somewhere you can't see is music, tinny and rhythmic. It's soon interrupted by a crackling noise, like someone trying to tune in to the correct station on a radio.

Then one of the picture frames lights up. Looks like it was actually some sort of TV screen.

???: welcome.

???: WELCOME!

???: we're glad that you're awake

???: AND THAT YOU CAME TO VISIT US!

???: we've been really, really, really, really,

???/???: B o R e D

???: in this stinky old house.

???: IT REALLY SUCKED! WE COULD HAVE JUST DIED

???: from how boring it was.

Two voices. One monotonous and so quiet you can barely hear it, the other shrill, dramatic, like its owner never learned the meaning of the words "indoor voice".

Catching what the quieter person is saying isn't made any easier by the high-pitched giggling that starts up in the background whenever they start speaking.

???: SO HURRY UP AND FIND US!

???/???: wE wAnT tO pLaY a GaMe!

Gee, why do those words give you such a profound sense of deja vu?

The line goes dead. At the same time, a door pops open at the other end of the corridor. You're meant to go through it, you guess. You'd rather go somewhere else - anywhere else - other than through that door, but there's nowhere else to go.

Or is there?

> Approach the door.

> Search for another exit.

---

## > Search for another exit.

No, there has to be *something* else here.

Ignoring the voices' instructions, you examine the walls of the corridor instead. Soon enough, you notice something funny about one of the paintings. Its frame seems much thicker than the others, which strikes you as somehow suspicious.

Feeling along its bottom edge reveals a button. You push it. There's a groaning sound, and part of the wall folds itself away, revealing a tunnel of some sort. Ha, you knew it!

You're so focused on trying to make your escape that you rush through the opening without looking. If you had been more careful, you might have noticed one very important thing: past this doorway, there is no floor.

Your feet meet thin air, sending you pitching downwards.

Drat, you think, as you plunge towards the pit of knives beneath you. You'd reached a follower milestone on Chittr the other day, too, and you hadn't gotten around to bequeathing it to any of your friends in case something like this happened.

Your final, regretful thoughts are of your account, dusty and abandoned, with no one there to continue to update it after you're gone.

## GAME OVER

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## > Approach the door.

Your wariness only intensifies once you set off down the hall, because the walls start fucking bleeding. You've seen enough troll blood at this point to be able to recognize it.

Multicolored streams ooze over the wallpaper and faded portraits lining the wall, collecting and congealing in sticky, viscous puddles on the floor. The narrow hallway becomes steeped in the stench of copper.

You walk faster, but the streams of blood follow you, sluicing down from the ceiling as quickly as you walk.

You reach the door. Eager to get away from the grisly sight, you throw it open, but- oh, god, you hadn't considered what might be waiting for you behind it.

What if these two shady characters plan to torture you? Tie you up and steal your palmsusk, texting embarrassing messages to your friends while you can only look on in horror, helpless and unable to intervene? Anything but that!

It's too dark to see anything. All you can do is fumble and feel around with your hands. Getting out of the room again is a no-go. The door swung shut behind you as soon as you stepped inside.

You shuffle forward on wobbly legs. The floor feels unstable somehow, like it's going to open up and swallow you at any moment.

Would it be a good idea to call out to see if anyone's here?

You manage a feeble "hello". Your voice echoes. Soft laughter reverberates back in response. You catch a glimpse of something from the corner of your eye - a flash of purple.

There's the sensation of eyes on the back of your neck, watching you, but you can't discern where the other presence in the room is. If there even is one.

You kind of hate this. Of all the shitty welcomes you've received, this one takes the cake. You have to get out of here!

You try to gather your panicked thoughts together to formulate a plan, but before you can do anything a series of ropes appear seemingly from nowhere, coiling tight around you and holding you down.

BARZUM: you're finally here.

BAIZLI: WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU!

A light comes on. It's not the warm, burning rays of sunlight - this room is windowless, top a broad spotlight, bright and harsh. It lights up a broad swath of the room, bleaching it white and sending long shadows stretching away from it.

