

Note from the author: In light of recent events I've decided to copy everything for this story on R.O.M. to here. As this is a collection of shorter fics (and I stretch that term a lot here) all the CWs are left in the section of the story itself. I've tried to preserve formatting as best I can, but ultimately can't grab everything. The typos can stay though.

## A self-indulgent vampire fic

anna has finally succeeded in bullying me into posting these, so enjoy!!! Here is a few one-shots I've worked on while writing up Abscission, so you might see some conceptual overlap between these stories and that, or even each other. Feel free to call me out for recycling ideas, I am shameless and gay.

CW for:

Vampires!!!

Blood!!!!

Explicit non-con brain breaking and use of hypnosis!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

More consensual things happen too!!!

Sad brain feelings

Frankly no reasonable regard to primary canon as I am off having fun in my own side dimension with this one

and Violence against stuffed animals

A mild alteration on the security of blood bag distribution was one of the many changes that meant nothing to the average citizen of Brypso 3 37 and meant absolutely everything to Dust. She clutched in her hands a bag- the \*last\* bag, her brain intrusively reminded her- of type O+ blood. Her usual phlebotomist had given her a pitying look as they explained they couldn't help her anymore. Policy changes, structural changes, blah blah blah more of the affini coming in and making things more efficient and benevolent and whatever. Dust didn't care about the broad strokes of a shifting world until it decided to come in and barrel her over.

Dust huddled up behind the debris of the dark alley, bag held tight against her chest. Still warm, close to body temperature which felt damn hot on the skin. Just one pint. Enough to last the week. Probably. Enough to make her feel her heartbeat again and almost feel like a person. Just a small glimmer of satiety against the gaping fear of deprivation.

Dust did not wait much longer. Consequences be damned if someone turned and found her like this. She poked a hole near the top of the bag with one of her fangs and stuck one of her many disposable straws in there, greedily drinking down the warm blood like some kind of grotesque sports drink. A perfect example of indulgence in nutrition as an escape from anxiety. Something perfectly healthy and sustainable. She'd just top off, and find another source of warm blood before she starved herself feral. This was fine.

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Everything was extremely not fine. Three weeks without fresh blood and Dust was no closer to finding an ethical replacement for her needs. There was, of course, the less than ethical option of chasing someone down a dark hallway and tackling them to take \*their\* blood the old fashioned way, but Dust had been doing her best to ignore that increasingly louder part of her brain.

Another part suggested that maybe she should run to a medical professional and spill her... unique medical needs all over the floor in the hopes for help but THAT didn't work out last time and she wasn't about to try that again when the planet was Under New Management. Worst case scenario she'd end up strapped to bed with needles and drills and- she wasn't going to try it. Simply not happening.

Dust gripped her hands in tight fists, sharpened claws of her nails digging into her palms while her teeth chewed on her lower lip. She left dry wounds in both locations, bare skin and split veins that flowed empty. She couldn't hear her own heartbeat anymore. Her skin had gone past ashen to downright deathly. Even with her hood drawn up and jacket drawn in tight she knew she looked like a fucking zombie walking the earth. Which, well, not entirely wrong? Maybe?

"Are you okay?" Someone had leaned over to look under her hood and up at her. Some lady in a flowing sundress with a black choker. Some lady full of warm rich blood that was so close and- and she- she could just- Dust bit down on her lip again. She should run. Turn tail and split and never stop but her feet were stuck in place while the hunger kept getting louder. It was like a fire that simply refused to be contained, and her flickering will could no longer rush to put it out as it spread left and right over her senses. "Ma'am?" The woman's face was so innocent. Genuinely helpful, even. She looked past Dust and waved towards someone behind her, and in that moment her head was tilted to the side just right.

Something in Dust's brain simply flicked off at the sight of this woman's jugulars so close. Tension turned into an explosion of motion as her jaw practically unhinged and clamped around the woman's neck, body instinctively clamping around the helpless human's form to pin her close. Razor teeth sliced through cloth and flesh in equal measure before Dust's mouth latched on, revelling in the taste of warm blood spilling over her tongue.

Stars, it tasted \*awful\* and she hated that she loved it. The bite of a fresh hunt was better than any orgasm she'd ever experienced, more satisfying than any other accomplishment in her life, her soul practically screamed for joy loud enough that she nearly felt truly alive again. Even her heart beat loud enough for her to hear thanks to the stolen vigor. She needed more. So much more!!

Dust's revels were interrupted by something piercing her side, jarring her feral brain out of it's stupor entirely to stare down in confusion at the vine pumping... something into her. Warm blood stained her face, having spilled down from her lips over her chin, sprayed over her chest, smeared across her cheeks. One glance up was enough to see that more vines had already wrapped themselves around the woman's neck, and the woman herself was staring far past the real world in a drugged sort of haze.

The broken tatters of Dust's consciousness finally clicked that someone was interrupting her meal, and absolutely refused to let that happen. Hands unclenched and swiped at the vines which darted away from her while more danced in from the side to grab her. But Dust leapt off the body to dart aside and collapse into a primitive sort of defensive posture. The plant \*things\* were faster, though. As soon as the animal in Dust's flesh touched ground the vines were already there to chase her down. Something grabbed her wrist, and she slashed at it ineffectively. Coiled legs pushed off to run to the side, and a second affini collided into her to push her down into the ground. She screamed, voice wet from the blood coating her throat, her body's pulse a discordant storm of noise inside her own ears. No, no, no, nO NO!!!!!!

The beast clawed, bit, flailed, even as more thorns and more needles pierced into her flesh. More vines wrapped around her arms and forced them to the side. Twice that gripped her legs to pin them as well. A weight greater than her own body pressed down against her chest while a voice whispered into her ear. "Please stay down, it'll be okay. You'll be safe, just stay down." She howled back and bit, eliciting a pained gasp and a slight shift in tension that was enough for her adrenaline-fuelled muscles to slip free and chase after the thing with her claws. Raw desperation was the only thing that continued her actions though, and her clumsy movements got her a vine around the throat that wrapped tight around her throat and veins and squeezed-

The animal in Dust's skin blinked awake, finding herself stuck to the floor once more with a terrible headache on top of everything else. The chokehold had apparently been enough to stem the endless flow of adrenaline as she now clearly felt the crawl of a drugged stupor trying to steal away her flesh. No good. She tried to bite but felt vines clamped tightly through her mouth. She tried to claw but found her hands forced open and held to the ground. "Amaranth," The alien above her spoke. "Can you give her more sedatives?"

“She’s already at the maximum amount of everything I \*could\* give her, Cedrus.”

A curse in a foreign tongue, then she felt a wooden hand gripping her face. “Okay, just, just stay down, please?” The voice above her was pleading now? Without the initial burst of energy she’d gotten from feeding Dust found it surprisingly easy to listen this time. Just... stay down. Well, her body didn’t seem to be too keen to listen to her anymore even if she did want to get up. Which she did. Like a cornered animal desperate for some momentary lapse to allow her to escape. The more rational parts of her brain had at least started to stir again. Coaxed by fresh blood and the hum of her broken heartbeat to finally come back together and- oh stars what had she done?

Dust blinked to alertness, \*actual\* alertness this time. The horrific taste of copper and iron over her mouth and tongue told her enough of what had just happened for her to fill in the blank gap in her mind. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, she’d fucked up again fUCK!!! She pleaded an apology through the gag, desperate for some emotional salvation against her own actions as a drugged sleep crawled up her throat.

“It’ll be okay, dear.” The voice above her spoke again, and this time she as much wanted to believe it as she wanted to run away. “Just sleep for now. Everything will be okay, I promise.” Dust couldn’t tell if she closed her own eyes or they were closed by unseen vines, but the result was the same. Darkness overtook her vision, followed by an eclipse in her consciousness as the drugs finally overcame her flesh.

In the darkness of her half-sleep Dust felt her body be released from it’s prison and moved into a carry position. Voices she couldn’t understand anymore flitted by without comprehension, followed by the rush of air across her skin. Something was poking and prodding about her form, and something icy cold was pressed in against her chest, but despite the motion she couldn’t stir from the darkness that had claimed her. Then something pressed into her temples and elicited a sigh of relief from her flesh, akin to a release of tension around her shoulders and neck that let loose the fog in her spine and finally allowed her to drop completely into oblivion.

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Hunger was the first sensation Dust became aware of. Before warmth and touch and the scent of antiseptic and the feeling of light on her skin she was aware of the void in her silent heart having once more grown into a pained gap of pure \*want\*. Her eyes snapped open to see the familiar sight of a tiled roof she'd seen in every damned hospital across terran space.

...Hospital.

...Doctors? Dust looked to the side to see someone in scrubs pass by her open door, spot her, and run off.

...Fuck. Dust was not well versed enough in psychology to properly understand the concept of PTSD but she was familiar in the concept of being absolutely terrified of doctors wanting to poke and prod and silence and cut and inject and drain and she was VERY familiar with the mental motion of being trapped in a memory of herself strapped to a cold medical bed in a silent laboratory by a series of complex straps while tubes pumped through both sides of her neck and that was all she could see even as her eyes tried to tell her that she wasn't \*there\* she was \*here\* and stars she was even thinking in run on sentences now.

Dust's brain, stuck between the echoes of her own medical trauma and her gnawing hunger, immediately shut back into it's worst feral self all over again. Her voice was, for a brief moment, a pained whine of realization before becoming a guttural howl. She had to escape, the animal inside of her body decided. Escape immediately and disappear and figure things out from there. One of those- what was the word- affini? Came into the room speaking in a calm, even voice that immediately turned into a shocked gasp once they realized she had clawed through the straps on her wrists and was halfway through the ones on her ankles when they walked in.

For one awkward second the two stared at each other silently. Then another explosion of movement marked the actual moment of realization between them as Dust attempted to turn and leap through the window, while the affini unfurled to grab her from mid-air and forcibly pin her back down to the bed. This time they didn't give her a chance to struggle, simply opting to use the full force of their form to enact maximum pressure across her body.

"Are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way, little terran?" The affini said, voice suddenly flat and sharp against her ears. Dust howled in response, which got another vine

wrapping around her face to silence her. The affini sighed, "Alright, the hard way, then." They produced a wide blue syringe and uncapped it in front of Dust's eyes. "I had to get this compiled just for you, dear. So, take some pride in that, I guess." They said as they swerved the injector over into her thigh, plunging the dosage through layers of thinned skin and fat into her muscles. A warm rush of wind bloomed out from her thigh, quickly reaching through leg up into her chest to grip her stilled heart.

Whatever they'd just given her gave Dust no chance for resistance. Once the chill reached her chest it rapidly spread out around her and snatched away the sensation from her body, until she felt less like a person and more like a wild dog's brain strapped to a cloud of half-present sensations and electric static. "Nnoooo..." her voice finally managed to slither out of her dry throat as the fog reached up through her skull. She still felt all there, but she knew the gears in her brain were slipping apart under the influence of... whatever they just gave her.

"Ready to use your words?" The affini on top of her asked.

"No doctors," She whimpered. "Not again, please, not- don't-" The words sputtered apart as the fog continued to gain ground over her consciousness, quickly reducing her to a numb silence locked inside of her own body. Her mind still spun futilely within its shell but the motions couldn't slither through the numbed nerves of her flesh, leaving her trapped in a yawning chasm of growing blood hunger until the fog finally dragged her back down into sleep.

"Dirt," the affini above her muttered. "I think I overshot the dose."

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The animal inside Dust awoke clawing and screaming at the air, legs instinctively kicking off sheets as her fangs ripped at attackers that weren't there. Her instinctive flailing quickly resulted in her falling flat on her ass off the side of the bed, then scrambling backwards to collide against a wall in a blind stupor before running along it and tripping over a large plush model of a bear and landing in an even larger pile of the things.

Confusion seemed to be an effective mediator for panic, as the feral consciousness had dropped the blind fear in favor of complete bewilderment as she poked her head out of the stack of plush models. She was in... some kind of weird circular room? No corners to get stuck in, at least. The walls were painted in pastel tones in brilliant murals that depicted a sky full of stars over a veritable forest of delicately illustrated plant life. Riddling the room itself was a variety of plush models, a bed, a concerning amount of stim toys, boxes of... things? Clothes? Windows were present as well, though an experimental left hook was enough to determine that she wasn't about to be able to break through and climb out that way. Looking through the glass all she could see was the endless sprawl of a city beneath her, suggesting she was in some kind of tower?

Dust would probably find this location a touch infantilizing were she not too hungry to actually think at the moment.

A shift along the walls at the far side of the room had her suddenly leaping back into the safety of hiding underneath all the plush models once more. Two of the affini entered through the suddenly-appearing-then-disappearing door, already wrapped in conversation as they strolled in. "It's just a theory, but please, entertain me on this?" The taller of the two said in hushed tones as they carried a small bundle of tubes under their arm.

"Amaranth, this subject is dangerous. We've been over this several times now. If something went wrong-" The second paused as their eyes swept over the room, glancing at the now empty bed with all the sheets tossed about blindly. "She's missing." Their voice fell flat.

"She's \*hiding\*." The first said. "It's different. I told you about this, if her symptoms are all consistent with the rudena virus outbreak that was recorded then her forebrain functions have been short circuited while the limbic has taken over. She's basically operating on animalistic instinct."

"That's assuming you're right," The second replied.

The first excitedly shuffled through the random assortment of goods they had bundled up into their arms before producing something that looked akin to an oversized feeding syringe full of a

very familiar warm red liquid. “Just, trust me Cedrus? Please? I promise I’ll be safe.” The affini asked.

“...Fine.” The second acceded, taking steps back to lean up against the section of the wall where the door was.

The first affini gave a small cheer of excitement and slithered into the center of the room, happily moving most of the goods they carried off to a second set of arms while the first two fiddled with the syringe they had chosen to focus on. “Dust, dear,” They said aloud to the room. “Are you hungry?” With that they moved one of their false hands forward towards the open air, pushing a single drop of blood onto their wrist.

Dust bit her lip. The mere scent of the blood was enough to draw her consciousness out of it’s nervous stupor. The full weight of her hunger rose up right after, impulsively luring her to stumble forward out towards the scent and- aw fuck now she was exposed. One step was all it had taken to have the plush bears tumble about around her, and then she looked up to see the affini had locked eyes and was silently staring and, and, Dust stumbled back towards the wall, pressing her spine against it as desperately as she could. No corners to hide in.

The affini didn’t move. Neither to run nor chase. The two remained in a long moment of still silence as the anxiety slowly worked its way through Dust’s system until, with a dry sigh, she relaxed from the wall just enough to lean forward. She instinctively chewed on her lip some more, eyes still focused on the vial of blood held before her. “It’s yours if you want it, no strings attached.” The affini said with a gentle smile. She relaxed down into a seated position, wrist still held out towards Dust as she did. Only once the affini stretched her false neck and looked away did she dare to step forward though.

One step. No movement. Not even a nervous twitch. Two steps. She was sure this was some kind of trick. But the affini wasn’t even looking at her and the blood was \*right there\* and she was so fucking hungry. The third step turned into an open run that ended in her leaping at the vial, and only once she was close did the affini move. Dust’s teeth locked around the dense vines of their forearm, body following it’s instincts to cling to them tightly as she attempted to tear apart the green flesh in the mistaken belief that it’d spill more of that red elixir into her mouth. The sap that did meet her tongue was wholly unexpected, a deliriously sweet mixture that sent electric sparks coursing through her jaw and throat as it spilled into her.

“That’s it, good girl,” The affini purred over her. Dust had practically wrapped herself around the affini’s side to get her meal, so all the affini had to do was wrap one of their extra arms around her waist while another simulated hand slid up to ruffle through her hair. Dust would have panicked at that were she not wholly hyperfocused on her meal by then. They were just... other sensations. Filling her hunger was more important. Even if the taste was jarringly sweet and sent an unusual electric warmth blooming out from her stomach.

The affini adjusted the vines of her forearm that were in Dust’s mouth, allowing her to maneuver the syringe between them and begin injecting the blood directly over Dust’s tongue. THAT got a guttural reaction from the feral human, a deeply satisfied groan and shiver at the familiar wretched taste finally chasing away the pangs of hunger in her chest. She drank deep, and with each gulp her heartbeat began to stir once more. But each pulse brought the drugged sap following out after it, creating a bloom of warmth echoing out from her chest that all too soon had her grip weakening, then falling limp entirely. By the time the syringe was empty Dust had gone from locked firmly in place to being cradled against the affini’s chest, body limp and voice simmering into a purr in satisfaction.

“There you go, little cutie. All safe and fed. Isn’t that nice?” The affini above her purred back, their voice a melodious tune that poured over Dust’s mind. If the weak sound of her own heartbeat was the small comfort of a familiar instrument, then the sound she heard from the affini’s chest was an entire orchestra that brushed over her worries through sheer power alone.

The second affini had quietly slithered over to join the first, perched on their false hands and knees to look down upon Dust with the same sort of fascination as the first. “...the drugs worked?”

“It didn’t work before because her blood flow was dysfunctional.” The first answered, and gingerly plucked one of her hands out of her lap to hold them up. “See? Her fingers were all dark and cold, and now they’re warm. We’ll need to feed her in sync with any dosages.” The first affini gave her another comforting pat on the head as they looked over to the second. “So, about that approval stamp?”

The second affini groaned. “...fine, fine, I’ll let you take charge with this one.”

“Wonderful!” The first affini beamed. “I’ll stay with this cutie for now. I think she’ll have lots of questions when she’s sapient again and I imagine she’ll want anything that can pass as a familiar face around here.”

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Dust didn’t have any clocks to measure time within her xenodrug induced haze. The passage of time only marked itself by the slow crawl of light creeping out through the windows to glimmer along the carpets, sliding leisurely across the distance before climbing up the walls to mark the setting star. During that time the mystery affini had kept themselves busy with a number of basic tests over Dust’s body. Oral swabs, pulse measures, blood samples, more poking and prodding than she was ever willing to bear but couldn’t bring herself to be nervous over thanks to the drugged blood happily stirring her otherwise still heart.

Once all of the affini’s many tubes and sheets of paper and samples and other medical thingamajigs were all taken care of they then laid her body back down upon her bed, pumped another shot of blood into her mouth, and then tucked her in for comfort. There she lay, never quite truly asleep yet not really awake or aware until the sun slipped under the edge of the horizon and brought the cold blanket of night unto the world. There she twitched, then flinched, then spasmed as her body jerked into an upright position once more, eyes wide and PAINFULLY aware of everything that had happened in the meantime.

“Ah, welcome back little one-” The affini started, but Dust yelped before stumbling off the side of the bed and landing flat on her ass once more.

“I’m sorry!” Dust shouted, peeking over the edge of the bed towards the now very confused affini. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do it, I- there’s this medical problem, it, I know it’s not a proper excuse but-”

The affini raised one of their hands in a gentle request for silence, and Dust complied. “One step at a time.” They said as they strolled forward to take a seat on the far edge of the bed. “My name is Amaranth Verna, Seventh Bloom. It/it’s pronouns. How about you?” Their- no, it’s. It’s?

Dust mentally recounted its pronouns to herself several times over. Its, its, its. Cement that in place.

“Dust, she/her.” She answered quietly, nervously gripping the edge of the bed. “And, I’m sorry, whatever I did.”

“I’ll pass along your apology to the proper party, little one.” The affini was a picture of absolute calm. Its body didn’t even ruffle a feather as Dust quietly stepped from the side of the bed back towards the wall, moving consistently away until she pressed up against it and dropped down to a seated position with her knees over her chest. “How much do you remember?”

Dust ran a finger over her lower lips, feeling the familiar scars from her own chewing habits run like rigid lines across her chin. “Not much,” She confessed. She never did remember much when the hunger took over. “I was starved, and trying to focus, and this woman appeared in front of me?” Nothing else came across clearly after that. Just an itch along her jaw and the sensation of pain in her gut.

“Thought so,” Amaranth hummed quietly to itself as it noted that down. “Have you ever been exposed to the rudena virus?” Dust tensed up. “Perhaps on Hydra minor?” She curled up inward, unbidden memories simmering under the surface again. Amaranth looked down at her quietly, eyes shimmering with unknown thoughts as it seemed to mull over the truths revealed in her body language. “I don’t know what happened to you back then, but if you ever feel ready to share I will be willing to listen.”

Dust didn’t know how to handle those words. A stranger asking her to... talk about her feelings? “Are you... a doctor?” She asked tersely, familiar edges of discomfort rippling through the corners of her mind.

“A microbiologist, actually.” Amaranth answered with no small amount of pride. It even struck a silly pose with the back of its hand under its chin and its head tilted to the side with a smile. That, apparently, was enough to dissuade Dust’s anxiety for now. “It’s what led me to catch interest in your case in the first place. I’d noted the similarities between your symptoms and the records of a rudena virus outbreak that was, how shall I say...” Her voice trailed off, vines of her hands curling around.