You can see your captors more clearly, now. Two purpleblood kids. Aside from their expressions, they look exactly the same. A manic glint sparkles in the eye of one of them, as sharp as his razor-blade grin. The other looks more hesitant, almost sad.

BAIZLI: WE'RE BAIZLI!

BARZUM: and barzum.

BAIZLI: YOU'RE THE ALIEN, AINTCHA?

BARZUM: you look weird.

BAIZLI: YOUR BODY'S REAL WEIRD!

BARZUM: we wonder what color your blood is.

BAIZLI: OR HOW SPRINGY AND SLIMEY YOUR ACID TUBES ARE!

BARZUM: they squirm around like slitherbeasts when we slice open trolls' bellies.

BAIZLI: ARE YOURS THE SAME?

You struggle against your bonds. You have no idea what acid tubes are, but you'd much rather they stay inside your body where they belong, thanks!

You thought you'd moved past the days where you had to serve as a torture muppet. All you needed was a few hours' shelter from the sun, and if it's safe to go outside again you'd really like to leave!

This was the wrong thing to say, apparently. The twins leer at you disapprovingly. Or, well, one of them looks so disappointed he might burst into tears. The other just looks pissed.

BARZUM: NO WAY!

BAIZLI: we told you.

BARZUM: WE'VE BEEN SOOO BORED!

BAIZLI: do you know what it's like

BARZUM: TO BE ALL ALONE

BAIZLI: with no one else to play with

BARZUM: FOR WIPES?

BAIZLI: we might have each other. we're never truly alone.

BARZUM: THAT'S WHAT MAKES BEING US SO GREAT!

BAIZLI: but it's a little difficult to play pranks on someone

BARZUM: WHO ALWAYS KNOWS WHAT YOU'RE THINKING AND FEELING!

Wait, you thought Barzum was the quiet one and Baizli was the loud one, but it looks like you were mistaken? Or did they switch?

If you weren't faced with the prospect of having your innards yanked out and played with by bloodthirsty children, you might be more puzzled by their statement. As it stands, you have more pressing problems on your mind right now, so their words more or less fly over your head.

You squirm harder, even though it doesn't do any good. In fact, it just seems to make the twins madder. Sadder? You settle on "smadder".

BARZUM: STOP TRYING TO GET AWAY!

BAIZLI: it's always like this.

BARZUM: NOBODY EVER WANTS TO PLAY WITH US!

BAIZLI: we hate it.

BARZUM/BAIZLI: nOw HoLd StILL.

You look at them beseechingly, trying to appear as small and helpless as possible. Maybe it's a little pathetic giving puppy dog eyes to literal children, but you lost track of your own dignity a long time ago. They're not really going to do this, right?

A noise starts up. It sounds suspiciously like a chainsaw? And is it just you, or is there the scent of raw meat in the air? Where the hell is it coming from?

You continue straining in your bonds, stomach clenching in fear, bile rising at the back of your throat. They're not actually going to hurt you, right? Oh, god. Oh, god, oh god oh-

You wake up, gasping. But you aren't strapped down anymore. You're in the same room that you were in at the beginning. What happened?

The room hasn't changed since you've been gone. There's still only one way out. You really, really don't want to step through the door again, but what else can you do?

You step through the door.

There's that radio crackling again.

BARZUM: welcome.

BAIZLI: WELCOME!

BARZUM: we're glad that you're awake

Their little greeting goes on just like it had before. A pre-recorded message, maybe?

Your heart pounds as you step through the second door. You're hoping you'll be able to sidestep the ropes this time, but instead of getting tied up you trip forward into a vat of what feels like glue.

You were lucky enough to have turned your face away from the stickiness, so your noise is still above the surface so you can't breath. For now, anyway. But you can't move.

BARZUM: you're finally here.

BAIZLI: WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU!

They're acting like it was the first time all over again. What is this fuckery? Are they messing with you? You met already, mere minutes ago.

BARZUM: no. we would've remembered

BAIZLI: MEETING A WEIRDO LIKE YOU!