"Catastrophic?" Dust offered.

"And questionably recorded." Amaranth followed.

"The reports were probably full of missing details." Dust continued.

"And poorly hidden lies." Amaranth added. "Like their claim that the virus had a 60% mortality rate, a 38% recovery rate, and then just casually never mentioned what happened to the other 2%."

Dust was about halfway through breathing the word 'vivisection' when she realized what she was doing and clammed up instead.

Amaranth must have noted her shift in tension, as it decided to shift the subject without missing a beat. "What matters for now is that we must learn the finer details of your unique needs so that we may better accommodate you, little Dust. That, and, I hate to have to say this part but you're also basically under arrest? Sort of?"

Dust winced. Of course. Nothing good ever happened when she lost to her hunger. "...what did I do?"

"Bit out a floret's throat, drank her blood, fought against two affini with surprising resilience." Amaranth answered quickly, it's body language momentarily flat before movement ruffled back out from it's center. "She's fine, by the way. Shaken and confused but we managed to save her. Apparently between the xenodrugs and whatever is in your saliva she doesn't even remember any of the details of the event."

"...I'm sorry." Stars damn it all. At least the victim of her inadequacy lived.

The flow of movement in the affini shifted to mirror a burst of emotional energy, equal parts assurance and excitement tempered by unmasked concern. "You were a victim in this, too! Well, I mean, in the broader sense. From how you were treated under the accord and our failure to identify your unique needs and assist you before it got so bad. But still! Once we understand your situation properly I'm sure we can figure out a solution that will work out for everyone involved and-"

"Amaranth." Dust interjected.

The affini stopped in a heartbeat, freezing mid-gesture. "Yes, dear?"

"What's really going to happen to me?" Dust asked. Amaranth had spoken like she had a plan, as many others had spoken to Dust before. Ideas of how things would be in the future and how they'd plan out and all she had to do was quietly lay down and let it happen. A plan implied other machines of governance were already spinning wheels around her, which, what else should she expect? She'd assaulted a stranger. Again.

She didn't want to wait and hope for understanding and assistance just to end up under the knife once more.

"...you're currently under review pending judgment, but odds are you're going to be enrolled into the domestication program." The affini's words struck Dust with the weight of a guillotine. With a single blow the energy of life that still glitzed through her body drained out, replaced with the familiar deathly chill that had marked her life since the day she first became sick.

"But it'll be okay!" Amaranth burst back to it's vividity in motion. Lights in hell how could someone be so energetic right now? "Now that you're here we can make sure you never go hungry and there won't be any further risk and-"

"Can I be alone for a while?" Dust interjected once more. She couldn't bear to deal with the affini's excited motions any more. Not when the pit in her gut was yawning open rapidly around her.

Amaranth deflated slowly in place, eyes darting from Dust around the room as it's mind spun with an apparent need to find some sort of comfort for her. But after a long moment of silence it instead folded back up into itself and said, "Of course, dear. Call if you need me? I'll be just next door."

Dust only nodded in response, and Amaranth gave a small bow before turning and leaving the room. A touch along the wall was all it took for the door to appear again, then disappear as soon as Amaranth was through it. Alone, Dust collapsed to her side and partook in one of the few acts she could in her state. She wept with eyes that shed no tears.

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Dust's claw trailed a line around the circumference of what was, at heart, a highly decorated prison cell. The only door she could find in her mild travails across the space was one to the bathroom, which was a very fancy bathroom! But with windows as indestructible as the ones in her main room that practically taunted her with a view of the city beyond.

She supposed it was only fair they kept her here, though. Given she was evidently a readily apparent danger or whatever other fucking term the legal nuts wove together to describe a feral animal occasionally wrapped under a veneer of human consciousness. The same animal she could feel writhing underneath herself as she paced aimlessly. It wasn't... impossible to control. Usually. But in the ennui of her state she simply didn't care enough to really try, nor pay any meaningful attention even as the growing void inside of her stretched through her dry veins. Within the hour, her aimless steps turned into a stumbling shamble. Her eyes had gone milky

white and lifeless, her heartbeat slipped into deathly silence, and Dust had simply stopped thinking entirely once more.

That was how Amaranth found her later in the day. A hungry shell shuffling across the room without purpose. The affini's movements, at first the usual wave of excitable exuberance that echoed the lively tune in its metaphorical heart, immediately flattened as its eyes met hers.

"Ah," It said. "I suppose I did underestimate how much you'd need after all. No problem! We needed to tame your limbic system anyway."

Dust, of course, had no reply as she didn't actually process any of the words. She simply stared silently until Amaranth produced another vial of blood for her, which captured the poor girl's attention with a sudden laser focus.

"As I thought, food motivated like every other animal." Amaranth mused as it waved the vial side to side, watching Dust's eyes trail after it. "At least you're more behaved today. Did our interaction get through to you?" Amaranth ruffled up her leaves, then put one of its spare hands on the side of its face in a mock gesture or self-chiding. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to tease. It's a bad habit." With an act akin to a gentle sigh the affini stepped forward, closing the distance between the two with casual airs while the human remained locked in place. It knelt down before her, bringing the vial down to eye level before tapping its wooden knee as it spoke, "Come here, dear."

Dust's broken consciousness roiled over in momentary turmoil as she glanced between the affini and the blood. Experience was enough of a teacher for her to know that the empty need inside of her chest could easily be sated by that plant, but a primal fear worked in equal measure to tell her to just run as far away as possible and find another source. Both lost the instant Amaranth plunged a single drop of warm blood out to drip onto its knee and fffuUcking hell the acrid scent was enough to send Dust's senses into overdrive.

Dust nervously stepped towards her again, this time getting close enough to be in arms reach before exploding into motion and leaping at the vial to steal it away. Once more Amaranth was faster, vines lashing out around her neck, shoulders, and arms to push her back down onto her knees and pin her helplessly into place. "Now, now, dear." Amaranth said with a stern tone. "I know you still have enough power in that brain to understand some words. So show me you're not a complete hopeless beast and \*sit\*."

Dust gnashed at air as she fought against the restraints, struggling in vain until exhaustion caught up to her while Amaranth barely even had to flinch.

“You’re free to struggle as much as your heart desires, but you’re not going to overpower me. Flight isn’t going to work either, as we both know there isn’t anywhere for you to hide here that I can’t follow. So, please, dear,” Amaranth brought the crimson tincture down before her nose, letting the scent become an intoxicating aura that overpowered her. “Sit. Down.”

Dust’s legs gave way under her, and Amaranth allowed her movement only to settle down from her knees to a seated position beside it.

“Very good,” Amaranth said with an air of relief. “See? There’s hope for you yet.” A set of vines rose up from the side, wrapping around a branch of hardened matter to make another arm that it raised up towards her face. Dust flinched back at first, but as the affini turned its wrist towards her she instead froze, transfixed by a pair of vines that ran thick with ichor.

Her psyche flitted over the memory of tearing apart the affini’s arm previously. The deep satisfaction of feeling her fangs saw through the matter and be rewarded with warm liquid spilling over her tongue. One moment was enough to leave her drooling, the next her mouth twitched in anticipation, the third she forgot her restraints entirely and attempted to lunge forward just to shunt against her bonds. “Ah, ah, not yet.” Amaranth remained calm despite her animalistic attack. “Wait.” It ordered, and the weight of the word managed to drift through the mental fog enough to get her to sit still for at least a moment.

But a moment was about all the affini would get out of her that day, and Amaranth didn’t bother to test the terran’s patience much further. “Good girl,” Amaranth said as it shoved the wrist forward into her limited reach, allowing her to tear open the green flesh. Primal satisfaction once more rolled over Dust’s mind into a stormy haze that matched the influx of drugged sap. Soon after the taste mixed with blood as Amaranth took to feeding the human with the same technique as before.

Dust, by then, was quite happily lost inside the haze of nursing on the affini's open wound, so she didn't pay much mind as the affini began to rub her back and give calming words to help her relax, nor noticed in so much when she followed the relaxation into flopping up against the affini's side limply. Then she was only feeding by virtue of the affini having held her jaw open for her, dripping more drugged sap in as it emptied the blood vial.

Approximately an hour later, after the color had slowly returned to Dust's cheeks and her heart had returned to its quiet rhythm, Dust clawed back up to consciousness to find herself still in that position. Draped against Amaranth's side, ear held against its chest, and body floating on weakening clouds of chemical bliss laced through donated blood. She then spent about ten more minutes in mixed surprise and comfort as she idly indulged in the feeling of such comfort and the gentle rhythm of Amaranth's body against her before any sense of propriety swam back up to lash at her for the \*indignancy\* of enjoying casual intimacy.

Dust recoiled from her position. "I'm sor-" She paused, hand on her face. Had she been apologizing too much already? It was about the only thing she knew how to do right anymore but- uhg, this was embarrassing. She tried to hide her face behind her hands, but only found that sap, drool, and blood was smeared all over her chin and now her hands.

...okay, THAT was embarrassing.

Dust muttered something that could, ostensibly, be phrased as an excuse as she rose up on shaky legs, walked awkwardly towards the bathroom, and failed spectacularly at any meaningful co-ordination as she soon face-planted against the wall next to the door instead. While the drug mixture was a \*touch\* less overwhelming this time compared to before, it was still some kind of sedative that had her limbs trailing a minute behind her brain and the world in her eyes awkwardly wobbling about.

"Amaranth," Dust spoke up, forehead still against the wall. "What did you give me?"

It, of course, hadn't even moved from its seated position. "Just a minor sedative to help you stay calm and well behaved."

Mmnnhh. Of course. Can't trust her to stay calm on her own, all things considered. Dust felt she should be wounded by such a fact, but the sad truth was that she wasn't willing to extend such trust to herself either. "...I want to shower." She said flatly, unmoving from her spot for fear that she'd flop over entirely at the slightest breeze. All her muscles felt pleasantly warm once more, both from the renewed life reaching into them and the absolute fuckery of the affini's sap in her system.

"Would you like me to lend a hand?" Amaranth asked.

"Please," Dust answered, and the affini rose up to walk over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. With the affini's stabilizing assistance Dust more correctly stepped through the bathroom door, flicked on the lights, and while Amaranth took to work turning on the shower for her Dust instead found herself caught by her own reflection. Her eyes had gone scarlet red, her fangs still jutted out prominently in her mouth, and the red stain surrounding the lower half of her face looked like a smeared mask of paint that she'd only seen in particularly gorey wildlife photography. "I look like a fucking vampire." She whined, her whimper of dissatisfaction spiking when a drop of blood landed on her own shirt.

"Are you not one?" Amaranth asked casually.

Dust snorted with barely contained contempt. "I wish. I don't turn into bats or fog or have magic hypno powers, or... any of that shit."

Amaranth made a show of humming and thinking as it pondered that, and once finished with preparing the shower it slid back to sit upon the counter and lift a vine underneath Dust's chin. With such a small gesture it tilted her face side to side, then up to look at it in the eyes. "And yet, you're the appearance of a corpse that walks the earth, you feast on blood by necessity, and have fangs fit for acquiring such sustenance. If there was to be a vampire walking the vastness of this space, I dare say you're the closest approximation a mortal body could become to such a thing."

Dust forced herself off of the affini's vine, taking one step before stumbling just to be caught on another vine across her chest. "If I'm secretly some sexy immortal vampire then you're free to gloat in 200 years." She said, trying to play off her own stumble entirely. Hands, mercifully no

longer blackened and hypersensitive from hunger, gripped the edge of her shirt and began to take it off before she properly realized the weight of the vine against her chest and the presence beside her. "Can I uh... have some privacy?" She mumbled, glancing to the side up to the affini.

"I'm afraid not, dear. You're liable to fall over as you are, though I can limit myself to merely keeping a vine at your side in case you stumble, and give you the cover of the curtain while you clean."

...fair enough, she supposed. She wasn't exactly in a position to argue while draped across the affini's vine like laundry left to dry. Amaranth gave her the privacy provided by putting one of its many wooden hands over its eyes as she undressed, another vine already at the side to catch her discarded laundry while the first brought stability for her to stumble forward against until she was under the stream.

Heat, water, steam, the rush of air falling around her heavy with the artificial rain, the smell of a body becoming overpowered by the scent of soaps. All of these were old faithfuls to help her relax, even forget that there was a vine resting gently between her shoulder blades as she tried to lose herself for at least one moment. It didn't work, of course. But the attempt was nice. So even as the heat laced through the frozen gaps in her body the blood didn't warm on its own she still remained painfully aware of her situation and all it meant.

Fuck it. If Amaranth was being painfully honest with her before she should probably return the favor. Even if it only reinforced the affini's belief in needing to, Dust winced to think of the word, domesticate her after this the truth still mattered. Or at least she thought so.

"Amaranth," She started. Her head was tilted down under the stream, arms before her and braced against the tile wall. Full of life they almost looked human again, like the grip of the deathly pallor and blackened rot on her hands had never existed. That'd only last a few hours unless Amaranth fed her again.

"Yes, dear?" The affini answered calmly.

"You were right before. I was on Hydra minor when the Rudena virus broke out." She said, the words stung like they were laced with barbs inside of her throat, but there was a relief inside of her chest to get them out. Amaranth didn't answer, letting the silence prompt her to continue as her comfort fit. "The lockdown came out quickly, but they just boxed the whole district in and waited for it to bleed us out. Most of the people who caught it, they," She couldn't quite weave the memories right as they happened. Not the smoke or the scent, or the sounds of riots breaking out just to leave a bloody mess blocks wide from all the exsanguinated flesh. "They'd developed acute anemia as the first symptoms. Not necessarily bad on it's own but when they got injured they'd just bleed and bleed and bleed until it all poured out. Next was the psychological effects, supposedly it'd scramble our brains and trap us in fight or flight mode and-"

Dust drew in a sharp breath. Fight or flight was a kind way to put it. It was like her brain was suddenly on fire. Every edged corner suddenly became a weapon in her mind, all pointed towards her. The faces of strangers were jeering facades plotting her death. She was convinced that the very stars in the night sky would fall down upon her and pierce her body through a thousand thousand points to reduce her to shreds. It was absurd, downright unreal, but trapped inside of her skull it was the only reality she could conceive of. "A lot happened. None of them good. I think I only survived because, well, there was this woman." Dust pushed herself to continue. "She'd been injured, on her stomach, and was lying on the street. There was so much blood, and I'd been out all night just- just chasing rats for some stars forsaken reason until I ran into her. She looked me in the eyes and she was so weak and-"

Dust slid down to a crouched position, one hand over her mouth. In the stream of water she could almost feel like she could cry again, but she knew it was only the freshwater streams pouring down from above. "I just, everything went red, next thing I knew I was tearing apart her neck and bathing in the arterial spray and it was the \*happiest\* I'd ever felt. Like every synapse lit up on dopamine at the same time. I laughed, and laughed, and laughed and I- I" Dust clamped her hand tightly over her mouth, feeling the memory overpower the now for only a moment. Enough to recall the disgusting flavor of the woman's blood coated across her person. She wanted to vomit it all up, but she knew that it wasn't there just as much as she knew she didn't manage to release herself from it before. She'd coasted off that high for the rest of the fucking week until she crashed, both literally and figuratively, collapsing in a dark corner stuck between fits of weeping and hyperventilating until she was found.

"I'm so sorry," She wanted to say to that woman. "I'm so fucking sorry, I wish I didn't." But the words wouldn't reach her anymore. They stayed with her, drowned in the shower as she wished she could be. She stayed there another while, long enough for the pain to return to it's dulled state in memories and for her body to approach something akin to calm.

When Dust stepped out back into the cold air of the bathroom the affini already had a towel out for her. "Thank you for sharing this with me," Amaranth spoke softly. It's eyes were still covered for her modesty.

Dust wanted to kick it for being so accommodating for a monster. "Aren't you going to go tell everyone now?" She hissed, cruelty directed inward seeping out through her words. "Let your affini know I'm a danger to everyone around me and that this might happen again if I'm ever released."

Amaranth moved it's hands to look at her, and it's gaze was a neutral ray of light that positively pierced through her. In the instant she was caught under it's path of sight she felt as if her very soul had been wrenched out from the raw intensity of that placid look. Silence reigned longer than she could find comfortable, followed by a moment of disruption as the affini's wooden lips slid apart. "You need not do such acts to survive again, little one. Of that I promise you." It said. A deflection as much as it was reassurance, she could tell. It placed a hand upon her head as it continued.

"And why not?" She spat. "I'm a vampire. You said as much yourself. The only reason I'm here is because she died and I can't even beg for her forgiveness, and if it weren't for you affini I would have done it again to somebody else. This is what I \*AM\* now!"

"Dust," The affini's words were still neutral, just as their gaze remained. A hand gripped her chin suddenly, forcibly wrenching her out of her ramble to force her to look up at the affini. "You will never be in such a position to succumb to yourself again, and you will never harm another. That period of your life is over. Do you understand?" Only then did she properly understand the affini's tone. It was confidence, plain and simple. The same sort of energy it'd bring to remark upon the color of the sky was announcing the fate that was already woven for her. She would never harm another. That was it. No room for debate or questioning. No chance of alteration or reconsideration.

Dust wailed as she collapsed, clinging desperately to the affini's side as all the year's woes finally began to burn apart. It hurt more than she could bear, so she succumbed to it. She wept, she screamed, she flailed, all while Amaranth held her still until every last drop was naught but

ash inside her broken heart. Then, exhausted and drained, she fell, mind dropping into near-sleep once more.

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When Dust next awoke her chest hurt like hell itself had burned through it, and Amaranth's hand coursed through her hair to gently console her path to the waking world. "Good morn- well, afternoon, actually. How are you feeling, dear?" Amaranth asked.

"Like there's a hole in my chest and everything just keeps falling out of it." Dust answered honestly. A hand on her chest revealed that the silence had returned, so she must've been out for a while.

Amaranth nodded after her words. "I've been told a moment of catharsis can be quite intense for your kind. Do you feel up for much today?"

Dust pondered the feeling in her chest against the weight of her limbs. "...honestly? No."

"That's quite alright." The affini seemed oddly chipper to hear that. "We can settle for just feeding you and letting you rest for now."

Dust released a low chuckle before opening her mouth with an 'aaaaaa', then snapped her eyes open when Amaranth actually popped another blood bottle in there for her. Pure shock beat out the feeling of indignancy, followed soon by confusion as the affini took to pouring the warm blood into her mouth while petting her head. The acrid taste rushed in to overpower any meaningful act against such a moment, and all too soon her conscious mind was once more adrift over the stream of indulgence such that she barely even noticed when the vial tapped out empty and Amaranth replaced it with a vine that dripped xenodrugs over her tongue.

"Now aren't you well behaved?"

"MMnn not starved," Dust grumbled around the vine in her mouth.

"Yes, I suppose that would help, wouldn't it?" Amaranth practically cooed back. It's adoring touch felt markedly more intimate all of a sudden. More overpowering to her body's senses, yet all the more comforting because of it. The touch pulled at her consciousness in a way she was entirely unused to. Where the hunger dulled this instead coaxed with warmth into a state of tranquility that felt like it could stretch on and on infinitely around her.

Then it was gone. As soon as Amaranth's hand moved off of Dust's head the usual chill of silence came back over the stuttering staccato's of her own heartbeat. "Wait," She suddenly begged, grabbing the affini's hand as she did. "Can you... stay? Please?" Dust decided that she hated the silence. The one from her heart always preceded disaster, and the one beyond her head may as well have been a horrific scream for how easily it let her memories fill in.

Amaranth stared at her ponderously for a long moment before placing it's hand upon her chest. One of it's fingers tapped in time to the rhythm in her chest, disjointed as it was, and after a moment whatever meaning it gleaned from her body seemed sufficient as it answered. "Very well." Amaranth then sat beside her once more, idly petting the vampire as she drifted back into comfort. "There is a matter that I wanted to discuss while I was here today, dear."

"Hmnn?" Dust groaned through an increasingly effective sleepy haze.

"We'd like to study your unique physiology in finer detail-" Dust froze, eyes wide open and mouth clenched tight. Study. Tests. More doctors and needles all over again and... and... stars it was so much harder to hold onto the panic in this state. Especially as Amaranth continued running it's fingers through her hair and sending ever more sparks of quiet comfort into her brain. "...would you like to talk about it?" Amaranth asked.

"No." Dust clipped. A final word, not open for debate.

Fortunately the affini only nodded in response. "I understand. I promise we'll do our best to accommodate your traumas if you'll let us."

"No scalpels?" Dust whispered.

"No scalpels."

She remained silent for a long time, letting the touch of the affini's hand combat against the weight of trauma until she could finally speak once more. "...okay." She muttered. "I'll trust you."

"I'll do my best to be worthy of that trust, thank you." Amaranth said with a smile, happily petting the vampire some more until she fully drifted back into sleep.

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Two days and four more feedings passed in rapid succession. Between the drugs from each session dulling Dust's awareness and the lengthy cuddle sessions she found herself caring less and less about the lost time she experienced. The moments where she slipped back under the rot of hunger were quickly controlled as well, with Amaranth demonstrating a ready ability to bring the animal to heel, even if it also meant having to catch her mid-leap and force her down in the process.

On the third day Amaranth broke the monotony by sweeping in, getting the primal brained Dust to sit still and be fed with a gesture, then carried her drugged form to a side room she'd never been in before. It placed the sedated vampire upon a seat of intricately woven branches which adjusted themselves to her body, providing her a place to sit reclined with her arms open to her sides.

In a dazed state Dust remained seated right there, admiring the architecture around her. It was a touch like a greenhouse with how the walls arched with glass sheets between metal struts.

Even the wall facing the room she had just left was a wall of glass, through which she could see the full expanse of the night sky beyond.

She was so used to Brypso's usual blur of light showering the world at night that she hadn't truly stopped to consider the stars, but under new management the dark of the sky was finally allowed to pierce through to touch the world once more. It was as beautiful as it was overwhelming, an endless splay of dots and streaks of light, while the belt of the milky way struck across as a painterly brush stroke. She could lay there and count the lights all night without a care in the world, drugs or no. Yet, some time later when the fog finally lifted enough for her mind to return to her, her attention was once more drawn to Amaranth by a gentle touch on the side of her head.

The affini was kneeling down beside her, a bundle of planttech wrapped up in its spare hands as the first two held her gently. Standing beside her were several more affini, all fiddling with more tech that she could tell at a glance was even more... she winced to think the world, \*medical\* equipment. "Dear, if you're willing, I'd like to try something today." Amaranth said before holding up the bundle of plant tech. "I'd like to use these to let you relax in virtual reality for a while, and meanwhile we can use the rest of this gear to examine you and get a better understanding of your situation. You won't have to be an active participant in the study, and between the VR and the drugs still in your system I think you should be able to get through this without feeling much of anything at all."

Dust tensed just slightly, barely a movement at all but enough to catch Amaranth's eye. "Are they-" She started.

"No, no scalpels or anything like that. You won't be hurt at all, I promise." It insisted, and Dust acquiesced with a silent nod. The affini's relief was plain to see on its wooden face as its body relaxed and unfurled before bringing the bundle in her hands up and over Dust's face. The material shifted and bent around her on touch, moving practically all on its own until it formed a mask that rested comfortably over her eyes to cast them in complete shadow. Meanwhile another set of vines and branches worked themselves into position covering her ears completely, shutting off the outside world's noise.

In perfect darkness she drifted, dimly aware of the pressure from her body weight upon the seat and the vague scent of the affini moving around her in the room, but little else. After a moment a gentle hum of noise rose up in her ears, mirroring the gentle lift of light across her vision. A word flitted into the center of her vision.

Calibrating.

It flickered in place, then dimmed into nothing as the white void grew around the corners of her vision completely. She couldn't even see her nose between her eyes anymore. The gentle hum of noise rose to a soft musical line that backlit her audio awareness and complemented the menu that appeared before her. The visor prompted her to choose a control method, and a twitch on her finger was enough for the branches supporting to wrap around her index and thumb. Confirm? A tap of her thumb for yes. Another screen for calibrating pressure and control sensitivity, then a third to select entertainment form.

Dust paused, suddenly aware that she hadn't actually stopped to indulge in media in a while. Idle clicking flitted through to a random movie, followed by selecting a theaterscape which had her floating in the void of outer space with the silver screen before her. It was... nice. Surreal, wholly unexpected, but nice.

The movie itself didn't really matter much in and of itself compared to the experience of just being able to sit back and do nothing and passively partake in it. Occasionally some feeling slipped through her body into awareness. Small ones, fingers against her arm or cold pads pressed into her chest. But nothing pierced the veil of her illusion of simply not being there. She was adrift in space, afterall. Enjoying some film about shapeshifting weredinosuars having a cooking competition. Not stuck between a whole team of affini that busied themselves with her body.

Alone in the dark.

Safe.

Calm.

Good girl!

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After what felt like an hour and a half-ish the visor gently raised Dust out from her comfortable trance before disentangling itself from her head, releasing her vision back to see the night sky far, far away from her. Or at least, that was what she expected. But when her eyes truly opened the sky had been painted gentle oranges and blues to mark the rising star's approach across the sky once more.

"We're all done with the machines, dear." Amarant spoke softly as it knelt beside her. "Just one last thing. We'd like you to wear this," it held up a thin circlet. "For a while so we can observe how your brain acts under the effects of hunger."

“Starving me on purpose now?” Dust grumbled.

Amaranth gave an apologetic shrug. “The time lapse between clarity and animalistic episodes has been shorter since you entered into our care, and we’d like to understand how it works more to address this properly.” It tilted the circlet down and leaned its head onto the back of its hands. “Between you and me, I placed my bet on the difference being adrenaline and cortisol levels. The artificial blood doesn’t have the same levels you’d find in the wild, and it’d address why you’ve reported a more... visceral sort of effect when getting it from people directly.”

“...fine.” Dust huffed and grabbed the circlet out of its hand, placing it upon her own head right after. It gave a slight click before slipping itself through her hair and tightening to be form fitting against her head. “Now what?”

“Now we wait!” Amaranth gave her a little pat on the head before scooping her up. It took her back to the main room in short order, depositing her on top of one of the larger teddy bears right after. It then handed her a stack of things to entertain herself with. A handheld game, a book, some stim toys, another teddy bear, she stopped counting after that.

Dust settled for the game. Something simple was good enough, one of those puzzle whatevers with the falling blocks while she waited for her brain to rot. Amaranth moved to take a seat in a different spot in the room, but the vampire quickly grabbed a vine and tugged ‘till the affini instead settled down next to her. Much better.

Amaranth, for its part, seemed to keep itself occupied with a notable stack of papers that it kept busy excitedly reviewing beside her.

“That of me?” Dust asked with a small gesture to all the paperwork.

“Yeap!” Amaranth’s body happily rustled as they flitted through the collected data. “We’ve found clear signs of how the rudena virus altered your body, but right now this is just raw data. Now I have to sit here and read it all and hope to understand something out of it.”

Dust peeked over it's side to take a look at the paper, then regretted that immediately as it was all bewildering charts and graphs and excel sheets in such a fine font that it frankly hurt to look at. "Have fun with that." She muttered as she slunk back down to her game in defeat.

Amaranth was already nose deep into the stacks of paper when she replied. "I will! I must admit, you are a fascinating study. I hope that's not too weird to say, by the way." It proceeded to hum happily, even tapping it's vines against itself in joy as it read. "Don't worry, little one. I'm sure we can get to the bottom of all of this and have everything sorted out just fine."

Dust glanced aside towards the affini to the stack of papers, then to the rest of the colorful room that was her effective prison. Sort out? Dust grit her teeth. There it was again. Thoughts of the future with ideas and schemes in the hands of other people and she didn't know a lick of it. Just left to sit tight in a closed room and wait like a polite patient.

"Amaranth," Dust whispered.

The affini suddenly shifted off the papers to look towards her. "Yes, dear?"

"What is the plan for me?" She asked. "Be honest, please. Even if it's bad to hear."

"It's simple, really. Well, simple in broad terms, complicated in direct terms. First, we figure out what makes you tick the way you are right now. Then, we figure out how to accommodate you such that you'll never need to be in a situation in which you risk harming another again. Then... you'd be free to go, I guess. Safe from the worries that so plagued your life before."

"...do I really deserve that?" Dust grumbled. Already she could feel the fangs of discontent breaking apart over the void inside of her. The puzzle game, a moment ago easy enough to handle even while conversing, was starting to become increasingly frustrating despite the difficulty remaining the same. She almost wanted to chuckle at the thought of a reverse sliding difficulty scale, where nothing changed but her cognition. Shame she had to live it whether she liked it or not.

“Dust,” Amaranth cut off her line of thought by grabbing her chin again, confidence bared against her once more. “Do not forget that you too are a victim. You did not ask to be made into this, nor did you ask to be so neglected that you would succumb to your primal self. To punish you for such deeds would do little more than cement that harm into place.”

Dust felt as if she could be ground into literal dust under the weight of such a stare. The affini gave her no chance to run though, as the grip was as ironclad as it's words. “Why do you even believe in me?”

“One of us must, how else would you be able to become your best self otherwise?” It smiled warmly as it spoke, and it's words resonated with that warmth such that Dust dared to actually believe it. She felt her own heart stutter, for only a moment like a true heartbeat that gripped her chest with the horrid pain of life that sung in rhythm to the music she'd heard within Amaranth's body. Then it weakened into a dark silence once more.

Dust, flustered for reasons she wasn't fully capable of comprehending in that state, buried herself into her game instead of stopping and contemplating everything right then and there. Contemplating was difficult anyway. That would require self-reflection and personal honesty and- and- and she didn't have much of THAT available right then especially as she was now stuck on this puzzle for like ten minutes and she knew it SHOULD be easy but it just wasn't and- stars it was probably the hunger kicking in again.

She didn't like being like this. She especially didn't like feeling as if her cognition were a fine grain sand that was slipping more and more between her fingers while the need to just bite into something and gnaw it apart grew and grew around her. The game console slipped between her numb fingers and Dust was barely aware of it anymore. “Amaranth,” She muttered with a dry voice. Find something else to focus on than the fact that her vision was clouding up again. “Are you still there?”

“I'm right here, dear.” The affini's voice was a balm to her dimming consciousness at least. A small comfort, but anything would do. She reached over to grip one of it's vines tightly.

“No doctors?” She knew if she could look in a mirror her eyes would already be overcome with a white pallor once more. Like a corpse half rotten. Disgusting.

Amaranth's vines coiled back around her hand, gripping her just as tight in turn. "No doctors here, dear. Just me." It spoke softly. With the same warmth that had reached her heart before but this time nothing but dust stirred. "Would you be comfortable telling me why you're scared of them so?"

Dust hummed for a long moment. She had to... organize her memories. Probably. Felt like rolling stones over sand to get it together. "Quarantine ended, people in hazmat suits came in. Scooped up survivors and moved them to a hospital." She muttered, pausing as the feeling of her own teeth brushing against her lower lip distracted her. It'd be nice to bite in, probably. Similar enough to live skin to distract the want for at least a moment. But didn't she already have deep scars from that? She tried to roll the next word off of her tongue, but it felt like it was made entirely of wet glue. "Sssssscalpels," it slipped off the end of her lips, and the rest of the sentence fell apart with it.

She blinked rapidly. Why was everything so bright? She bit her lip hard enough to hurt. Had to. Was the only way to cling onto. Onto... something important. What was she just talking about? Dust glanced up and saw the plant looking down at her with an expression she couldn't quite parse. It said something, but her consciousness struggled to hear it as anything but raw noise. Instead she heard the sound of a pulse, fresh and raw and overpowering to her hearing coming from within the plant. She needed... something. Something to fill the void of raw hunger.

Dust leaned over towards Amaranth, blackened hands clutching at the sides of its chest. With an empty groan she rose up to her knees and collapsed over onto it in the same motion. Her mouth was right next to its neck then, and its scent played over her tongue. It'd be so easy to just bite in. Get the primal satisfaction her withering brain scREAMED for. Just bite and tear and gnaw and thrash and... and... and she could feel the drool pooling over her lip as the thought took over, but with her heat on its shoulder her attention was split between the need and the most beautiful music that reverberated within the affini's flesh.

Conflicting orders clashed inside of her. The need to bite against the call to stay and succumb to the music that flitted against her skin. Thrash against calm. The draining will to act against the increasing volume of audio tidal waves. Dust's mouth and tongue twitched awkwardly in one last grasp towards the affini's neck, then she collapsed entirely against its chest, lost dreaming in the grasp of the gentle music.

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Dust awoke with a pained yell, muscles tensing to the extreme against their restraints as she felt an acute pain inside of her heart. With great pressure it squeezed once more, and she felt the sudden shift in awareness as raw life pulsed within her with a long forgotten vigor. A paradoxical sort of pain reverberated out from her chest, as if a fist had tightened itself around the muscle while the rest threatened to explode out from her. At once she felt the familiar hands of Amaranth forcibly prying the visor off of her, followed by it sweeping off the roots and vines and pinned her against the seat.

Once freed she curled up into the fetal position and rolled upon her side, hands gripped tight against her sternum and body shaking from the shock of agony. "Dear, you'll be okay," Amaranth's voice spoke into her ears, but it didn't cut through the red fog. There was sweat? On her skin? And her breath felt wet inside of her throat without the familiar twinge of blood for the first time in ages. With another great pulse another wave of agony hit her chest, sending her into a convulsive fit before she could settle back into a tightened ball of nerves.

"Listen to me, Dust." Amaranth said as it curled up behind her, multiple arms wrapping around her tightly. She felt the din of Amaranth's accompaniment play out against her skin, reaching through her body to grip her heart amidst the storm of chaos within. Another hand gripped the top half of her face, wrenching her head back to rest under the affini's chin while a sixth slipped it's fingers between her clenched fingers and forcibly spread them out. "Just listen."

The fourth heartbeat stuttered out of position, then fell between notes amidst Amaranth's body. Pain still coursed out from Dust's chest but this time it crashed under a growing wave of enforced contentment. When the fifth beat hit it landed squarely within the affini's musical guidance, bringing the pulse down to a gentle diminuendo across her body. The sixth followed Amaranth's guidance, and by the seventh her heart had wholly submitted to it's conductor and played to a normalized rhythm.

"Now breathe," Amaranth instructed, and Dust's body obeyed. A strong and deep inhalation played out through her lungs, filling her chest as it calmed her muscles. "And out, dear." A small shift in pressure marked the affini gently guiding her ribs to squeeze in. In and out. Steady, deep breaths above a steady heartbeat. All in time to Amaranth's enchanting music. "Very good, you're doing good for me little one." Amaranth's voice whispered into her ear. "Just focus on breathing for me for now. You don't need to do anything else."

Dust nodded slightly and forced herself to inhale again. Deep breaths, steady rhythm, easy to do as long as Amaranth's body was held against hers. Meanwhile the other affini around the room gently guided her body back towards its resting position on her back. Her eyes fluttered open properly after that, revealing her to be in the room of glass she'd been studied in before. "What happened?" She whined.

Amaranth ran a seventh hand through her hair to calm her as it spoke. "I dare say we've solved your dietary needs to the dot, dear. Perhaps a bit too well this time, sorry about that." As Amaranth spoke its body unfurled such that she was still wrapped up in now unleashed vines while the rest formed together back into a humanoid shape beside her. The familiar energy of its eager scientific self bristled into existence as it proceeded to gesture excitedly beside her as it continued. "I was mostly right before. Adrenaline and cortisol is an important ingredient to a proper feeding that your body needs, but the method of acquisition is just as if not even more important for you. As a matter of fact your brain only stabilizes back- it, okay it's all complicated but the long and simple is that you need to be able to simulate a proper hunt before you can actually stabilize."

"...what?"

Amaranth held up a torn up doll of a rabbit that was stained with dried blood. "You need a chew toy to pounce on." It said as if that elucidated everything sufficiently. It then produced a video recording showing her chasing the doll around the other room for about half an hour before Amaranth allowed her to catch it, then proceeding to absolutely tear it apart to get at the blood bag. "Additionally, look!" It proceeded to take one of her hands by the wrist and hold it up before her eyes.

It was shockingly lively looking. Rich in living color that she hadn't seen painted upon her body since before the infection and- Dust gripped her chest with her free hand. A steady heartbeat, powerful and strong as it hadn't been in ages.

"I consider this wonderful news!" Amaranth was practically twirling around her excitedly, all the while the other affini were busy awkwardly moving out of its way. "Ideally this should lengthen the amount of time it takes before you slip under again, as well as let us keep you at the peak of your health! We'll need to do more fine-tuning of course, figure out the best schedule to keep

and amounts and all that glass. But!” Amaranth stopped it’s fevered motions to strike a dramatic pose over her. “It’s progress!”

Despite all the energy coming in from above Dust simply remained in a stunned sort of silence underneath the affini. Her hand still gripped her chest, shocked to feel a pulse so vividly within her again. It was like before. Before... all of this ever happened and she- she was- Dust’s breath hitched. She felt something warm and wet spill out from her eyes and slide down her cheeks.

Amaranth’s surge of excitement deflated to a worried quiet in that moment, while all around it the other affini were hurried unplugging the various machines and shuffling out to give the two some privacy. “Dust, dear.” Amaranth leaned over the human, face close. “Are you alright?”

Dust was, in all honesty, more than a little overwhelmed at the moment and thus didn’t answer with words so much as she just made a sound akin to ‘aaaAAaaaAAaaaa’, put her hands to her own cheeks, then made even more sounds when she pulled them back to see that the tears she felt were in fact made of blood that had already spilled over her cheeks and chin and shirt and probably onto her seat and the floor and stars what a mess crying was why did she miss it so much!?

“...I’ll clean that off for you.” Amaranth chirped, plucking a box of tissues out of it’s chest.

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Two boxes of tissues, one inconsolable fit of open weeping, and a thoroughly hugged teddy bear later two were strewn out side by side over the bed with bodies wrapped up tightly around each other. “I should have been prepared for the return of your vital functions to be an overwhelming experience, and I apologize for that.” Amaranth said a veneer of professionalism that was completely betrayed by an even thicker veneer of empathetic worry.

“I feel like I might have overreacted there, and I’d like to say sorry for that too.” Dust murmured. She held a hand at the side of her own neck, still revelling in the shocking strength with which a normal heartbeat could have. “Thank you for this. I mean it.”

“...before you last slipped under, you were going to tell me about what happened to you.”

Ah, right. Dust sucked in an awkward gasp of air.

“You don’t have to continue if you don’t want to.”

“No, I’ll talk I just- it’s not pleasant.” Dust didn’t like to revisit these memories, not by choice nor by haunted dreams chasing her through the night. “I got scooped up with the rest of the survivors and dragged off to a hospital site. There they just... kept us. For a while. Didn’t know if we were still contagious or not, so they wouldn’t let us out of the quarantine cells. When they figured out that we...” She gestured to her mouth, and Amaranth silently gave an understanding brush to continue. “Most of us had already gone past feral to catatonic by then. Those of us who could still speak were moved and given enough to stop biting at the nurses, the rest were...”

Amaranth’s grip tightened around her torso, and Dust paused to find some vestige of comfort. She could still feel the restraints if she focused on it. Awful metal bands around her wrists. She could even hear the sound of the others trying desperately to have anything that could be a normal conversation in such a fucked up situation.

“The doctors thought they were corpses and treated them like such. They autopsied the lot to try and find out what happened.” Sometimes in her nightmares she was the one in their place. A body frozen in place from starvation watching the bone saw slip through her ribs. “The rest of us were kept around as lab rats. A... a ‘fun medical mystery’ according to one of the doctors.” Dust grunted and pulled herself out of Amaranth’s arms enough to sit up, anger bubbling up over the surface. “It wasn’t even in a black site! Or, or a government facility, or, or anything of that sort. The journalists could walk right in and take our picture, but they always kicked their feet around muttering about how there’s no profit in trying to run articles about this fucking plague. Like some kind of damned public secret, here’s the modern lepers getting cut apart and stitched back together in the name of science.”

The longer she whined the harder it became to stay detached from the memories. Phantom sensations of pins and needles over her chest were a sign she could ignore, for a while. Metal

and leather over her limbs could be excused behind the myriad vines that encased her. But the phantom scent of bleach cut through her mental walls, and the illusory memories of the flickering yellow lights were all too happy to barge in after them. At some point in her rant Dust's voice had broken up from anger into barely contained whimpers. She'd have curled into herself again had Amaranth not already ensnared her limbs and pulled her back down into its embrace once more.

"You are not there, dear." Amaranth spoke, and the melody of their voice was pure medicine in Dust's ears. "Nor will you ever be again. You are safe now." Dust moved to speak, but a thin vine crossed over her lips. "Shh, listen and come back to the here and now." It tightened itself around her, bathing her in the intensity of its melody. It was easy for Dust to let herself be dragged along with it when her heart and lungs already submitted at a glance. As easy as relaxing a muscle, and then within minutes she was floating above it all again. After several minutes more Amaranth gave her a small pat on the head. "You do not need to continue if you do not wish to."

Dust stirred by only a small degree, voice whining at the thought of even trying to approach this subject again today. "No, I, I'd rather not." She spoke quietly. "Can we... stay here, actually? I think I need this right now."

"Of course, I'll stay as long as you need."

---

A week and a day passed in the blink of an eye to Dust. Just as the affini's adjustments to her blood intake had brought life back to her heart, so too did the rest of her body follow in recovering to a state of vividity thought lost to her. She practically leapt out of bed excitedly in the morning, and Amaranth could barely even keep up with her constant need for some kind of exertion to get the energy out of her body.