BARZUM: stop trying to trick us.

Then everything goes black for a third time.

And here you are again.

BARZUM: welcome.

BAIZLI: WELCOME!

Are you for real??

This time you get shoved into a box. You're pretty sure you pass out while you're in the middle of getting buried alive.

You come to in the room you're beginning to think of as yours, yet again.

You pass out five times. Ten. You begin to lose count. You never pass out at the same point during the twins' shenanigans, but it inevitably happens. And you always end up right back where you started.

The worst part is that while your conversation with the twins stays the same, the way they trap you changes. You get trussed upside down from the ceiling. Dunked into a water tank, scrabbling to get out while your lungs begin to burn from lack of air.

Every time you black out before you can die, but you've almost-died dozens of times by now and it's really beginning to stress you out!

You have to be stuck in some sort of time loop. You see this sort of thing in movies all the time, and everyone knows that movies are the best points of reference for one's actual life.

The hero wakes up to the strains of an old pop song playing on the radio and reminisces over their childhood journals, which sends them back in time where they have to stop a crime before it happens. Or... maybe you were thinking of a different movie.

Anyway, your point is that you have to find a way out of the loop. Hopefully you won't have to do anything too wild like stab your past self and then throw your own bloodied corpse out the window. That would really, really blow.

Unfortunately, you can't seem to find any clues indicating what you should do next. You always pass out. The twins are always excited to play-with-slash-torture you. They don't seem to be aware that any of this is happening, from what you can tell.

After round 20-something-or-other, you've had it. Enough is enough. You can't take any more giggling, any more of that hard, damp floor, any more excruciating "games".

You might not be any closer to figuring out what to do, but you have to try *something*.

> Fuck this.

> Remember who you are.

---

> Fuck this.

There's one thing you've been doing wrong: appealing to the twins to let you go. All they seem to care about is torturing you! Of course simply asking them for your freedom isn't going to work.

You'll do things differently this time. If you want to escape, you'll have to go on the offensive.

You wake up again.

Disembodied voices, bleeding walls, game, check, check, check. You head towards the twins' room.

Stand back! You yell before they can launch into their tirade. You're a weird, scary alien with weird, scary alien superpowers, and you're not afraid to use them! You switch on your phone's torch app, waving it around. You even attempt an intimidating roar for added effect.

The only superpowers you're aware of is your irresistible charm and a set of truly banging gams, but they don't need to know that.

Your gambit works. They don't cower in fear exactly, but they're bamboozled enough for you to look frantically around the room as much as you can with your paltry light source. There! An air vent with a loose grill.

With a desperate yell, you launch yourself up towards it and crawl inside. The twins, finally aware that this is all just an elaborate ruse, start shouting after you.

The twins' indignant voices start to fade as you wriggle deeper into the dusty guts of the house. You can't have very long. It's only a matter of time until the diminutive terrors climb into the vents after you.

Or maybe they'll run ahead and then cut you off via one of the other rooms the vent's connected to. They must know the layout of the house better than you do.

Much to your surprise, though, you reemerge at one of the outside walls with no trouble. It's dusk, not day, for which you mutter a quick "thank you" to your merciful overlords. From here, it's a simple matter of picking your way down the vines until you get to the bottom.

Once your feet touch the ground, you start running. When you cast one last wild glance back over your shoulder, you catch sight of them. Your captors, who you've successfully hoodwinked.

They're standing in the grand front doorway, screaming. You have no idea why they aren't coming after you, but you don't question it, pumping your legs until they're burning.

It's a good thing you spent all that time jogging with Stelsa. You've gotten really good at running away from your problems!

You stop running once you can't see the house anymore. You're a little surprised that getting away turned out to be that simple, but you know better than to look a gift hoofbeast in the squawk gaper.

Relief floods through you in waves. You did it! You got away! You slow down to a leisurely walking pace, pulling out your phone as you go.

You have a slew of texts from Skylla, who'd been wondering what happened to you after you'd never turned up. Her invitation to come over and hang out still stands, though. Oh boy, you can't wait to finally make your way over there and chill with her.