"I dare say at the rate you're going you might just run right through the walls on your own." Amaranth said after Dust finally worked herself to exhaustion chasing it around the room. Amaranth tossed a chew toy to the side, which she leapt after to grab mid-air and greedily tear apart as soon as she hit the floor. As weird as it was to eat like a rabid dog, she couldn't deny

that it felt \*amazing\* to do. A chemical bath of pure dopamine washed over her mind as the chase turned into the feeling of edible cloth and foam splitting apart between her teeth, followed by a rush of oxytocin once the taste of fresh blood ran thick onto her tongue.

As was becoming increasingly normal between the two, Amaranth happily scooped up the feeding Dust to bundle into it's vines to cuddle positively senseless. An easy thing for Dust to do, given that her brain was so deliriously high off of it's own innate gratification that she wasn't capable of much more than snuggling while chewing on anything placed right in front of her.

She had, at one point, suggested that that meant in the wild her mutations expected her to hunt someone down, bite out their throat, and then cuddle them as they die. But Amaranth just gave her a very concerned look and said it'd like to not think about that, so the two dropped that line of thought entirely.

Once the doll was drained dry, Amaranth gave her a small tap on the chin to replace it with a xenodrug loaded vine. "Must I?" Dust huffed in a sleepy tone, eyes unfocused as she nuzzled her cheek against the plant's vines instead.

"It's even more important to keep you topped off right now, dear." Amaranth answered calmly. "It'd look particularly bad if you were to have another fighting episode and need several of us to pin you down, wouldn't it?"

"Scared of the big bad vampire?" Dust teased.

"I recall how much effort it took to sedate you the first time, and I'd rather not go through that again when we just want to help you."

Dust groaned out a "fiiiiiiiine" then bit down on the vine, allowing more the sedative to chase after the acrid taste of blood. At least this stuff was sweet, she thought. A tasty little desert that also happened to make her all calm and docile the rest of the day. "When I'm done here I want to visit a park." She mumbled around the vine.

"There are quite a number of lovely parks around here nowadays. I dare say you could visit all of them without a worry after this."

"Will you go with me?"

"If you'd let me. I would like to remain friends, if that's not too weird to say given our situation."

"I would like that too." Dust mumbled, and a satisfied rumble rolled through Amaranth's body.

"You won't need to worry about keeping up with blood either, as you can get plenty of it and dolls to hunt compiled on demand."

"This is all assuming I'm released."

"I don't see why you wouldn't be." Amaranth gave a confident sort of roll to its voice as it continued. "I've handily demonstrated that the difficulties you faced were the result of a resource insufficiency and not a flaw of your personal character. Additionally, you've demonstrated more than sufficient remorse and will for repentance for the harm your body has inflicted. Just between you and me, you're the very model of a well behaved little terran once your hunger is sated. What else could they possibly find fault with?"

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On the day of her hearing Dust was quietly picked up by Amaranth and led from her room down a bewildering series of halls until she found herself within what might have once been a grand hall. At that time it was more of a bureaucratic nightmare made manifest into physical form. Stacks of paper were piled upon each other into teetering goliaths above her, while tables and desks littered the space into a dense labyrinth that plateaued above her own eye level.

Amaranth curled vines underneath her feet and around her waist to lift her up above the sprawl, easily clearing the whole mess. In the center she found a clearing in the chaos where the desks had been pushed around into an improvised circle. Affini were perched at all the desks, some with florets at their side to happily distract them from the more serious matters at hand, and soon Dust was joined in with the lot besides Amaranth.

“So this is the vampire?” Said an affini that was practically draped across their desk to lean over and look towards her. “Cuter in person.”

At the desk besides that one the familiar face of the floret she had previously attacked peeked out from behind another affini's vines. She seemed to gasp and wave in excitement, but Dust's heart withered at the sight of the ghastly scar along the side of her neck. A meek wave in return was all she could manage back. Other humans all peered towards her curiously. Affini too, actually.

Oh, *\*everyone\** was staring at her.

Dust chewed on her lower lip nervously. “It'll be okay, dear,” Amaranth whispered to her. “Just let me take care of this.” She nodded in assent. This was fine. Nothing to worry about. Just a meeting where all of these affini would decide whether or not she should be dragged off in collar and chain and... domesticated. Whatever that entailed, exactly. She glanced nervously at the florets in the room, all obediently silent in their fawning adoration towards their owners or looking her way with that dull look in their eyes. Harmless. If she was domesticated she'd be made harmless, then?

Dust tensed. She didn't want to figure out how that'd be managed, given her condition. A small nudge from Amaranth jolted her out of her thoughts and made her realize she had completely missed whatever speeches and introductions had already been handed out. Stand. Bow politely. Small introduction before Amaranth trailed off into how it'd been handling her care for the past while. Dust slid down to a seated position as her affini quite happily monopolized the stage for itself.

She could handle this. She didn't even have to do anything, just... look nice. This was fine. Easy and do-able.

Dust chewed on her lip nervously.

Easy and doable.

An hour of seemingly productive conversation and about two hours worth of time spent adoring their florets along the way made for a three hour shift of silence that left Dust more exhausted than actual exercise did. While Amaranth had occasionally given her a vine to hold or a hand upon the back to help assuage her moods, the act seemed to draw some concerning looks from the other affini. Dust found herself shying away from the touch after that, convinced that that might somehow help her case. Maybe? She didn't know what standards these plants ran by.

Even that the conversation at hand had been about her wasn't enough to stave off the great weight of boredom from creeping into her mind and drawing her into an unfocused state, and in that state she had discovered a faint smell permeating the air. It was an awful scent, something that clung fiercely to her skin and surrounded her in the sensation of mud. Slim as it was, the sensation slipped through the myriad others that coursed into Dust and demanded she notice it.

Dust attempted to ignore it. Focus on something else, like the soft vibrations of a pulse that slipped through Amaranth's vines as she slid her fingers along its side- there were those looks again. Like she was some kind of puppy. Even Amaranth seemed surprised this time, having stopped in the middle of talking about some kind of hormone reaction to glance down at her and ask "Do you need anything, dear?"

"Um, no, sorry." She whispered back. After a moment she added, "Actually, does it smell funny in here?"

Various leaves danced through the air across Amaranth's form. "Nothing unusual to me."

"I'm probably just imagining it, then. Nevermind."

“Are you su-”

“Yes, nevermind.” The glances her way had grown more intense from that small interaction. Cute smiles now decorated the myriad of affini. She wished she understood their culture enough to figure out exactly *\*why\** they seemed so intent as looking down at her like some kind of adorable little thing whenever she interacted with Amaranth like that and WHERE was that fucking smell coming from!?

An hour more and some lengthy discussion about the state of her cardiovascular system, which was as fucked up as the rest of her body, and the smell had gone from a mild but persistent distraction to a full blown obsession to her senses. It felt as if her skin was wrapped in oil, like her tongue had run dry in a desert. Furtive glancing revealed nothing, just her, the papers, the affini, the florets- *\*the florets!\** Dust glanced towards the woman she had attacked previously, now blissfully dozed off in her owner’s vines. As she drew in breath the scent dimmed weakly, then peaked as her exhale blended with a gentle stretch for comfort. The woman tilted her head to the side and Dust’s whole world tilted sharply towards her neck.

....fuck.

This shouldn’t be happening. She was already full of blood, she had hunted those dolls just like Amaranth said she should. She should be safe and fine and not daydreaming about digging her claws into that woman’s rib cage. She shouldn’t be wanting for blood, she had plenty.

The easiest way to stay topped up on blood was to not pass up on a fresh meal though, her brain unhelpfully suggested.

Dust frowned. Maybe the adrenaline dosage was off?

There’s plenty of fresh adrenaline to drain from all those humans, her brain interjected again.

Shut up, she thought to herself. This isn't helping. She's trying to be calm and harmless and not succumb to the fact that the scent of fresh prey was enough to drown her mind out from the real world around her. What were they all talking about? She glanced up to see a chart relating something about brain waves and hear an affini talking about hunting instincts or whatever she didn't care she just kept glancing at the adorable, helpless, tasty humans all piled up into their affini's laps and getting adored positively senseless.

Staring too long revealed a deeper problem to her. She could hear their heartbeats. Calm. Steady. Slow. As she stared blankly towards the scarred woman her own heartbeat began to slip in to match her rhythm. To have a noticeable heartbeat was still strange to Dust, but feeling it copy another was a wholly surreal experience. There was a brief cramp along her sternum, a discomfort across the width of her chest, then a sigh of relief as her body slipped into match step.

Her pulse was deafening. Overwhelming. She'd love to feel it quicken in her own chest as she chased the human down, then falter into perfect silence. It'd be easy to do, and the reward would drown her brain in pleasure richer than a shot of cocaine injected right between her eyes. She'd enjoy it. This was wrong. She needed to leap into action. She tightened her grip on Amaranth's vine and silently begged the affini to stop her.

Dust knew she was trapped in a stalemate and rapidly losing ground. Anything would tip her then, even something as simple as the affini leaning down to question her.

"Dust, dear, are you okay?" Amaranth whispered to her. The affini's hand rested on the back of her head. Like a coiled spring she burst into motion at the first touch. With unreal speed she twisted out of Amaranth's grasp and leapt across to the prone woman. More affini burst into motion to catch her, but the predatory instinct that had seized control of her all too awake brain ducked to the side and kicked off before being captured. Within the span of mere seconds she had cleared the distance and tackled the woman, wrapping herself around the human in a tight embrace as the two fell down to the floor to land upon the vampire's back. She rolled to the side, paying no mind to the pain that blossomed along her spine as she held the human down and-

The floret was staring at her in the eyes, completely unphased by the sudden motion. Stars, if anything she looked amused, like this was some kind of harmless game. Everything froze in that moment as the two stared at each other, silent until the floret's mouth bent into a small if confused smile. "What's wrong?" She whispered.

Dust only then noticed the crimson drops that were falling from her own eyes to stain the woman's cheeks. She was seconds away from trying to kill her, again. Even after everything she was just a hair trigger from harm and she couldn't even stop herself. "I'm a monster." Dust whispered back. She slowly unclenched her hands and brought them over face, burying herself against the woman's chest as sobs slipped through her.

The woman ran her hands over Dust's back. She didn't deserve this. Not mercy. Not from her of all people. "I'll be okay," the floret whispered back to her, and her smile was so earnest that Dust would have begged to believe her. "Nothing bad can happen while they're here." Whatever spell had bought the two time finally broke after that, and Dust was met with the force of great vines tackling her to the side and pinning her down against the floor.

Amaranth was upon Dust in an instant, plucking her out from the other affini and restraining her in the same measure as it bundled her up against its chest. "I'm sorry," Amaranth spoke loudly as it pulled itself up to its full stature, body wrapped around her protectively. "It seems I made a mistake, I'll return shortly."

Its escape was swift, and within the blink of an eye Dust found herself placed upon a small seat outside the busy room. Amaranth knelt down across from her, hands over the arm rests and large eyes at her eye level. "I'm sorry-" Dust tried to blurt out, but a vine curled up to press over her lips.

"Shh, one step at a time dear." It said in an infuriatingly calm tone. "Deep breaths for me?" Dust nodded, and struggled to gasp for air against her own muscles trying to squeeze in her lungs. The noise she made sounded more like a pained gasp than anything else, followed by another one that trailed into something akin to a struggling balloon. But Amaranth held her gaze steady, its voice pulling her forward. Breathe. Just breathe. Her faltering breaths slowly followed Amaranth's guiding motions, each one growing calmer until she was swept up into its rhythm entirely.

Dust couldn't resist feeling the glow of calm burn into her this way. Every breath brought her down to Amaranth's level of unnatural calm, every beat of her heart trapped her mind on the path of releasing tension, every little twitch and blink just reinforcement to its whim. Breathe. Just breathe.

“Good girl,” Amaranth said, and finally released her to express the concern readily apparent in its mind. “What happened?”

Dust’s mouth twitched as all the feelings squirmed under the blanket of enforced tranquility. She’d... she almost... “I’m a monster.” Dust’s words were hollow, but they broke the seal that Amaranth had bundled her heart into and gave room for her to collapse forward into open tears. Strained wails poured endlessly from her throat as crimson tears smeared across her face into a wretched pool at her feet. Amaranth held her close all over again, vines forcibly stilling her arms to her sides and holding her steadfast even as she flailed blindly in her emotional fits. “I’m a monster!” She shouted loud enough for the world to hear. “I would have killed her and my wretched fucking brain would have drowned me in pleasure while I did it.”

Amaranth was struck by her words, body freezing even as it pinned her down. “That shouldn’t have happened,” It said, but the confidence was gone from its voice.

“I’m healthier than I’ve ever been and all it did was make me want to drink her even more.” Dust wailed. “I’m a killer! A beast! A vile leech just waiting for the rest of my mind to rot away and-and-” A sharp gasp preceded a terrifying click inside of her skull. “I didn’t want to hurt anyone, Amaranth.”

“I know.”

“I will if I’m released.”

“Dust-”

When Dust next spoke, it was with an unnatural chill that left the sensation of ice spilling across her lips. “I will. Someday. Even if I’m good now, one day I’ll slip, I’ll kill someone and bathe in their viscera, and I won’t be able to resist the pleasure I feel when I do it.”

“\*Dust\* -”

“Someday I’ll rot if I’m left alone, Amaranth.” She was staring a million miles past the affini then. “I’ll become an addict to the rush, I’ll seek excuses to do it again and again, and then some day I won’t even bother trying to have an excuse. I’ll just be killing for the fun of it.”

Amaranth froze, staring at her with wide eyes painted a frozen blue. Fear? Something inside Dust wanted to laugh. To think even an affini could feel fear. It glanced around uncertainly, thoughts broiling underneath the hidden curtains in it’s mind as it’s body coiled ever inward. Discontent, struggle, confusion. Then a quiet movement mimicking a sigh as all the tension bled out at once. Acceptance painted it’s eyes a deep green.

Amaranth moved it’s forearm to rest in front of her face. “Drink.” It ordered.

“I don’t-”

“Your wants don’t matter here anymore, little one.” Amaranth’s words bristled with a harsh undertone. It pressed forward, forcing a bundle of vines between her teeth. “Now drink.”

Dust wasn’t given the choice to disobey. Amaranth’s forceful gesture tore its own flesh against her still teeth for her and spilled fresh xenodrugs over her tongue. As she’d done many times before, Dust felt the familiar chill and sparks of a drugged high begin to blossom over her mouth as the taste filled it, then down its throat as she swallowed the chemicals. Amaranth didn’t let her budge a single inch until all the tension ran limp in her body and the pained look in her eyes was replaced with the familiar if empty haze induced by the copious dosage. Even then it released her bonds just to move her unmoving body up against it, holding her so close that her consciousness drowned within the gentle tones of the affini’s biorhythm.

Amaranth rose to its full height and spun around to throw open the doors to the grand room. “I’m sorry but I need to cut this meeting short.” It said, “My floret needs my help.” One of the affini gave a great huff and tossed aside a stack of papers they’d no longer need. Another gave it a small round of applause as it stepped away.

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Awareness was a slow companion when it came to piercing through the veil in Dust's mind. In Amaranth's arms she didn't truly see anything beyond its bloom of leaves and flowers, nor did she hear anything other than the thundering drums of its body playing directly into her ears. Looking past the affini's flesh she saw the familiar form of the greenhouse room around her, with ever more machinery than she had seen before crowding the floor.

As she was lowered into the chair the myriad vines and branches once more shifted to hold her, all while Amaranth placed more wires and pads across her body. Small blips and beeps from the nearby machines stirred dark memories, and her attempt to squirm was immediately quashed by the chair's vines coiling upon her limbs to bind her down.

"W-what's happening?" Dust stammered. Everything felt all out of place inside of her head, like her brain was coated in oil and all the feelings were sliding right off. She knew, objectively, she should be having a more powerful emotional reaction given what she'd just done and the... implication of being cuffed to a medical station once more, but all that actually made it through the fog was numbed silence.

Maybe her dumb vampire brain decided she didn't need emotions anymore. That'd suck.

It was probably just shock, she hoped. Or disassociation? Dust tried to glance down towards her hands and found that she wasn't given enough room to even manage that. Regardless, her body felt as if it were composed of strung-together fog that was floating further and further away from her by the moment.

Disassociating, then.

"What's happening?" She murmured, her voice a haphazard jumble of poorly directed muscles.

Amaranth slid over from one of the various consoles it had been tapping on, bringing itself directly above her with a hand on each side of her head. Its bright eyes drew in her vision, blocking out everything else from her focus. "You will be domesticated." The affini answered with

an unnerving calm. "You told me that you don't wish to hurt others, and I will see to it that you don't." The veneer of confidence faltered for only a moment at the tail end of it's words, betrayed by a sudden twist along it's myriad leaves.

That got the stopper in Dust's head to finally slip free enough for the emotions to return. A confusing tide of \*something\* welled up around the edges of her mind, soft enough to not seize full control yet but insisted enough that she couldn't avoid it's effects. Her eyelids twitched, the edges of her mouth curled awkwardly against her wishes to remain still, her fingers curled in tightly until the myriad branches forcibly spread them out and pressed them flat against the arm rests.

The visor and earpiece from before slid up to cradle the back of her head before gradually moving forward. "Feel free to struggle if you wish, I think we could both use the catharsis." Amaranth said before they locked into place, shutting her senses off from the outside world entirely. In darkness her breaths picked up to a nervous hitch, accelerating rapidly until Amaranth's hand suddenly pressed down against her chest. The touch brought with it a familiar haze of calm to combat against the stunned silence inside of her, and small pricks of pain announced another dose of xenodrugs before her sternum was claimed by a numbed haze.

Panic immediately returned as the pinpricks against her skin became an intrusive force burrowing into her. The sensation vanished all too shallowly into her flesh, but understanding blossomed when a moment later her heartbeat thundered within her own ears. She felt roots grazing the surface of her chest. Leaves brushing against skin. The smell of a garden near at hand. A flower?

The view inside the visor brightened into life to mirror the slowly rising hum around her. Just like last time, a word flickered into existence before her.

Calibrating.

She felt a pinch behind her ears and against the back of her neck. A jolt danced through her nerves. The flower in her chest enforced Amaranth's rhythm into her pulse.

She was being calibrated.

Dust struggled. Her limbs were given no room to bend, her chest no strength to even breathe outside the enforced step of the affini's song, but inside her skull she still tried to bring herself to break out of it. All that she accomplished though was to reveal the shape of her own resistance, and a rush of electricity arcing up her neck captured the neural pattern and forced it to burn brightly into life. In that instant Dust felt the act of defiance become yet another act her body could not cease performing, just as her heart beat to Amaranth's song so too did her mind automatically try to stop. And yet, the word still flickered before her eyes. Calibrating.

Trapped in between enforced submission and mandated resistance Dust was left to feel the edges of her consciousness squirm and fray apart. Instinctive twitches, spasms, attempts to hold her breath, her flesh tried all of it without her prompting and failed to overcome the rolling thunder that echoed out from her chest. Each attempt left her body feeling even more tired just for trying. Dust tried to beg herself to stop and bend to the song instead, but that too was captured and subverted by the electric pulse inside of her skull.

She tried to wail but all that came out was a gentle groan that slid perfectly into the beats of Amaranth's touch. The pressure wouldn't stop rising. The song wouldn't stop ascending in volume. Over and over the two ends danced outside her control until everything became too much and POP!

There was a new fracture in Dust's psyche then. A fault line where the affini's lovely music bled deeper into her than she ever thought possible, where the boundary between her own self and Amaranth seemed to fade apart. By the same fault her strength slipped out, leaving her feeling weaker than before. An unbidden whimper of defeat slipped from her lips as the tension finally left her body, and with it the fog subsumed her completely. Her vision in the VR blended apart into a gentle prism of lights to capture her attention and softly bring her down, adrift and unfocused amongst the most beautiful melody she'd ever heard.

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Dust didn't realize the digital fugue had abated until she was already back in Amaranth's arms and being carried out of the greenhouse room. All the pretty colors that had drowned her out

had simply kept on swirling around until they slowly settled together to coalesce the shape of the affini, and this time as the vampire looked up at it she couldn't help but feel that the plant was positively glowing. Awe and want bristled out of the seam inside her mind in equal measure, tempered only by the sensation that her eyes positively hurt to keep looking even in the dim lighting of the room.

"Please close your eyes, little one. They're still dilated." Amaranth spoke, and this time all the intricate flicks of it's anatomy to simulate such a pattern of speech resonated through the vampire's flesh with shocking clarity. It was like discovering an old song had a whole chorus accompanying it, and only now did she have a speaker able to bring it to life. Except this song was overwhelming as it plugged directly into her heart and forced her to sing along, even as exhaustion trailed through her skin and- "Shhh," Amaranth whispered as a vine slipped over her eyes. "You just went through a difficult ordeal, dear. Rest now, you'll need your strength tomorrow."

Dust whimpered at it's words. A want to obey burned through the fracture inside of her, even as the rest struggled just to understand. She shouldn't, she should, she... didn't understand. It was too much. Too much noise, too many gentle taps vibrating through her skin, too much static bristled around the animal inside of her. Overwhelming. Difficult. She couldn't manage much of anything in this state.

Dust remained limp in Amaranth's arms. Even as the affini stripped her body, bathed her, dressed her, and brought her to bed, it wasn't until she was laid down and the affini coiled tighter around her that she even twitched. But when she did, it was to squirm futilely, to kick her legs weakly against the vines and claw at the cage of plant matter closing in around her. "It's too much," She mumbled. Too much noise. Too much light. Overwhelming beyond compare. She couldn't hear herself beneath the melody closing in around her and fear was brimming over to fight that.

But Amaranth wrapped a hand around the side of her head and brought her close to it's chest. "It'll be okay, dear." It purred. "Just listen. Just breathe." Her body obeyed faster than her mind, finding a beat in Amaranth's song to catch and drawing breath to it's steady pace. The flow of air blended against the pulse of her heart, \*Amaranth's\* pulse in her heart, to become a veritable tidal wave that crashed apart her anxieties. Bereft of such an instinctive fear, Dust's mind collapsed back into the gentle fog and slipped into sleep, breathing to it's tune through the whole night.

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When Dust awoke she was back in the greenhouse. The vines and branches of the seat were once more wrapped around her limbs. She opened her eyes to see the glass and metal walls, looked across to Amaranth busy fiddling with ever more machinery at her side, and before she could even draw in the breath to speak the vines wrapped around her head and brought the visor down over her vision.

Calibrating.

Dust tensed. Please don- an electric rush burnt through her body. Her strength was still drained from the last session, so even as her ability to bend was stripped from her she could barely bring her will to bear before it cracked under pressure. Less than a minute later and her psyche fractured a second time, now with spiderwebs arcing out from the first wound and across her consciousness. The song greedily rushed into the new wounds to mend her with itself, golden light of the affini's will replacing her own.

Another whimper emanated from Dust's mouth. It hurt. She was being split open and carved apart and it hurt deep inside of her skull and she couldn't hear anything over Amaranth, she couldn't even hear herself think through it. "Please," She said, unable to hear her own voice. "Please make it st-" Amaranth's hand against her jaw made her voice break into an open moan as the light of it's touch smothered her mind.

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When Dust next had enough strength to bring the weight of consciousness back to bear, she was still trapped inside the VR. She could tell by the distant touch of cloth that she was wearing different clothes. How long had it been? A day? A week? She ran her tongue against her lips and felt the arid touch of her own skin. Long enough to begin running dry. Hunger would follow soon. "Amaranth?" She wheezed, and a touch of vines against the palm of her hand answered. fFfffFuCK! Electric light blossomed up her body from the small contact, showering her in a fireworks of ecstasy that scattered any whims or worries to the winds.

She felt as if she was afloat on that cloud for some time, unable to even string together the will to think for some other vague stretch of time. This time she tried to play her cards a touch more carefully. Pause. Breathe. Try to ignore that she automatically moved to inhale to the rhythm of a song that burned subtle through her veins. Feel. She was still trapped in the chair. She still had the visor and earpieces on. The clothes on her body felt different again, and there was a layer of sweat resting across her skin. Hunger was blossoming through her chest, even as the flower forced her heart to move instead of succumbing to silence.

Then the lights flicked on inside the visor. "W-wait," She said instinctively, but the machine didn't listen to her. Another electric rush pulsed through her body, this time more thoroughly tracing every little neuron hidden through her flesh than it ever had before. She felt as if it formed a net through her skull so fine she couldn't possibly begin to track it, and practically howled as the machine used that net to capture her psyche again. It was like a dozen metal rods slammed through her mind and forced her to stretch out to exposure. A sample on the vivisection platter, something dark inside of her suggested.

Dust felt another buzz behind her ears and became horrifically aware of the state of her psyche. She'd been broken so many times she couldn't hope to count the cracks. The first fracture was lost in an endless web of splinters and pieces all held together only by the affini's song that had filled the gaps. Stars, her mind was more gold joinery provided by Amaranth than herself at this point. She couldn't take it any more than this. "Please," She breathed instinctively. "Wait."

A voice brushed against her skin, but she couldn't hear it through the headgear. She whined, squirmed in her seat, then screamed as she felt the familiar song that was Amaranth slam into her frail defenses. With a mix of desperation and blooming hunger Dust wailed against the crashing beats of it's music. Her psyche did not splinter from impact this time. It damn near disintegrated. After the third hit her desperation peaked, and her body surged against it's restraints. Vines strained and branches snapped as Dust struggled to pull herself up. Her legs pushed heel against the wood until her knees were against her chest, and her hands recoiled with desperate need until her fingertips brushed against her own cheek.

Then she felt one of her ear caps be moved, and the voice of Amaranth sung through her mind with incomparable beauty. "Break." It ordered, and her mind obeyed. Her psyche flew apart into the finest grains of sand that fell to the waiting palms of the affini, gold filigree of it's song left behind surrounding the snarling beast that was left inside of her. The grains that were Dust had only a moment to revel in the beauty of her own loss as she felt herself disintegrate, and all her emotions spilled from her mouth as a wanting moan that trailed off into blackness.

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The animal in Dust's skin stirred to find itself strewn across the floor. Starvation ran rampant through her chest, but even in the hollowed cavity there was an undercurrent of music that bled through her perceptions. She lay still there until the scent of fresh blood met her nose, and at once was upon her feet blindly rushing towards the scent-

"Sit."

Amaranth's voice crashed into Dust's body with the force of a tidal wave, knocking her legs out from under her and sending her back down to the floor immediately. The beast whined in shock, voice little more than strained whimpers as it attempted to move against the heavy restraints of the affini's voice.

"Oh good, you'll actually listen to me properly now." Amaranth mused as it stepped around the prone vampire. It knelt down next to her, brandishing another bottle of blood before the animal's eyes as it went. Dust's body gnashed at the air instinctively, eyes wide and focused in on it to a razor point. "Can't reach it now, can you?" Amaranth continued, its own eyes a steady blue tint as it stared down at the thing. "I almost wish you were more than her animalistic instinct, little vampire, just so I could make you understand how badly you've hurt her."

It shifted the bottle slightly, allowing a single drop to splash against the ground just out of Dust's reach. Despite that, in an act of desperate want she still tried to strain towards it, mouth open and tongue shamelessly out reaching towards the barest taste of sustenance.

"I'm wasting air, I know. Your language centers aren't working properly right now." Amaranth's body rustled in an approximation of a sigh. Something inside of its body shifted to create a melodious click, and then it shoved the side of the bottle into Dust's mouth. At once Dust's form broke out of her illusory shackles to collapse around Amaranth's hand, greedily tearing blood from the container in a messy display of fervent desire.

When she finished she flopped over back onto the floor, red staining half her clothes and mind happily slipping into a fed sleep.

Amaranth huffed over her prone form, "How do you still manage to be cute like this?"

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The two repeated the exercise more times than Dust would have counted even if she had the cognition to spare. Over and over she awoke starved at Amaranth's heel, begging for even a taste of blood, and each time the affini denied her before allowing her to drink with that beautiful click. Again and again and again until the pattern burned itself so deeply into Dust's hindbrain that when Amaranth set down the bottle before her she moved to feed her storming hunger and... didn't.

The animal inside of Dust's brain squirmed as it tried to actually take the blood left defenseless before it, but it couldn't act. Something was wrong. Something was \*missing\*. She looked up towards the affini in confusion, and Amaranth's neutral expression broke into a wide grin. "What's wrong, dear? Not hungry?" Gold lights flecked green eyes as it knelt down before her. "Your food is right there."

Dust hissed, bared her fangs, \*tried\* to latch onto the bottle and tear it apart but only managed to frustrate herself further against the mental bonds that held her.

Amaranth took the bottle and crushed it in it's hand, spilling a wide pool of blood between the two before baring it's palm towards her. "What's wrong? Drink." It ordered, but she still couldn't bring herself to bite down into it. She couldn't even lick the blood off the floor, it was all there clouding her senses into wild insensate want but she COULDN'T-

Amaranth smeared it's hand over her face, smothering her in the scent before it stood up and left to wash it's hand. "Stay," It ordered, and once more Dust felt the intense weight of it's voice bear down on her.

When Amaranth returned an hour later she was still in that position, unable to even lick the blood that had dripped over her lips. Until that soft click finally broke the dam, and she exploded into motion to lap the dried blood that had coated the floor. Amaranth's hand grabbed her by the back of her ruined shirt and yanked her off the mess to catch her attention with a doll instead. At once her fractured mind focused in on it, and Amaranth tossed it aside with a lackadaisical "Fetch."

Dust, of course, obeyed. She sprang right off of her feet to run after the doll and tackle it out of the air. She didn't even properly hear the click this time, but it's permission echoed through her psyche as her nails tore into the doll and her teeth sunk into its side. From the affini's perspective she had leapt to bite into the toy, then landed with a roll as she bundled up to enjoy her well-earned meal.

Dust gave no resistance as Amaranth strolled over to pluck her off the floor and hold her close, merely slipping into a familiar comforted haze that blended into sleep under it's song.

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The vampire's return to actual conscious awareness was a slow ascent through a red haze, light slipping through her eyelids as the gentle crescendos of a subtle tune swept her up in their tides and pulled her up. It permeated through her flesh, drew her heartbeat into it's tune and led her along to breathe deep of the cold air around her. A sudden chill along the back of her neck then sliced through the fog entirely.

Dust jolted up to find herself bound face-down on a medical table, with something cold trailing along the length of her neck. She immediately tensed, voice spiking to call out for her affini when Amaranth pre-empted her with a hand upon her head. It knelt down before her, leaning over awkwardly just to be able to look her in the face. "I'm sorry, dear. Your body is still resistant to our anesthetics for now, so it seems an error on my part let you wake up."

"W-what's happening?" Dust stuttered, and even the break in her voice landed between steps to a tune that permeated her mind.

"You are about to be given a haustoric implant, dear." Amaranth answered calmly as it reached over to pluck a vial out from beyond her vision and brought it down to her. Suspended in the glass tube was something that appeared like a bundle of nervous fibers wrapped tightly around a small seed, with small talons trailing along the bottom side. "This will be grafted to your spinal column so that it may merge with your body, and with it I will be able to better monitor your health as well as control your dosages. With this that pesky resistance you have to our drugs will be quite nicely solved."

Dust tensed futilely against her restraints. "But- I, you," Anxiety tried to seethe up from within, but it couldn't muster more than a few stray emotions before crashing futilely against the rhythms that controlled her.

A strange emotion passed over Amaranth's face. Uncertainty? Regret? Dust couldn't parse it quite as fast as she needed before it vanished behind another wall of enforced calm on the affini's end. "Shh," It whispered, and Dust's mouth slipped shut. "I'm sorry, dear. But this is not a matter that is up for debate anymore. Now please calm down for me."

At it's words all the tension simply vanished from her body, leaving her relaxed and limp on the medical bed. She couldn't even spin up confusion into anxious energy when surprise hit her, nor could she voice her question against the remaining weight of Amaranth's previous orders.

"Give me all of your fears, little one." Amaranth's voice was a smooth whisper as it continued. "All those negative feelings and pains that litter your heart. All those negative thoughts, too. Let them slip out to fall into the palm of my hand, knowing that I'll keep them safe for you. That I'll return them if and when you're ready to face them again."

It's voice slipped through her ears and poured over her soul with an unearthly beauty, stripping her of all the fear in her soul. Like a wave of light it crashed down across her body and left her in a state of light euphoria instead, all that negativity just drip drip dripping out of her face into Amaranth's waiting hands. Then the affini closed her hands and moved them away, and with them went even the awareness of having felt such fears in the first place.

Dust felt a sensation akin to a nail sliding along the back of her neck, and even then she could only smile softly knowing her affini was close at hand. "Now sleep," Amaranth spoke, and the wave of calm turned into a heavy blanket that crashed her consciousness into darkness.

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"Wake up, dear."

The words slipped through the curtains of darkness that wreathed Dust's mind and pulled her back to the waking world. In the span of a single blink she went from sleeping exhaustion to full alertness, rising up from the blankets to find herself already being swept into Amaranth's arms. Adoration overflowed from her soul as she looked up at the affini, absolutely enraptured with the glowing beauty of the thing. Numb shock followed blinding love as the affini's touch bathed her body in further light, crashing apart her thoughts into a blind moan of overwhelmed pleasure.

"Sorry," Amaranth spoke softly, vines coiling tighter around her despite the apology. "You're still rather sensitive. That should calm down in a few more days, I think." Any confusion that could have arisen from the abundance of unknowns in her state simply didn't, just as all the fear she could have felt had been entirely disallowed. Bereft of such negativity, she instead was left awash in overwhelming pleasure as the affini moved her body. It puppeted her through the motions of feeding her and dressing her, with an abundance of adoring pets on the head along the way, and only after did it deposit her into an overly large and comfortable seat to give her space.

Dust needed about another hour before the pleasure high died down enough to let her even think again. When she opened her eyes to truly look around she saw herself in an unfamiliar home, where golden filigree spliced between darkened glass plates to create a dizzying array which revealed the outside world as effectively as they walled it off. They trailed their vision across to the abundance of cushions and seats and bookshelves and- was this a lounge? She tried to sit up but only really managed to limp to the side and rest her head against the arm of the overly large seat she had been draped in.

Amaranth quietly slipped past her to pull up one of the couches and drape itself across it, laying its head upon one hand such that it was now resting beside her. Her eyes caught upon its own,

and she was quickly lost in the shimmer specks of light that swirled within the faceted gems. She hadn't truly noticed how deep the colors blended together before, nor how sparks of light would flicker across the surface before scattering into soft fireworks. The colors shifted from gentle blues into soft greens as she lost herself in the sight of Amaranth's gaze and-

"Dear," It said, and Dust sat upright at attention. "I need you to rest your eyes for a moment, please." Her eyes slid shut even as she wanted to melt into the deep notes of Amaranth's voice. "I'd like to return those feelings that I've been holding for you now. Do you recall them? That bit of stress and worry and fear?"

"Yes." She answered, voice a soft whisper as she felt the affini's words wash over her.

"Good. I want you to take those emotions out of my hand now, one at a time. Take your time feeling each one piece by piece, knowing that you're safe here with me and that nothing will hurt you anymore."

In her mind's eye Dust reached out to Amaranth's closed hand, slipping between it's fingers to pluck a light out. At once it flashed and laced into her nerves. By the same stroke, Dust became acutely aware that she had no actual understanding of her current situation. Where was she? Why does she feel so... unfocused? What happened!? She plucked another light, which gave voice to her uncertainty with a fresh current of anxiety through her mind, then the third to let fear return with dark questions of what the future would hold.

Dust jerked back to alertness, this time with the alertness to not just immediately be lost upon the tidal waves of Amaranth's song. Though she still felt it's music laced through every cell, it was like a background noise that could... well, she could at least ignore enough to function for now.

"What happened?" She blurted out, hands now gripped tightly on the arms of the oversized chair.

Amaranth didn't even flinch at the burst of motion. Resting at her side it simply lifted a finger to press the tip against her wrist. "I've destroyed the possibility of you harming another, and by the same hand have taken you as my floret."

Dust chewed her lower lip, fangs grazing old scars without the pressure to pierce them anew. "Explain."

"I've broken your will and tethered it to my own biorhythms, then trained your body to obey me before even itself on the most subconscious levels."

"I don't understand."

"You've been stripped of the ability to act outside of my permissions, Dust. You will never be able to lose control and harm another, and even if you were to be reduced to your most feral self you'd starve without spilling a single drop of blood unless I tell you to act." Amaranth's veneer of stoicism faltered at the end, uncertainty slipping through in a glimmer of grey lights. "I'm... sorry, for having to take so extreme a measure. But I cannot release you after having done that, so I've taken you as my floret as well."

Dust sunk back into her seat. She was aware, on some level, that a normal reaction to realizing she's been altered in such a fashion would be to feel something akin to blind panic. Or perhaps to lash out and blame another for these circumstances. But she just felt warm. Comfortable, even. She brought a hand to the back of her neck and felt a surgical scar mar her skin.

So she's a floret, then.

She moved her hand to press a finger next to Amaranth's, and felt the steady tune of her own pulse running rich under her skin. She moved next to feel the affini's, and felt it's pulse mirror her own- no, she mirrored it's. The total symphony of its body was the undercurrent of her own actions on a level so complete she couldn't even bring herself to breathe out of rhythm when she tried.

"You're serious." She muttered.

"Would a demonstration help?" Amaranth asked, and Dust nodded. "Very well." It slipped out of its spot to step out of the room, returning shortly with a second affini and their floret in tow.

"Dust, this is Cedrus Vera and his floret, Mercy."

"Hello!" The floret happily chirped with a casual wave to the seated vampire. Dust did not mirror her excitement. She instead saw the familiar scar on the woman's neck and immediately felt a familiar chasm break open under her heart and try to swallow her whole.

"Don't mind her too much, dear." Amaranth ruffled the floret's hair as it stepped past her to return to Dust's side, this time slithering behind her in the same seat to drape an arm over the vampire's shoulder. "She's a touch overwhelmed at the moment."

The other affini, Cedrus apparently, also ruffled the floret's hair before taking a seat across from the lot. His eyes were locked onto Dust, untrusting in their focus which she couldn't argue against, really.

Dust leaned back into Amaranth's body, nervous tension crashing against the instinctual comfort she now found overpowering from the simple contact. Her hands gripped at the vines along her sides, and her voice rose up to beg, "I don't-"

"Want to hurt her, I know. You won't." Amaranth spoke with a firm certainty. "But do you still feel that hunger?"

She did. The cloying scent had already returned, and as Mercy lived and breathed it only intensified by the moment. But her heartbeat clashed against the tone of Dust's own, and where she once synchronized to her prey's step the vampire instead found herself trapped wholly in place. Despite that the want to spill blood still grew like a burning flame that claimed more and more of her nerves and... and...

The impulse to strike never turned into action. Even under the increasing pressure she remained rooted in Amaranth's lap wholly incapable of escaping.

"Is she okay?" Mercy asked, cocking her head to the side and further exposing the side of her neck.

Amaranth trailed a hand down the back of Dust's head in a comforting gesture before gripping it tightly. "She is afflicted with a great many things in her condition, but the most troubling one for her at this time is a strongly overdeveloped need to hunt. Take a look at her eyes, for example. See how her pupils have dilated?" As Amaranth spoke, Mercy casually stepped closer and leaned over to peer into Dust's eyes directly, inadvertently smothering her mind in the scent of fresh meat in the process. "Being around her food supply has caused her mind to kick in some... less than helpful instincts in an attempt to acquire such sustenance."

"You mean my blood?" Mercy asked, an innocent smile still on her lips.

"Yes, exactly. Cedrus, may you please take off her collar for a moment?"

The other affini rumbled quietly in response, but reached over a vine to slide across the back of Mercy's collar and strip off the piece of cloth. Now exposed the symphony of the floret's neck played out to a heightened intensity across Dust's mind, crashing through her mental walls completely and smothering her conscious thought as fresh energy flooded through her body to move and pounce and atTACK yet, all that came of it was a pathetic whimper before Dust turned back to her affini and fawned desperately for release.

Amaranth's mouth bent into a satisfied smile. "Good girl," It purred. "See? Even in the depths of desperation all you can manage is to beg me. But for now, I'd rather like to have you coherent again, so," She tipped the vampire's face down to look forward again and place an empty hand before it's vision. "Give me your hunger. It controls you when we both know that only I should be the one to do that. So surrender it to me, knowing that I will protect it should you ever need it again, and that in its place I will guide you better than it ever could."

A simple command was all it took for Amaranth to exert it's will over her, and with that command all of the unconstrained destructive craving poured out from Dust's brain. In her mind's eye she saw it spill out of her eyes and mouth as a black fog that coalesced into its palm, and when it closed that hand into a fist the sensation became cut off from her entirely.

Dust blinked back to alertness. She was calm, unusually so. The scents and sounds of human prey still existed around her but held no more sway than the gentle hum of ventilation or the sensation of warmth from the star cascading over her skin. Dust blinked several more times in pure confusion. The overarching need to strike was gone. Vanished so completely it was like she had never suffered from it in the first place.

"Do you understand now?" Amaranth's spoke, and Dust shivered as a completely different sort of want resonated markedly lower than her chest.

"You control me." Dust rasped.

"Completely." Amaranth finished her thought for her.

"Fuck, that's hot." Mercy, having no personal sense of shame over the idea of erotic indulgement of control, quite happily added in the middle of the two's otherwise private moment.