You'd never play favorites among your pals, but you have to admit that you hold a particular fondness for Skylla. Her whole thing where she always makes sure not to cause you any bodily harm? That definitely has its charms.

You keep walking. But after a while your stomach starts to sink. It's been half an hour and your surroundings don't look any different. You should be closer to Skylla's neck of the woods by now.

It's not until you catch sight of a weathered wall all wound with ivy that you realize what's going on.

It's the house again. You're still stuck. You're not going to be able to leave its grounds no matter how much you walk.

You might have escaped the house, but whatever curse or time-space witchcraft this is isn't confined to within those walls. You're in a pocket dimension of some sort. And you don't know how to break out.

So now you can either return to the twins, since they're the only company you have out here, or make these bushes your new best friends.

You look dolefully out at the miles of scraggy underbrush before you. You had probably best get used to gazing at nothing but this, since it's all you're going to be seeing for a long, long time.

## FOREVER LOST.

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### > Remember who you are.

There's one thing you've been doing wrong: making this all about escape. You've been so preoccupied with no getting sliced to pieces with knives and everything that you've lost track of what's truly important.

The word that echoes in your heart when you rise at dusk and pulses through your bloodstream during the rest of your waking hours until it's time to go to sleep. The word that's kicked off every single narrative you've starred in thus far.

## FRIENDSHIP.

You'll do things differently this time. You're going to bring yourself to truly care about these creepy clown children, god dammit, even if it's the last thing you do. And with the way things are going, it very well could be.

Their m.o. is oddly benign this time: a tickling machine. Unfortunately, it's a little difficult for you to talk to them through all the laughter.

BAIZLI: WHAT ARE THOSE NOISES THEY'RE MAKING?

BARZUM: i think they're trying to tell us something.

Miraculously, the tickling stops. You wheeze, trying to catch your breath, hoping to god you haven't peed. You've managed not to wet yourself out of fear until now, it'd be just the worst to have broken your streak due to laughing too hard.

What is it about clowns and you divesting your body of waste?

After assuring yourself that your underwear is blessedly dry, you ask: if they kill you, won't they just be alone again? How is *that* beneficial for anyone? They'll be bored and you'll be, uh, dead. Which you would really rather not be.

Their creeping, saccharine smiles transform into matching expressions of confusion. Barzum puts a finger to her chin, cocking her head to one side as

if deep in thought. Almost like a puppy. Under any other circumstances, you might even consider it cute.

BARZUM: what are you talking about?

BAIZLI: WE DON'T WANT TO KILL YOU!

BARZUM: maybe just cut you a little.

BAIZLI: YOU'LL HEAL RIGHT BACK UP AGAIN!

BARZUM: don't be such a wiggler.

Some of the things they've tried to inflict on you would have definitely tkane more than your regular human healing functions to recover from!

But wait- you think back to Remele taking a whole ass club in her side and acting like it was no big. She'd said something about higher blood colors being able to take more of a beating, too. Are the twins assuming that that's the case for everyone?

God, this is what happens when all the adults in a society go off planet and leave a bunch of zoo animals to bring up their kids. Or, well, trolls also solve most of their problems by killing each other. You can't discount that either, you suppose.

You take a closer look at the twins. There isn't any malice in either of their faces. The only emotion you can discern is idly curiosity.

You decide to take that as encouragement.

You explain that, no, you won't heal up from being sliced open. Or from an on-fire scuttlebuggy being flung at your head. Because you're a human, and humans heal differently from trolls. Well. Differently from highblood trolls, at least.

You even use your best babysitter voice for good measure. You feel like you're giving a stern talking-to about the importance of taking care of one's toys so that they don't break.

Instead, you propose, why don't you be friends? You can all play together, instead of you being the, uh, subject of their torment. They'll be able to play with you for longer that way, too!

They give you a strange look.

BARZUM: friends?

BAIZLI: WHAT'S THAT?

...Do people not agree to be their playmates very often?