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"I am \*so\* sorry," Dust said as she bowed down to Mercy. She was prepared to make any number of apologies, and all of that preparation was immediately shot out the window as the floret gave a melodious giggle in return before putting a hand atop Dust's head.

"Apology accepted! But also don't worry about it too much, ya silly goose. Nothing \*bad\* can actually happen when the affini are around, so like, it's not like I was actually gonna get seriously hurt anyway." The floret responded as if she didn't have a garish scar along the side of her neck.

Dust tensed nervously. "But, your neck,"

"It's cool, right? Like I've got some kind of sick battle scar." Mercy struck a dramatic pose as she said that, then wheeled down to lean in conspiratorially towards Dust. "Buuuuuut, if you want to make it up to me,"

"Yes!" Dust chirped automatically.

"Well then when you get that hunger problem under control hit me up and we can do a hot neck bitey thing that's like, horny instead of dangerous." Mercy's smile as she suggested the idea was about as wide as Dust's shock.

Cedrus coughed, "Mercy."

"What? Vampires are hot!" Mercy wheeled around to look her owner at that, while Dust succumbed to the kind of confused gay haze that came from not being able to interpret an obvious flirt at all.

"This vampire is also still coming to terms with a lot of changes in her life and now is probably not the best time to be flirting with her." Cedrus replied.

Dust flapped her mouth futilely a few times before falling down onto her rear all over again. "I think she is a little overwhelmed right now, dears." Amaranth spoke as it rested a hand upon her back, vines coiling around her chest for comfort as it stepped before her. "Perhaps we could have this conversation another time?" A vine slipped up to cup Dust's cheek, and she lost herself in the light of the affini's touch all over again.

The next moments could have been a minute or a month for all she cared. The world beyond her owner's touch lost focus entirely, and even as the two guests blurred past her all her mind

could drift on is the wondrous feeling of joy that bathed over her from even such simple contact. Until that touch abruptly vanished, and everything snapped back into focus around her owner as it leaned against the door.

With the undercurrent of Amaranth's rhythm a constant companion in Dust's consciousness, she could feel the affini's metaphorical heart at all times. Dimly, but enough to look at it and realize that it was exhausted beyond compare. She looked past it to the glass walls and gilded filigree, the decorated furnishings across a carpeted floor, and beyond that to the kitchens and study and... this was Amaranth's home?

"So what happens now?" She asked as she looked around with idle curiosity.

"As my floret I will need you to live here with me. Additionally, you will need to remain within my presence from here on out."

Dust withered internally. "Because I'm-"

"No," Amaranth cut her off. "You are no longer a danger, nor will you ever be. However, because of my alterations to you, if I were to leave you alone you'd soon feel depressed, aimless, and lethargic to a degree that is entirely unethical. I-" It paused, tension returning in the form of vines tightening into knots in it's chest. "I am sorry."

Amaranth seemed to pace aimlessly for a moment, stepping towards Dust before pausing in thought before stepping in a different direction. Each time another stutter resonated through it's melody that Dust's body happily mimicked, and each skip in it's song made Dust's heart twist in uncertainty inside of her.

Amaranth's mouth was slow to move across it's next words, as if afraid each one would shatter at the slightest misstep. "I... do not wish to be overly controlling towards you beyond what is necessary, though. Nor do I intend to force you into any romantic connotations usually associated with such ownership. You are caged, I know, but," This time Amaranth bit on it's lip, and Dust unconsciously mirrored the gesture. "You still deserve as much independence as can be afforded you, I think."

Dust spent a long moment mulling over Amaranth's words. Worry of wasting its time didn't mean much of anything when she could quite literally feel its patience humming along behind her own eyes, and she couldn't deny the truth behind its words as felt its guilt pulse through her own heart. But that guilt carried a weight of its own, and that weight dredged through her altered mind.

"Do you not want me?" She whispered, fearful of the answer even as she felt it bloom like a light in her mind.

Amaranth rushed to her side and fell to its knees before her, gripping her two hands in six of its own as it stared into her eyes. "Dust, I have unraveled every piece of your mind and held each string in the palm of my hand. I've broken every individual nerve in your body just to slave them to a pattern of my own making. I've altered you in a way that can never be undone and forced you to rest at my heel." A shiver bloomed from within its core, and slipped across its form to chase along Dust's skin. "I want you, but I have bent you so out of shape that if I were to ask, your brain would fold over itself to find an excuse to want me back, and I don't wish to force more from you than I already have."

Dust slipped her hands from its own and grabbed it by the shoulders, pulling it in tight before wrapping her arms through its chest to hold it. She buried her own face through the leaves and branches of its body as she brought it against her, bathed her own mind into the deepest touches of the affini's rhythm and felt her own consciousness scatter upon the wind of its pulse. "Want me." She said firmly, even as that want became her own and seized control from her. "Want me so much that you can't let go, you dumb plant."

Amaranth hugged Dust back in turn. It didn't need to reply with words at that point, as the song of their hearts intertwined was enough for the both of them to know that it already did.

## POST-SCRIPT

Vitus rather enjoyed the mundanity of living on Brypso 3 37 at this point. While it had all been rather exciting to see the world change under their steps when the affini first arrived, they had quickly grown tired of waking up each day to find some new oddity had cropped up and complicated matters every sodding day. No, they much preferred the mundanity of having a wonderfully unproductive time adoring their floret in the archeobureaucracy office, then getting dinner with their floret at a nice restaurant on the way home, and then cuddling all through the night with their floret and their floret's 3 dozen stuffed animals.

So comfortable in that routine were they that they had grown to assume nothing strange or unusual would happen anymore, even as they saw a floret chase after a doll on a string, leap ten feet into the air to grab it with her mouth, and then land in a rolling tackle across a grassy hill wherein she promptly curled around the doll and seemed to be petting it quite intensely. Their floret, blazed off her ass entirely, similarly saw nothing particularly strange about that beyond an excited sort of glee over the display of athletic prowess.

That illusion was then immediately shattered when Vitus saw that same floret peek up from the doll with a smear of blood and foam viscera coated over her jaw, eyes glittering like wide saucers in the sunset light while her nails cut through the cloth with the same ease as a knife.

Vitus decided to borrow a terran term and promptly thought 'what the FUCK!?'.

But Vitus' floret was simply too baked to even notice nor care about the stutter in her owner's step, and soon pulled on their vine to bring them back to the topic at hand. Vitus huffed to themselves. Whatever was going on with that floret, they decided they wouldn't let it bother them any more and promptly continued walking on their merry way.

## POST-POST-SCRIPT

Mercy's pulse thundered in her chest as she ran through the woods. She had already run herself past the point of exhaustion, yet for her efforts all she had accomplished was to delay the inevitable. Clawed hands wrapped around her throat from behind as the vampire tackled her, sending them both sprawling to the ground and rolling across vines. The thing attacking her used that time to wrap itself around her body, pinning her arms down to her sides between its strong thighs as its hands tore through her shirt.

Only a second after the night air graced her neck did the vampire's breath run against her skin, followed soon after by the chill of its nose brushing against her jugular. It moved with an energetic fury, unnatural strength holding her head down and to the side as it sniffed against her skin, trailed a line down the length of her neck.

Mercy snapped out of her shock to scream, and was summarily silenced by the vampire grabbing her face and SNARLING into her ear. A fresh wave of shock smashed into her brain then, which was soon complimented by an unnatural sense of calm pouring out from her skull.

Serotonin for a dying breath, her mind rudely suggested.

Regardless of its validity the calm left Mercy in a limp state of acceptance as the vampire clung tightly to her form. In fact, she could nearly describe it as cuddling her if it weren't for the part where it was clawing about her shoulder and licking its lips. Once satisfied with whatever search it had been involved in, the vampire suddenly froze up and, with a precision wholly unlike its chaotic movements before, locked its lips over her shoulder and scraped her fangs along Mercy's skin.

As soon as the first drops of blood slipped free from her fresh wounds the vampire snapped back into an energetic spree, lapping at her flesh greedily to find it's fill. The initial pain of it's cutting soon dulled into a warmth that seeped out from her wound to drag her body down into a dulled haze. Nothing nearly as strong as her owner's touch, unfortunately. But enough to leave her unable to struggle out of it's grasp as it provided a sleepy haze to her consciousness. Her struggles had died down to nothing by then anyway.

Once the initial buzz wore off Mercy became aware of some... other facets involved in the vampire feeding off of her. It's arms were wrapped around her chest in a tight hug, it's legs around her waist, and it writhed as if it were getting fucked silly as it's tongue dug into her wounds. Warmth had bloomed in it's chest, which mirrored the warmth that was bleeding out of hers. When she looked down to it, she saw the vampire's eyes were dilated wide open while a rapturous smile painted it's mouth.

'Stars, it's going to eat me and I'm too stoned to stop thinking about how pretty it is.' Mercy thought. At least she was stoned. This would have probably been much scarier if she still had the awareness to properly appreciate it. The vampire's claws sudden dug into her back as it tightened it's hold on her, lifting her body off the ground and burying its face into her shoulder, hips resting upon her thigh and \*squeezing\* and oh my god it was cumming off of eating her already oh dirt.

A burst of tension across its body preceded a sudden shout of joy, followed by a decaying whimper of satisfaction as the two dropped back down into a limp mess on the floor. All the energy in the vampire's body simply vanished in that moment, leaving the once iron clad bounds now more like a particularly warm blanket of flesh atop her body. Well, a limp blanket that was also still licking at her skin and snor-

Mercy blinked out of her play mentality to look down at Dust, immediately gasping with the sort of glee she usually reserved for kittens for bunnies that were especially cute.

That vampire had fallen asleep right on top of her!

Mercy proceeded to grip her chest and cry from how adorable Dust was being, even if she did still have some of the floret's blood smeared around her face. Oh stars between this and the light high Dust's spit gave her, Mercy already wanted to book another playdate like this. The myriad vines draped around the two writhed about, and soon after Amaranth suddenly slithered in beside them with a medical kit in hand.

"I dare say Dust seemed to enjoy herself tonight. How about you, dear?" It asked with a smile as it tried to clean her wound. A more difficult task than it should have been, considering Dust's sleeping body was quite insistent about sticking close to Mercy.

Mercy paused to reflect upon herself. The chase was fun, of course. Having a hot feral vampire chasing after her fang and claw out with glowing red eyes *\*was\** the sort of thing she'd have read a number of doujins about before. Getting caught? Oh she enjoyed that too, especially once the bite started to hit her like the fastest shot of weed she'd had yet. But...

Mercy once more glanced over to the sleeping vampire that absolutely refused to be pulled off of her body, even as it's mouth was handily distracted by one of Amaranth's vines. Definitely better after cuddles than she used to get before she became a floret.

Mercy smiled softly and, as soon as Amaranth was done wrapping a bandage over her shoulder, reciprocated the hug to this adorable little undead. "I loved it, thank you."

## **POST- POST-POST-SCRIPT**

Amaranth had a sneaking suspicion that Dust's aging process was, perhaps, a touch different from normal terrans. Perhaps it was the fact that over the many years in it's care she had not shown a sign of withering or wrinkling, and had in fact only seemed to flush with even more vibrant life with each passing year. Perhaps it was that even after her 100th birthday her body was still as unnaturally athletic and flexible as if it were her 20th again. Perhaps it was that she was putting candles onto Dust's birthday cake and had run out of room because, apparently, it

was not meant to hold more than 243 candles across its surface and Amaranth still had a few dozen more left to place on it.

A spare set of vines curled out to grab a tablet and confirm that the average human lifespan, even with all the relevant treatments available at the time, still did not put a person's expected prime to last near 300 years or more.

"Dust, dear." Amaranth leaned over backwards to poke it's head into the dining room and look past the myriad of guests to the girl wearing a frankly silly amount of birthday hats. "Have you considered you might be slightly more long lived than the average human?"

"What, like I'm some kind of sexy immortal vampire?" She asked back.

"Well, this is your 287th birthday."

Dust simply looked confused at that. "Is it? I haven't been counting."

"And you haven't shown any sign of aging since the day I first took you."

Dust glanced down at her own body, still hale and healthy as ever.

"And, well, you are sexy and a vampire already."

Dust stared blankly forward for a moment as she considered this, then gasped excitedly as she shouted "I'm a sexy immortal vampire!?!?"

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On her 1000th birthday, Amaranth decided that the more reasonable course of action for candle placement on Dust's cake was to simply get candles in the shape of numbers. It didn't even mind all the teasing it got from Dust over not having thought of that sooner. To Amaranth, those hundreds of years of loving affection were more than well worth the occasional bit of being rightfully teased silly.

I could have gone through and turned all the --- into proper page breaks but eh this was already 51 pages in draft which was, like, 40 more pages than I intended whoops

## **A Shadow On The Waves**

I actually wrote this one back when I was young and foolish and had only written like ten chapters of abscission, when I suddenly got struck by an idea and proceeded to stay up

until 5am writing this one in one fugue state before immediately collapsing on my couch and sleeping.

I've also been told that this is the best thing I've ever written, so, don't know how to feel about that in hindsight

ANYWAY

CW for:

not a lot of actual kink in this one?

but oh boy is there ennui

there is so much ennui

i had to reread this to edit it and then I just stared out my window for a while as I contemplated my feelings

Theta didn't know what they had lost.

They were born of a stray utilitarian's dream and a wayward attempt at creating yet another subspecies offshoot of humans. Born inside a glass womb and frozen for 5200 years, Theta didn't know they had lost a malign family to an ethic's committee's review and a lengthy attempt to disassemble a cult's many labs. When they finally drew their first breath they didn't know they had lost countless years to a machine's frozen hand, nor did they know the names they were supposed to speak nor the hands they were meant to hold.

Raised on the surface of Calypso 12, they didn't know of the countless structures that had once dotted it's surface, the mountain ranges that had been eroded by time, the people and cultures lost to dust in the wind. They never knew the days where the ground had run thin and the air flew foul. They never knew the oceans weren't always brimming with fish, nor the ground teeming with insects. Theta didn't even see signs of what was once a road until they were already 20, nor the rotted remains of an armored truck's tritsteel hull until they were nearly 30.

Theta's personal possessions only began with a box of inherited goods from one of their genetic donors, and a gifted home that overlooked the sunsets on a bay. They grew up breathing pure ocean air that had once been opaque with smog, walking barefoot through the sand where concrete had been. They looked up into a sky that brimmed with an abundance of brilliant white clouds, where the rare floating structure would occasionally drift through the white blankets in and out of view.

Within the box of goods Theta had found a broken instrument, and when they had become an adult they sought out a practiced hand to repair it. Their days were filled with a casual leisure, and they took to filling their free time with learning to play the old thing, and soon after they had developed a habit of wandering into the small village that perched on the ocean's edge to play in an open bar that let the light of the setting sun in each night.

Perched on their small stage, Theta didn't know the days where bombs had once fallen beneath their very feet, nor the screams of anguish that dotted the long since lost streets that had once crossed around it. They didn't know the history of the musical tool in their hand, nor the countless songs written for it. They didn't even know a lick of musical theory.

But despite all that Theta didn't know, they knew they enjoyed the awkward noises they had made when they first picked up the instrument. They had a countless abundance of free time, blissfully unaware of the fears of losing their home, their clothes, their food. They climbed the trees in the forests that overgrew land that once held malls, traveled the beaten paths of valleys that held tall grass for miles on end, and they played their instrument every day. On sunny days they'd recline on the beach, letting the sun kiss their deeply tanned flesh and play their instrument until sweat coated their form. On rainy days they would perch under a balcony and play in tune to the raindrops that tapped over their cover while neighbors would lean out their window to listen.

When Theta played in the bar, coated in the dying lights of the day's sun, they played music they had fabricated from lessons learned only by practice. They lost themselves to the daze of the songs they had formed listening to the waves crash around their ankles, the chirps of insects nested within the trees, the hum of the wind through the shaded paths of the village. They played until the sun dipped beneath the edge of the ocean waves, giving one last brilliant emerald flash that covered them in a green light. When they were feeling particularly happy, they would time their musical finish to that glimmer of verdant light, and leave the bar in a moment of silence with the first touch of night's shade in tandem.

---

Perched along the length of the bar sat the usual array of Theta's friends. Cirsium, an affini from a distant world who had settled in this village seeking rest from a life of idle science labs. Alette, Cirsium's floret that she had met within a station built into an orbital network densely packed around a distant gas giant. Rye, a beastial person whose wide frame belied their preference for simply sleeping in a sunbeam all day.

"Please tell me you remembered it this time," Theta asked, unaware how the timbre of their voice had been quite literally engineered to be like music to the affini's ears. From their pocket they produced a glass cube with thin layers of opaque material sealed within, an arcane memento from the inherited goods that had somehow traveled the many years without once being scratched.

The affini, ever the flirt, made a mock show humming and hawing over the possibility of her forgetting once again. "I don't know," She said in a playful tone. "I was so busy adoring my lovely Alette all morning, I might have forgotten again."

"You did do that and you did forget." Alette cut in, producing a handheld machine from her bag. "But I remembered."

Theta gasped excitedly and ran over to Alette's side. "Alette, you wonderful bean, you are my hero." They said, practically leaping upon her in a tight hug, before disentangling themselves to step over to Rye and give him a warm kiss upon his fluffy cheeks as well. Alette, meanwhile, gave a kiss to Cirsium's cheek as condolence for her having forgotten, again, to bring the requested machine.

Rye hummed idly, his voice a warm rumble of a purr as he did, wide finger tracing the rim of his long finished drink. "So what do you think it is this time?" He said, reminiscing over the many relics and knickknacks Theta would excitedly come running in with when they found them lying on the wayside.

"I hope," They said, happily fiddling with the old device. "that whatever it is, it's interesting. No more old... what did you call them, Cirsium?"

"Bullet shells."

"Whatever those were," Theta continued. After a small twist and a click, a slot on the side of the device popped open, the perfect size for the glass cube Theta had brought. With another click and a twist, they popped the cube in and spun the machine back around.

Nothing happened.

"It works, right?" Alette asked.

Cirsium leaned over her floret to inspect the device. "It should, it took me a while to hunt down and find one that worked and I'd be quite upset for it to break now that it's here."

"You need to push the On button." Rye said, and clicked the little green dot on the top of the machine. A flat pane of glass flicked to life, littered with a countless array of staticked dots that slowly organized into an image. The view inside the glass pane was completely unknown to Theta. Tall structures of solid stone, glass, and steel. Sharpened metal shapes covering the space below it. Black pillars of smoke in the distance.

"It's a photo?" Cirsium cocked her head to the side.

Theta flicked a switch on the side of the machine, and the image switched to one of crowds of people wearing strange fashion and packed tightly together in a street. Another flick changed the view to a deep trench in between rusted factories that overflowed with water. Another revealed two people wrapped up together in each other's arms, perched before a soft fire in their home.

Rye tapped a talon next to the edge of the glass pane. "See those numbers? Those look like co-ordinates."

Alette leaned in closer to peer at the small red scribbles in the edge of the pictures. "So they are."

"The stellar ID matches this planet. Where did you find this, Theta?" Cirsium added.

Theta flicked the switch again, changing the picture to an expanse of cultured crops under a toxic sky. "Inheritance from one of my genetic donors, lady told me I was the closest relative." They answered, not really aware of what it meant.

Theta didn't know how that work painted their flesh. Wide eyes of a brilliant purple hue, soft lips that shined beautifully when they smiled, dark hazel flesh that ran with soft gradients and sharp lines to highlight their form. All markers of a specific view of beauty that Theta never once even considered. To them, their appearance was wholly unremarkable. To a stranger many stars away, they were an unreal vision.

"Do you think we can visit these places?" Theta asked.

"It's been a long time since these were taken, I think. But if any were taken in this area we could easily find them tomorrow." Rye answered

"Can we please?" Theta asked excitedly, grabbing Rye's forearm as they did.

Alette turned to Cirsium. "Would we be able to use your boat tomorrow?"

"That sounds like a delightful little adventure," Cirsium smiled in response.

"Wonderful!" Theta practically leapt out of their seat, machine in hands, leaping into the air with fresh energy from the prospect of a new flight of fancy. "I should get these printed- can I get these printed?"

Rye plucked the machine out of their hands to inspect it, then flicked a button on the side. With a soft whirr small paper squares slid out of the side of the device, one by one until a stack of black sheets with white frames landed on the counter.

"Oh, that works." Theta clambered up over Rye's shoulder, wide eyes staring intently towards the prints. Cirsium meanwhile took Alette in hand and scooted closer, moving her floret to her lap in the process. They all stood in silent awe as the black tones shifted into color replicas of the images they had seen on the glass pane, with the numbers in the corner preserved in bright red hues.

Rye plucked the photo of the two humans perched before a fireplace and set it aside. "I think that one is a bit personal for us to hunt down." He rumbled.

“That one is on the other side of the planet, so it’ll be a little out of the way.” Cirsium said as she plucked another photo from the pile and set it aside.

The lot repeated this process through the pile of pictures one by one, sorting out the sights that were of a personal value like a photo of a mysterious person standing next to an array of baked goods, or a close up shot of a stuffed animal Theta couldn’t recognize. Next went the pictures of places that would be lost to time, such as inside shots of cramped architecture. Thirdly went the pictures that were simply too far away to be of use, like a lovely photo of the world taken from a long lost space station. Theta couldn’t help but notice that the planet seemed far more grey than they knew it to be now, but they didn’t have the knowledge to understand why.

The fourth group of photos to go were events that Theta didn’t understand. The deeper into the pile of pictures they went, the more common those photos were. Great oval shapes dotting the horizon, fire in the distance, rubble through the streets, a curtain of light that crossed the mountains. On and on the pictures went, and each sent a chill down Theta’s spine with the certainty that they couldn’t even begin to know the meaning of it. “Do you know what any of these are?” Alette had asked her affini.

“I’m afraid these pre-date me by a long time, little floret.” Cirsium had answered.

When all was said and done they were left with three photos on their to do list. One, a picture of a great tree on a hill. “That’s an old species.” Cirsium had said. “It could easily still be around.” The second was a series of mechanical structures dotting the length of the oceanside. The structures were most assuredly gone to time, but the location was not too far. Last was a tower on a cliff whose construction was unlike any of the other buildings they had seen. That picture was the last one the person had taken.

“We’ll need to take a train to reach the tree, but the other two we can reach by boat.” Cirsium said as she bundled up the photos they had set aside and returned them to Theta.

“Train tomorrow, boat the next day?” Rye asked.

“I like that plan.” Alette answered.

“I’ll meet you all at the station then?” Theta replied.

“It’s a date.” Cirsium confirmed.

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The next day the sun shone softly in brilliant rays of light through the blanket of clouds. When Theta walked to the train station they admired the distant view of rolling hills mottled by spots of brilliant sunlight and the soft cast shade beyond them, ever unaware that once those hills had been mountainous in their heights.

At the station they leapt onto the platform with a comfortable ease, unaware that many ages ago they would have ever had to fish out their wallet and hunt down a ticket, then leapt into Rye's open arms for a hug before clambering up onto his shoulders to play lookout for Cirsium. The affini and her pet arrived soon after, the two wearing matching sundresses that complemented Cirsium's radiant aura of leaves which danced around her in the winds. "There you are!" Theta said with a warm joy, arms resting comfortably atop Rye's head.

"Sorry we're late," Cirsium said. "I was so busy adoring Alette's beautiful cheeks that I completely lost track of time!"

"It's true." Alette huffed. "She wouldn't stop pinching them."

The four shared a comfortable laugh at that. Less than a leisurely hour later the train arrived, and the four boarded to enjoy their trip. Within the metal ride Theta found a place to sit next to Rye, arm wrapped around his and leaning comfortably into his fur, kicking their feet up in the luxurious space and as ever blissfully unaware of the idea of trains being austere, underfunded, overcrowded machines. From beyond the window the pair saw the world pass them by, sun drifting up from behind the distant mountains as it went. Rolling hills became brilliant clear lakes, which soon became a forest of massive red trees that reached high into the sky. Beyond that was a tunnel which the train sped through before revealing the wide valleys between the stone giants.

Cirsium was the first to notice their stop approaching, and promptly ran around rousing everyone from their dazy mid-travel nap to actually get them to make their intended escape. The four ran out into the mountainous air, Theta running into a nearby clothing dispensary to get a warm coat to wear over their linen crop top as soon as the first cold chill hit them. They didn't know to expect the chill this high up.

Together the four hitched a ride on a tram out to the base of the valley, where even from a distance they could see the tree in the photo still grew. In the years since the photo was taken it had only grown ever more grand, reaching up into the sky and creating a wide canvas of leaves that blanketed the valley floor in shade. Once they reached the bottom of the path the four practically ran out of the tram, across the bridge that cleared a natural moat, and off over the beaten path to the tree's base.

"It's still here!" Theta shouted excitedly, practically jumping the whole way and throwing their fists into the air as they went.

"Of course it is," Cirsium wore an open tone of pride. "I told you it would be, didn't I?"

Alette, who was holding Cirsium's hand the entire spree, did not sound convinced. "You also said we'd be on time today." Cirsium folded up in embarrassment for being called out.

Theta clambered up over the massive roots of the tree, handhold by handhold making their way up to rest against the trunk, spinning around to sit down on one of the gnarled bits of bark and admire the view beyond. Thousands upon thousands of years ago that tree had been the only mark of beauty in this area, the rest long since poisoned by mercury and apathy. But Theta only saw the fields of green that spread out in every direction, marked by the tram line that led further down to a mountainside town and up back to the train.

Rye climbed up after them, Cirsium and Alette clinging to his shoulders for an easy ride, and all three took a seat to soak in the view. Theta drew in a deep breath, enjoying the feel of cold air dancing through their sinuses and bringing a momentary clarity to the air that flowed through their chest. "It's beautiful up here." They said with a wistful smile.

"We should come again some time." Rye said.

"Oh?" Theta said, leaning over to put an arm on Rye's shoulder. "Did you finally find the will to ask me out?"

"What can I say?" Rye held up their hands in mock surrender. "You're simply so beautiful that I've been intimidated all this time."

"Oh hush," Theta waved off the compliment. "I'm hardly anything special."

"Oh my god you two are incorrigible," Alette blew a stack of loose leaves into the two's direction. "Haven't you been fucking for months now?"

Theta broke out into joyous laughter, catching the leaves that flew their way before they slipped and landed into Rye's lap.

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The four retained their high spirits all through the day, feeling the fresh rush of spirit as they hopped the tram to go down and get lunch. Together they sat at a table with a beautiful open view of the fields where goats grazed and flowers waved in the wind. Together they wandered the central paths of the town all hand in hand before the sun began to creep away and they all returned to the tram back up.

Back on the train heading towards home the four were full of energy, excitedly chattering about over all the beautiful things they had seen on their little journey. When the tunnel became the forest became the lake again their spirits had calmed down, and Theta plucked out their instrument once more to improvise a tune inspired by the day's sights. Alette and Cirsium cuddled up together and sighed wistfully as the sights drifted by outside once more. Rye, meanwhile, tried to be polite but couldn't help but enjoy the sight of Theta's soft tummy fat as they danced to their own tune.

By the time the train returned to their own station the night had already returned and blanketed the bay in the soft glow of the night's stars. "Tomorrow we take the boat, right?" Theta asked as they stepped off the train, holding Rye's and Alette's hands comfortably.

"Of course." Cirsium answered, holding Alette's other hand herself. "I'll just come by and pick you up at yours?"

"Perfect! At the pier?"

"Sounds lovely." Cirsium and Alette took turns giving Theta a kiss on each cheek, which Theta returned in kind. "See you tomorrow!" The affini and floret waved them goodnight, retreating off into the dark together.

Theta turned to Rye, still holding his hand. "So, sounds like you might as well crash at mine again."

"I can't believe Alette thinks we're fucking." Rye sighed, putting a paw over his face.

"Shh, I'll message her later to explain, okay?" Theta said, putting their free hand on Rye's cheek. There were many things Theta didn't know, but the platonic nature of Rye's affections was one thing they did know quite well.

"Thank you," Rye's voice melded back into a purr, warm vibrations playing through their body to resonate into Theta's hand. "I mean it."

---

The next day the sun rose to greet the world with an orange glow, and Theta greeted Cirsium and Alette by running off the pier into a jumping stride, misjudging the distance, and landing face-first into the ocean water. Luckily, Rye had predicted their excitable nature and had told Theta to wear a swimsuit before going out and leave all the pictures in Rye's bag with a beach towel.

Ten minutes and one awkward swim back into Cirsium's boat later they took off. The vessel slid into a position that just barely grazed over the ocean's surface, cutting a line through the surface off its razor edge and sending the wind whipping through the lot's hair, fur, and leaves as they traveled. Theta faced the forward path with an open smile, unaware that such a trip would be considered an unlikely luxury in days long past. They only knew that they loved to be with their friends, enjoying the myriad pleasures of the world in the moment that they happened. They delighted in the wind strikes of air that flowed over their skin, sent their hoodie dancing about behind them like a cape in the breeze, and filled their lungs with a crisp taste of salt as they went.

Two hours and one break for cheese and crackers later the lot drifted up near a jagged patch of massive stones dotting the length of the beach. Theta held up the photo of the rusty factories for comparison, and found they could only barely see any comparison. "Are you sure this is the place?" They turned to the affini and asked.

"Absolutely sure." Cirsium brought the boat down to a soft pace, letting it float back down to rest on the ocean's surface properly as they took in the sight.

Alette looked at the photo to the beach again, frowning in uncertainty. "What do you think happened to the stuff that was here?"

Cirsium shrugged. "Don't know. Time? Maybe it all just washed out into the ocean one day."

Rye rumbled in response. "Or it got disassembled."

Theta sighed. "Well, I guess we got lucky with that tree then, huh?"

"I doubt a tree could wash out to sea from a mountain valley." Alette answered flatly. Theta and Cirsium broke into a fit of giggles at that, but Rye just seemed confused at why they had found that funny.

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It took the four another three hours before they found the tower in the last photo. The cliff that the building had rested upon had long since crumbled into a small peninsula, but the tower still remained. Resting at its base was a building made of wood and surrounded by lush fields of plants. There was even a dock, with another boat lashed to its side. Beyond it there was nothing but grass as far as the eye could see, curling up the length of the once-cliff-now-slope before disappearing into the bushes of the wild.

The four didn't hesitate to drift up to the dock and step off onto it. As they did, a stranger emerged from the garden nearby, standing several heads taller than even Cirsium did. Theta strolled on towards the garden, holding up the photo in one hand and looking up at the tower that looked as pristine now as it did in the picture taken long long ago. "Hello there!" Theta said with a wide smile, happily bounding up to the garden's fence and resting against it. "Can I bother you for a moment of your time?"

The stranger approached closer, revealing herself to be an affini just as Cirsium was, but one that had decorated herself with an array of yellow flowers that circled her head like a crown before trailing down to drape over her shoulders. "Hello there, strangers. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Cirsium, Alette, and Rye all stepped forward and introduced themselves one by one, giving a polite bow to the affini as they did. Last was Theta, who flipped the picture to reveal its contents

to her as they spoke. "I'm Theta! It's nice to meet you! We found these old photos and felt like going on an adventure to find out where they were taken, which led us right here."

"Oh!" She leaned in closer, squinting as she looked over the picture. "It's been a long, long time since my home looked like that." She said, "But do please come in, if you've come all this way it's only polite for me to give you the tour."

"This is your home?" Alette asked as she gestured towards the tower.

"Yes, yes, well, sort of." The affini answered, then waved her hands around as she stopped in place. "But wait, first, where are my manners?" She twirled around, kicking up her myriad vines and leaves into a billowing wave that circled around her twice before curling up tightly.

"Barbarea Exigis, fifty-sixth bloom, at your service."

Cirsium seemed to tense up in shock at that.

"This tower you see is one of our many carbon recapture stations that we had set up a long time ago. Well, was, it broke down a few thousand years ago and there is no more need for it, so..." She gestured vaguely to the side. "I guess it's just a pretty sight, now."

Theta didn't know what it meant to carbon recapture.

"I've been living here since it was first put down though, and in more recent years I've decided to try to... pretty up a bit I suppose." She giggled softly to herself as she walked through the garden, showing them the various plants she had grown. Myriads of flowers, bushes, thorny shapes and curled stems all abound. She had arches made of trees that intertwined together and cast their shadows over a fountain in the middle where water sprung between bundled roses to flow into a stone bowl. She led them to a series of wide stone benches in the comfortable shade and took a seat, gesturing them to do the same. There she asked them of their stories, where they came from and who they were, the things they had seen, and she hung on their every word.

From Rye she heard tales of a home on the other side of the planet, where he had spent his days fixing old vehicles before a wanderlust had him packing a bag and taking to the road. From Alette she heard of the gas giant where rings of stations were all connected together into a net that covered it's entire atmosphere, with great platforms dipping into the cloud layers and stripping mass for what felt as if an endless supply of raw materials. From Cirsium she heard of how the affini had wandered into the station on an idle whim, and found a girl who detested the idle busywork of shipping gaseous masses from one end of a machine to another.

When she turned to Theta they had already sifted through Rye's bag and pulled out the stacks of photos they had set aside. "You lived here all the way back then, right? Could you tell us about these pictures?" They asked, inadvertently cutting off Barbarea's questioning in the process.

"Of course, dear." She said, plucking the photos one by one. "Ah... these are quite old." She plucked the photo of the oval shapes dotting the sky. "See these? Those were affini ships back when we first landed here. Back when it was... honestly I don't even remember what the old government was called at this point. But when our ships flew down we saw this world poisoned near to death, and imperialists as we tend to be, decided to take over it." She huffed at the memory, sending a gust of wind dancing out along the sides of her neck.

Theta looked up at the sky and saw only brilliant blues mixed with beautiful white tones. They looked out to the sea and saw only blue-green waves playing along the golden shore.

"You wouldn't know about back then, would you?" Barbarea continued, sifting through the photos as she did. "It's been so long I suppose most wouldn't. It was a different time and place back then. The world was coated in cities and roads, the air was full of smog, and there were so many more people than there are now."

"Did you save it?" Alette asked, leaning against Cirsium.

"We silenced the machines, broke the weapons, claimed the people we deemed threats, but honestly.... No, I don't think we really saved anyone that day." Barbarea's face bent into a frown. "Theta, was it? Have you lived your whole life here?"

"Most of it," They answered. "I was told that I was born elsewhere, but when I was very young I was moved here."

"Hrmm, and have you ever felt hunger?"

"No."

"Have you ever worried you'd be left out in the cold, alone and afraid?"

"Not once." Theta scratched the side of their head, not understanding this line of questioning.

"And when you need things, do you ever feel as if you won't be able to get them, even if it means life or death?"

Theta shrugged. "Not as far as I can recall."

"How about you, Alette. When you left Cirsium, did you go with her by choice?"

"Of course! We'd already been dating for a while by then."

"And you Cirsium, did you ever feel that this human was afraid of you?"

"Not for a second," Cirsium answered, ruffling her florets hair as she did.

"And you, Rye, how many of your kind are around?"

"Uhm, a lot?" Rye answered. "Is that unusual?"

"When we arrived, yes. You were near extinction." Barbarea slipped up from her seat. "I suppose we saved at least four people then, even if I only know of you now."

Theta cocked their head in confusion. "I don't understand."

"That's quite alright. How about I treat you to dinner and tea?" She gestured to her home at the base of the tower, and the four agreed readily to share dinner with her.

---

"So tell me, how did you happen upon those photos?" Barbarea asked as she set their plates and poured their tea all at the same time in a delicate dance of silverware and vines.

Theta proudly produced the glass cube from Rye's bag in response. "From this! I got it from an inheritance package a while back, with this instrument." As soon as they produced the instrument Barbarea's dance froze in absolute shock, her eyes flying wide open as they glanced over the shape.

"...I'm sorry, were there any people in the photos you found?" She asked, her voice gone faint but tinted with a nebulous emotion. Rye produced the personal selection of pictures and handed them over to her, and Barbarea's shock turned into an open gasp as she started to sift through them and pulled out all the pictures that had a certain woman in them. Her vines quickly returned to setting the table, now shaking awkwardly as they did while her eyes remained locked onto the images before her. "Where did you say you got these?" She asked, her voice now little more than a whisper.

"An inheritance package." Theta asked, bewildered beyond comparison. "I was told I was the closest relative available, but I don't know who it was from myself."

Barbarea held up a picture as she turned towards Theta, revealing that a dark blue sap had begun to flow from the cracks in the wood around her eyes. She stepped over to Theta quickly, putting one hand to their cheek as she held up the photo against them. "You look just like her." She said.

Theta glanced left and right awkwardly, unsure what was happening. "Um, what do you mean?"

"I- I'm sorry," Barbarea retreated suddenly. "I just, I'm just shocked, there was someone I knew a long time ago, she came here hoping to escape the chaos way back when and-" She put her

head into her hands, breathing in sharply to create a breeze through her body before she continued. "I'm sorry, here, let me finish setting dinner and then I'll explain."

Barbarea moved with a quiet passion after that, hurriedly giving all of her guests a more than abundant serving of food as she did before taking her seat at the head of the table.

"Again, I'm sorry for my little outburst there." She started. "Back then, when we arrived, things were chaos. We saw ourselves as saviours of a wayward species, and paid little mind to how much damage we did as we came down to help them. People fought, and died, to resist us, and when it became apparent they couldn't win they took to more desperate measures in an attempt to stop us."

Theta reached over and took Rye's hand as the story continued, glancing down upon the curtain of light depicted in one of the pictures on the table.

"They tried to glass the planet. We stopped them, but it still caused horrific damage to the atmosphere and ended a large portion of life here. When I saw the devastation from the ground, and all the weeping bodies that passed my way, I just, I... guess that was when my illusions started to break." Barbarea paused once again, hands tensing against the table. "Cirsium, I understand this may be upsetting for you to hear if I continue."

"Please continue," Cirsium answered, looking towards Barbarea unblinkingly. "I'm listening."

"When the affini invade, we hurt people. We drive them into a corner and then they hurt other people in turn. When we claim their resistance and break them we cause untold amounts of pain and fear in the process, and pat ourselves on the back for doing a good job just because they can no longer complain about our actions." She said. Theta reached over with their other hand and took hers, and Barbarea accepted the gesture with a quiet relief. "After I saw the glassing I turned to the affini in our ships and saw them celebrating their success while the scars on the population here still burned. From this tower I saw the whole process of the affini establishing the puppet governments, the luxury machines, creating this... loving tyranny of a government we live under now."

Barbarea paused, tightening her grip on Theta's hand.

"Theta, dear, you've been gifted your whole life as a beneficiary of all the pain that happened back in those days. All these thousands of years for the wounds to wither away into forgotten scars and for the world where the affini's rule is as natural as breathing."

Theta shivered. "I... I don't understand." They said, their voice shaking with uncertainty.

"It will probably take you a long time to understand, and I'm sorry for that."

Theta fell silent, eyes glued on the curtain of light captured in time in the photo below.

“And what of the woman in your picture?” Rye asked, sensing Theta’s paralysis.

“Ah, yes, she was a... friend, I suppose you could say. Back then, after the glassing, Ezra had run away from the cities in the hopes of outrunning the rebel terrorists that were still active then. They’d-” Barbarea’s voice hitched on the words, but only for a moment. “They’d destroyed her home, killed her family on the belief that they were affini sympathisers, and she was afraid they’d come for her. Had nothing but a camera and that instrument on her person when she found me and collapsed in my front yard.

“I gave her a home to stay, protected her as best I could, built the first house that this one was based on just for her, and in return she gave me a friendship that warmed my soul. Many nights I spent listening to her play that instrument as I drifted off to sleep.” Barbarea’s mouth tilted into a smile as she reminisced. “But, sadly, not all things were meant to last. She grew old while I remained young, and before the scars on this world had even begun to heal she parted ways with me.”

“Did you take her as your floret?” Alette asked.

“No,” Barbarea frowned. “Never. She’d thank me for it if I had, but I couldn’t shake the knowledge that it would have been impossible for her to regret it. The influence, it... changes people. Once it begins it’s impossible to truly say the person they were would have still agreed to what they’d become.”

Alette tightened her grip on Cirsium’s hand.

Barbarea relaxed her expression again, tilting her head towards Cirsium. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to undermine your relationship. Things were just... different back then. At least I hope they’re different now.”

Cirsium wrapped her arms around Alette tightly. “I love her,” She said with absolute confidence. “I love her more than anything else in this galaxy, and I would never have asked her to be my floret if she didn’t love me in turn.”

Barbarea’s body seemed to relax at that, leaves settling down around her. “Thank you, Cirsium. I think I’ve been hoping to hear that for a long time.”

“Ma’am,” Theta spoke, rising up suddenly, instrument in hand. “Could I play a song for you?”

Barbarea looked up in open surprise, eyes shining in a myriad array of colors at the sudden prospect. “I- yes.” She then remembered where she was, and added “After dinner?”

Theta looked down at the warm food and flushed a red tone. “After dinner.” They said, and sat back down.

---

After a filling meal the five of them retired to the living room, Theta perched by the fire with instrument in hand and the rest comfortably draped about the room enjoying their tea. "I can't promise to play like Ezra did," Theta said with a quiet sort of comfort. "But I'll play my best for you, ma'am."

Theta didn't know what life Barbarea had lived. They didn't know the explosions that lifted the streets from the earth and sent bodies scattering through the air, or the taste of ozone that would linger on the back of one's tongue for years after the glassing attempt had happened. They didn't know the suffering of those who were broken by forceful hands, or the fear of those who saw phantoms reaching out to them from deadly alleys. Theta didn't know the poisoned oceans or leveled mountains or toxic air. But Theta knew their instrument, they knew their friends, they knew the rhythm of the wind through the branches of trees and the way that the waves would lap at the shore. They knew the slopes of mountains and the sound of fish leaping from rivers.