BARZUM: no...

BAIZLI: USUALLY EVERYONE RUNS IN THE OTHER DIRECTION!

BARZUM: so we have to catch them

BAIZLI: OR TRICK THEM!

That... explains a lot. You think you're beginning to understand.

If they let you down, you can try and show them what you have in mind.

They do. They actually free you. They turn all the lights on in the room, too, so you can finally see everything in it.

It's bigger than you expected, and set up like a circus tent. A wire is suspended along the ceiling. A person-sized target board rotates at dizzying speeds against the back wall. Juggling clubs, knives, scarves, and other props are piled across the floor. You recognize a few of the mechanisms they had inflicted on you before.

It's pure chaos.

So... what else do they do with all this stuff?

They're still staring at you as if they aren't quite sure how to deal with you engaging with them voluntarily. You're feeling pretty tentative, yourself.

This whole interaction seems incredibly precarious. You're afraid that if you make a misstep you'll end up back in the tickling rack again.

BAIZLI: this isn't ours. we just found it when we got here.

BARZUM: BUT IT DOES LOOK A LOT LIKE WHAT'S IN OUR HIVE!

BAIZLI: we can do shows.

BARZUM: AND STUNTS!

BARZUM/BAIZLI: aLL KiNdS oF cOoL sTuFf!

Fuck, even when they aren't threatening you, the way they talk in chorus like that freaks you out a little. In perfect unison, like they're one voice instead of two.

You shake off your fears and suggest that they show you a little something.

They seem to like that idea. Excitedly, they scurry over to the target board. One twin stands against it, while the other picks up a handful of throwing knives.

You're anxious. You don't exactly want them to rough up *each other* instead of you! But Barzum just throws the knives in a graceful arc. They surround Baizli perfectly, barely missing him.

You gasp, your mouth a perfect O. The twins seem pleased with themselves, laughing together like they're sharing a secret.

BAIZLI: if you think that's impressive,

BARZUM: WATCH THIS!

They execute a sick flip on a pair of trapezes above a bed of swords. Make a daring escape from one of the contraptions they'd trapped you in. They move similarly to how they speak - perfectly in tandem with each other.

With the variety of obsessions you've seen among your friends, it figures that it was only a matter of time until you met someone who made a hobby of risking

their lives. It's not too out there compared to cage-fighting, you suppose. Or collecting saucy East Alternian figures.

BAIZLI: YOU COULD HAVE JUST ESCAPED

BARZUM: from the trap we put you in earlier, you know?

BAIZLI: WHY DIDN'T YOU?

You laugh nervously. You haven't exactly had much practice. And maybe it would've been easier if you had someone else to help? You look at the two of them pointedly. You didn't even realize siblings were a thing among trolls, let alone twins.

BARZUM: sibling?

BAIZLI: WHAT'S THAT?

You know, someone you, uh, share a lusus with? Someone who hatched with in the same clutch? Are you phrasing that right?

BARZUM: we do share a lusus.

BAIZLI: WE SHARE EVERYTHING!

BARZUM: we didn't just hatch from the same clutch,

BAIZLI: WE HATCHED FROM THE SAME EGG.

BARZUM: we were going to be a single troll, but

BAIZLI: WE SPLIT IN TWO!

BARZUM: just our bodies, though. our minds are still one.

BAIZLI: ONE PERSON, TWO BODIES.

BARZUM/BAIZLI: we're oNe AnD tHe SaMe.

Okay, maybe siblings aren't a thing on Alternia after all. Being literally the same person is quite a bit different from the human concept of twins or siblings.

Somehow this leads to them telling you all about a number of exploits they had with some of the other kids in their neighborhood. One story lead to another, and soon you're recounting some of your own adventures, too.

They particularly love your attempt at giving an impression of Nihkee, clapping and crowing as you get into a dramatic power stance and flex your flimsy muscles.

You can't help but feel a little proud of yourself. You feel like the guy on *Jurassic Park* who walked into the velociraptor den all, "be chill, my dudes", and they actually listened to him!

Besides, there's something great about making kids laugh, even kids who were trying to murder you less than an hour ago.

The twins are in the middle of talking about a prank they'd played that they found hilarious - and that you've been trying hard not to grimace in horror at - when you feel it. A certain change in the air.

Didn't they mention they had been stuck here?

BARZUM: DID WE?

BAIZLI: yes, we have.

BARZUM: WHEN WE TRY TO GO OUT THE DOOR

BAIZLI: some sort of force pushes us back.

BARZUM: YOU'RE THE FIRST OTHER PERSON WE'VE SEEN

BAIZLI: since we got here.

You have a hunch that that might have changed. Why don't you all try again?

They look at you skeptically.

BARZUM: IF YA WANT.

BAIZLI: it's not going to be any different though.

You just tell them to trust you.

You look at the front door. The twins are crowding you from either side, clinging onto your arms and edging so close it's like they're trying to burrow into you.

Ready?

They nod. You push against the door.

It opens, and you breathe in the cool evening air.

BARZUM: NOT SO FAST.

BAIZLI: we've gotten this far before.

BARZUM: BUT WE WON'T BE ABLE TO GO ANY FARTHER.

BAIZLI: you'll see.

You take one step. Then another. As you look beyond the grounds of the house, you see things you hadn't when you first got here - mountains in the distance, other houses. Before, all you could see was shrubbery.

You pick up the pace. The house falls away behind you, disappearing into the fog.

BARZUM: WHOA!

BAIZLI: you did it.

BARZUM: YOU ACTUALLY DID IT!

BAIZLI: we can finally leave.

They swoop in to grab you, hugging you hard. The curving horns of their masks almost stab you in the cheek. These things are a bit of a hazard when their wearers only come up to about where your chest is.

They keep talking before you can get a word in, pulling you forwards and shuffling you along between them.

It looks like you were right. It wasn't just enough to save yourself - you had to save them, too. You don't know how, but the key to making this little patch of universe obey the rules of reality once more was FRIENDSHIP all along.

-

BARZUM: HAHAHA!

BAIZLI: you should have seen your face.

BARZUM: YOU WERE SHIT-YOUR-GAMTUBES-TERRIFIED!

You heave a sigh as their incessant giggling surrounds you like so many playful ghosts. Yes, yes, you say. Very clever. They were the ones behind all this nonsense, weren't they?

You started guessing somewhere towards the end. The - you wiggle your hands vaguely - all the time stuff. They sure scared you, all right.

BAIZLI: um

BARZUM: NO.

BAIZLI: that wasn't us. we were talking about the

BARZUM: BLOODY WALLS. AND CREEPY SOUNDS.

BAIZLI: none of that was real. *that* was all us. that was all

BARZUM/BAIZLI: cHuCkLeVoOdOoS.

BAIZLI: we're the best at chucklevoodooos.

BARZUM: WE GOT YOU SOOO GOOD!

They both bounce beside you excitedly. You blink down at them. You have no idea what the heck chucklevoodooos are, but you can only guess that it's some sort of illusionary thing. So they didn't have anything to do with time messing up? Folding in on itself?

BAIZLI: no.

BARZUM: WE TOLD YOU.

BAIZLI: we've been trying to get out of that stupid house

BARZUM: FOR WIPES.

BAIZLI: maybe even a perigee. did you really thing

BARZUM: THAT WAS OUR HIVE?

BAIZLI: our place is

BARZUM: SO MUCH COOLER THAN THAT DUMP!

Visit their actual hive? You have your reservations about that, but you can't find it within you to say no as they eagerly pull you along, one twin tugging your hand, the other looping an arm in yours.

You look back at the house one last time. You have no clue whether the twins are lying or, if they're telling the truth, what really caused what happened here, but right now? You're content enough knowing that you'll never have to see this place ever again.

**TWO FOR ONES FRIENDS! (HONK)**

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Do you want to understand?

> NO

> YES

---

> NO

**GAME OVER**

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> YES

[EPILOGUE](#)