Theta knew a comfortable life in a world that lingered long after it's destruction, and Theta channeled the sounds of that world into their song. They played until their body drew taut against the rhythm, and sweat beaded down their back from the effort. They played every beat of the soft light in their heart, and tinted it with the warmth they felt when they rested upon Rye's chest or held Alette and Cirsium's hands.

When the last note rung out, Theta opened their eyes to see Barbarea was weeping thick blue tears from her face, a smile warmer than any they had ever seen before joining it. "Thank you," She said, hands over her chest. "I, for a moment it was like she was right here again."

Theta gave a quiet bow to finish their performance. "If it's not too much to ask, could I visit you again sometime?"

"Of course! You're all welcome anytime, I promise. I'll have plenty to eat and tea to drink. Oh, maybe I can bake some cookies for next time, too. Do you all still like cookies these days?"

Theta gasped excitedly. They knew with a beautiful clarity that they loved homemade cookies.

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The next day the four bundled back onto the boat and began their trip back home, all warmed by a lovely breakfast at Barbarea's hands and the embraces they shared before they left. Alette and Cirsium held hands tightly the whole trip back, holding each other lovingly with a new quiet appreciation. Rye watched the skyline roll by, acutely aware of what had once been and why it left.

Theta was sitting by the back of the boat, staring at the picture of the curtain of light that had once damned the world. They didn't see a single sign of such awful events anywhere they had traveled in this day. "Do you think it was worth it?" They mumbled into the wind. The wind didn't answer as it continued to brush across Theta's skin. No plains of grass, valleys in the mountains, lakes of clear water, or beaches of golden sand would answer Theta's voice.

The photo slipped free from between Theta's fingers, and they watched it twirl off into the wind. It danced like a figment of light in the breeze, spiralling about in the air as it flew ever further and further away from them, until it was no more than a shadow floating on the waves of the sea. Then it too vanished, lost in the tides like so much more.

## Thought I'd See You Again

i'mmm ggayyy im gayyyy immmm ggGGggGgggGggayyy

CW for:

bad brain feelings

fear

not so subtle manipulation

coaxing someone into a state of eternal submission

delicious pancakes c:

discussion of horses, whatever those are

Future author note: fun fact when peepers tell me which fic of mine is their favorite this one ends up being their first pick. Which is fitting, as it's grown over time to be mine as well.

"Can I borrow your ear for a moment?" The affini's voice froze the blood in Winter's veins solid. Mentally, she reminded herself of the importance of her rules for slipping under affini's attention. Be polite, follow orders quietly, \*never\* flirt back, and most importantly always give the sense of having somewhere else to be. These were important rules. Necessary rules! Otherwise it was far too easy to give one the wrong impression that you, perhaps, were even a bit interested in being bent into place as their pet and having your will crushed into a fine dust under their heels. However, for \*this\* affini in particular she was distinctly aware that most of these would not help.

She couldn't give the sense that she had somewhere else to be. Alone in the diner on a night of heavy rain, she very distinctly had nowhere to be except right here and wait for food. Around her through the dim lighting she could make out the silhouettes of other patrons, far too few in number. Functionally cornered, damn it. Never flirt back was easy enough though, considering she was already just barely containing a growing wave of panic that wanted to overcome her nerves at the sheer sight of them. Follow orders quietly. That... please don't come up. Be polite. Right. Just have to be polite. She gestured to the seat across from her, silently making sure that

her hat was still down and her scarf still covered her neck. Easy enough to pretend to be cold in this state.

The affini slithered into place across from her, body curling in a sinuous motion that betrayed the falsehood of her silhouette. Winter flinched instinctively as the full enormity of the affini entered into her direct vision, reminding her once more of how *\*small\** she felt in their world. "Thank you, dear. See, I've recently taken a fascination with terran literature and I wanted to hear your thoughts on the matter."

"I'm not especially studied in the field," Winter answered curtly.

"That's quite alright," They smiled down at her, familiar verdant eyes glittering in the dim light. "It concerns a rather glaring hole in affini knowledge. Your... horses, as they're called. I've been reading quite a bit of books and poetry about them, and yet while there is so much written about them, nobody seems to know quite what they actually are anymore. Isn't that odd?" The affini tilted her head as she asked, scale-like plates that coated her torso shifting as she moved. Winter could see the faint points of needles hiding beneath the curtain and winced internally. It'd be fine. She was fine. Nothing was going to happen.

"I suppose so," Winter replied, this time quietly. She was staring at the plant's chest too much. Too focused on the needles ahead of her to keep properly aware of her surroundings. Affini could strike from any number of possible angles, after all.

"Quite, yet despite this the poetic descriptors still persist. I've read quite a handful of people who use flowery language to describe a majestic creature roaming free across great plains, about something untameable and wonderful and beautiful. Yet, simultaneously, there is just as much if not more so about the process of *\*breaking\** such creatures and how wonderful they are once their spirit is torn into shape." They spoke, and Winter wanted to crawl out of her skin and melt through the floor. This was fine, she told herself. It was just a normal affini conversation, probably. Of course their kind would be so fascinated with how other species have been... domesticated. Stars, that word feels gross on her mind. "I was wondering, which of those do you think is closer to the truth of such animals?"

Winter tightened her grip on her thighs. "I don't understand the question."

"The beast who is at its most beautiful when it roams free, or the companion that flourishes once its spirit has been broken of its illusions."

Winter chose to believe that this conversation was still about horses. "If it were up to me, I think the former would be the truth."

The affini's smile just broadened in response. "Really? I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Personally, I was thinking the latter would be closer to reality. After all, there are so many

species in existence that only truly flourish once they've been excised from a hurtful environment."

"Yet to do so requires breaking their will, as you said." Winter said impulsively, then internally kicked herself for blurting that out. This was the opposite of escaping the conversation, now she had the affini's attention firmly locked onto her. "I mean, the animal in question clearly doesn't desire such a life for itself if it needs to be treated so harshly in the first place, doesn't it?"

"A regrettable fact, but it's not uncommon for animals to be incapable of acting in their own self-interest. To be broken, so to speak, is as much a matter of freeing them from the scars that prevent them from achieving happiness as it is earning obedience." The affini answered with such calm and certainty that she almost wanted to believe them. But then they giggled of all things, a false hand resting against their mouth in a mockery of human gestures before they added. "I think I let my practice with sophonts cloud my judgement there. The rules are different for non-sapient. Oh but where are my manners? I haven't even introduced myself." They moved the hand down towards her, vines uncurling to mimic a familiar affini gesture of greeting this time. "Lamium Majore, Twelfth Bloom."

Fuck. Dirt. Stars. They were sticking around. Hopeful optimism broiled into a sheet of frustration in Winter's mind at the realization. "Maple." She lied as she took the affini's hand, only slightly shuddering as she felt the vines wrap around her fingers. "Pleased to meet you." She lied a second time.

"Likewise," Lamium's voice hadn't changed a lick, ever the confident purr of wood against tendrous fibers of vines and roots. "But dear? Could I please see your face? It feels quite awkward to talk with that brim covering your eyes, doesn't it?"

That technically wasn't an order, but Winter knew better than to test an affini's patience. She begged her hand to not shake so much as she plucked the hat off of her head, then had to actively remind herself not to hand it over to Lamium afterwards. This was probably fine, she internally begged. She'd changed her hair color, the cut, her fashion, it was fine.

"You have beautiful eyes, little one." Lamium practically grinned down at her. She just hummed quietly in response. Technically it wasn't a denial, nor was it a flirt, she just had to hope Lamium wouldn't take it as an excuse to 'teach' this terran 'some self love'. She kept her eyes low and tried her best not to look Lamium in the eye, hoping that small act would be enough to prevent the affini from getting some recognition. Anything to help, at this point. After a tense moment Lamium moved to speak again, "Do-"

"Order up!" The waitress said as she slid a full stack of pancakes in front of Winter, followed after by the usual sides and some coffee. An old classic meal for a diner like this. The waitress then mercifully distracted Lamium by asking if they wanted anything, which gave Winter a chance to actually relax since she felt the familiar affini's gaze first bore into her that night.

Just focus on the food, she told herself. The world may have been retrofitted to the affini's needs, everything may be a storm of change around her, but at least the food was still a familiar comfort. For now. Just had to get through this meal without incident- "So what brings you here?" damnit.

"Just dinner." Winter replied. Polite, but short. Move the topic. Don't people like to talk about themselves? She should deflect with that. "How about you?"

Lamium's gaze still lingers over her like a crushing weight. "I've been looking for someone for about a year now. Do you know how that feels, to lose someone?"

"No, well, a little? I know what it's like to lose something suddenly"

"It's horrible, isn't it?" Lamium asked, and Winter quietly nodded along. "Leaves a little hole in your..." They trailed a finger in a circle over their chest, paying no mind to the fact that they were operating their false joints backwards. "Heart, I think it's called?"

"It's your fault." What was she saying? Stop talking. She's already given too many words and now this fucking affini was staring her down. Had she been xenodrugged? Something to loosen her tongue? Winter took a sip of her water and felt no telltale tingle of chemical bliss dancing over her lips. She glanced down at her clothes, not finding any stray vines or roots having slithered their way underneath her layers.

Not that Lamium wasn't \*capable\* of doing so earlier. Stars now she wasn't paying attention to the table. That affini could have dosed her food while she wasn't looking. Or had a needle already out for her throat just waiting for her to look up. Winter shot her gaze up, body preemptively tense in expected fears as she did to see... nothing different. Lamium just held her gaze steady, smiling like nothing had happened, silently gesturing for her to continue talking.

"I'm sorry, that was an outburst, I didn't-"

"Tell me what is my fault, dear" An order. Damnit.

"This place was different. Before all you affni arrived." Winter gritted her teeth. She kept her voice low, afraid that if she let too much emotion she'd say something a bit more \*pointed\* at Lamium particularly. "Then the ships came down and uprooted the whole thing, now instead of feeling like home it's like I'm in some kind of uncanny nightmare world that no longer fits me. Look at this, it's a diner and my feet don't even touch the ground from this seat." To emphasize her point she swung her legs out under her, highlighting the ridiculous difference in scale between the affini-accommodating seats and her humanoid self. She then cut herself off from turning this into a whole rant by stuffing her face with bacon and eggs, hoping that Lamium would take that as a signal to leave her alone now.

Lamium, of course, did not leave her alone. "I am sorry, little one." Always 'little one'. Like she was so small and insignificant in form and mind and everything else to these things. A flash of light burned in from outside, followed swiftly by the deep rumble of thunder rolling through the town. "Goodness me," Lamium mused, eyes finally shifting away from Winter to glare outside. "It's quite unsafe out. How about I walk you home after your meal?"

"I don't."

"I'd hate for you to slip and hurt yourself. Or worse, catch a frightful chill in the rain."

Winter flinched inward. That was... very bad. If she left with Lamium that'd skyrocket her odds of being recognized, and even if not it's not like she actually had anywhere to be anyway. For the last year she'd been living off a continuous stream of couch surfing, hotel rooms (bless the stars money was defunct), and borrowing empty apartments all along her merry trip. She couldn't exactly disappear down an alley either, as that'd be a quick route to getting herself knocked out and left at Lamium's mercy again. And without a place to actually be led home \*to\* it'd only be a matter of time until the affini realized what was up and take her anyway.

Winter grimaced, then bit her lip fiercely when she realized the implications such an expression could give. She couldn't just say NO, either. It'd do her no good to be rude to her Good Neighbors after all. She was cornered on this one, and by the look in Lamium's eyes she knew they were as aware of that as she was. "Thank you," She murmured before chasing her anxiety with some deliriously syruped pancakes.

Anxiety told her to eat as fast as possible, but fear challenged that with a reminder that her current safety only lasted as long as her food did. Just try to change the topic, Winter. Get them to talk about something so she can figure out an actual plan.

"What did you lose?" Terrible question, why was that the first thing to come to mind?

Lamium \*purred\* of all things in response, voice soon sliding into a rattling hiss before they spoke, "I lost a girl."

"That's unfortunate." Winter snipped back around a mouthful of eggs.

"She was the most beautiful little thing I'd ever seen. I was quite shocked when she ran away."

Winter tried, and likely failed, to hide the shaking that rose up from her hand.

"But I know she's still out there, somewhere. Running around in the cold all on her own, without a caring hand to come save her." Lightning struck again, momentarily blinding Winter's world in a flash of light that cast Lamium's silhouette over her, twin golden eyes still shimmering brightly through the cast shadow.

"Maybe she doesn't want you to find her."

Another ruffle shimmered through Lamium's body, this time with needles practically shivering inside their chest. "Maybe I'll correct that desire for her when I catch her, then." Winter felt a cold sweat bloom around her neck at that. They could do it, she was sure. Somewhere in the mix of chemical bliss and loving discipline they'd pry that desire out of her skull and not even leave her a scar to remember it by. Another rattle played out through their ribs, and their gaze seemed to tighten in on her. "In fact, perhaps you've seen her? She was a lovely terran with eyes just like yours-"

"I have to use the restroom." Winter blurted out and darted off her seat. She clutched her chest the entire path to the bathrooms, gasping for air against the sudden grip of fear. She felt the anxiety tighten around her neck, choking her out even as she slammed the door behind her and locked it. She was safe. She was alone.

For now.

Winter stumbled over to the mirror and tore off her scarf, revealing the black band of her collar framed by countless red marks, wounds, and scabs where she'd tried to scratch it off over the last year. None of her attempts worked, of course. Couldn't even manage to bend the edge off her skin enough to try to slip a knife at it. Instinctively she dragged her nails across it once more, some part of her mind hoping this time it'd fray enough to catch and drag off.

At least it wasn't beeping at her anymore, or drugging her every time she had a little too much anxiety in the night. That first month on the run had been the hardest, always trying to control her breathing or, failing that, finding somewhere safe to stumble and pass out. Every time she was so sure she'd wake up back in Lamium's arms, awaiting whatever punishment the affini saw fit to deliver upon her for being so disobedient.

Winter's grip tightened around her own neck. It'd be all over if Lamium saw this. Assuming they didn't already see through her disguise. They probably saw or, no, if they did then they wouldn't have just \*let\* her run to the bathroom like this, would they? She glanced to the window. Escape... could be an option. It'd mean abandoning her bag and her hat and running through the cold rain but- no, wait, any affini who found her in that state would no doubt 'help' her find a nice place to nap at the nearest domestication clinic. She didn't want to deal with \*that\* again, even if the beds were incomparably comfortable.

Right. She couldn't run out the window and she couldn't run out the front door without tipping off Lamium as well. The human wrapped her scarf tightly around her neck, double checking in the mirror that it completely covered the collar once more. No choice but to go back there and just... hope for a better idea to come to mind. Brain please come up with a better idea fast.

That faint shimmer of hope was immediately stumbled by the realization that Winter had knocked her silverware to the floor during her run to the bathroom. Walking back to the table

gave her plenty of time to realize the weight of that mistake as she saw Lamium gingerly plucking their own silverware into their false hands. Some more paranoid part of her brain suggested that perhaps Lamium merely put on the appearance of her having dropped the silverware just to engineer an excuse. That... wasn't entirely unreasonable to believe one of those plants would do.

Winter stomached the part of herself that thought it was gross and bent down to pick up her fork, finding a vine stopping her before she could grab it. Of course. "Dear, that's dirty now. Here, let's use my set now." Of course. Let's. Plural. Winter had no doubt that Lamium's idea consisted mostly of Winter passively accepting their help and- yeap, there it is. They already sliced off a piece of pancakes and speared it with their fork for her.

Winter speedran through anger into bargaining as Lamium raised the fork up for them. Maybe, just maybe if they played nice here the affini will be too busy fawning over her to actually connect the dots of who they're talking to and let her go on her merry way for being so polite! Maybe! Hopefully.

...this was absurd. She didn't have much other choice left though, and let the affini press the food between her lips. At least it was all butter and syrup and carbs she could pretend to soothe her nervous heart in the process. "As I was saying," Lamium proceeded to say, quickly stifling Winter's chance for deflection with another bit of food. "I lost someone quite dear to me a year ago. The most beautiful terran girl I'd ever seen, and she ran right out the front door to disappear out into the whole wide world."

Bad. Bad bad bad. She'd lost the chance to keep talking while Lamium kept stuffing her mouth, and she'd lost control of her time as more and more of her plate would disappear to the affini's preferred pace. Trying to run away now would not only be rude but a futile effort, especially given how awkward it was for her to maneuver such a large seat. At best she'd stumble to the side and get wrapped up in her vines, and then Lamium would discover the collar and recognize her face and- and-

"That's when I decided to take up reading about those 'horses' you terrans have written about." Lamium continued. "It seemed fitting to ponder over the matter as I watched her run free. Like an animal left to roam upon the open prairies, able to go anywhere it wished and discover if she flourished in that state." Watched? Winter tensed. "Not that there was ever any real danger on this planet, really. We'd sanded off all the rough edges, provided plenty of empty homes for her to happen to find and sleep in along the way, and without a need for money there was no shortage of food to keep her going." Oh no. Oh no no no no no no no- "And yet, I didn't see my stray horse flourishing one bit in her newfound freedom."

Winter choked in shock, and Lamium immediately sent vines infiltrating into her scarf and around her neck. All it took was a gentle flex, and the food passed harmlessly into her stomach. But worse was the feeling of their vines flexed around her collar, pressing into the scabs and

scratches of her skin. They knew. Even if there was some chance they didn't know before they certainly knew now. Stars. Stars, dirt, fuck.

"What did you say your name was again, dear?" Lamium's eyes were fixed squarely on her own, lights focused into a laser point that bored into her soul.

Winter stuttered, gasped, then whimpered out a meek, "W-winter."

Lamium just raised a false eyebrow in response, gaze unflinching even then.

"Winter... Majore...?" She just wanted the world to open up beneath her and swallow her whole instead of being whittled down under this plant's gaze. But Lamium's gaze still lingered, a silent order for her to follow. "Winter Majore, 23rd Floret, m-Ma'am."

"I've missed you, my little flower." Lamium eyes glittered with golden motes of light as their vines formed into a hand around her neck, sliding up to cup one of her cheeks. She felt something wet spilling down her face. Tears? She could barely tell her own emotions now beyond the dull impact of shock in her heart.

"I... I'm sorry-" Winter started to speak, but Lamium cut them off once more by stuffing some food into her mouth, this time pressing the fork in deeper to hold down on her tongue as they did.

"A year and a day I have given you, and now in return I expect your honesty. I do not require your apologies, little one, just as you do not require my forgiveness. Do you understand?" They asked, not moving the fork an inch as they did. Winter nodded slightly as that was all she could do, and Lamium finally showed mercy by removing the piece of silverware and waiting patiently for her to chew and swallow. "Why did you run?" They finally asked.

A sense of despair had begun to bloom within Winter's chest, born from the knowledge of her own failure to flee and the certainty of her new capture. It was impossible to run, impossible to even lie now. "I was scared," She admitted. "Everything changed around me so fast, from the people to the towns to this whole dang world. And when I was with you, I, I looked in the mirror one day and realized I was changing too." Her voice was a shaky mess, but under the weight of Lamium's fixed gaze the words still tumbled together from her mind. "I got scared of what I saw so I ran and I just kept running and then I was scared of what would happen if I returned and-"

Lamium interrupted that train of thought by putting a piece of bacon into Winter's mouth, then held her mouth shut until she swallowed once more. The grip continued after, chasing her stuttering breaths down until she calmed again. Only then did they release her.

Winter sagged forward after the affini's grip, coming to rest leaning against the table. With a small gesture from- Winter flinched internally to admit it- from her owner she continued. "Even when I walked the same streets I used to know, nothing was as I recalled. I couldn't find home, I

couldn't even find myself out there." Her voice fell silent after that, as her emotions dimmed into a mellow wave of surrender. "...I thought I escaped."

"Don't be silly, little one. You were never outside my reach."

"But the collar?"

"Do you really think it broke?" Lamium's mouth contorted into an unnatural smile before they stuck the fork into Winter's mouth again. "Clean." They ordered, and Winter obeyed. It was a demeaning task, but still she worked her tongue to wipe off the traces of food from the piece of metal. Lamium then slid the silverware back out and turned it around, handle towards her. "Take it." They ordered, and once more Winter obeyed. What was wrong with her? Not even trying to act independent now. "If you truly believe your collar doesn't work, then go ahead and stab yourself with that fork."

Winter's eyes widened in shock, glancing rapidly from the fork to her Mistress and back. "...what?"

"Stab yourself." Their voice twisted. "Try it and see just how broken your collar truly is."

Winter's hand shook in place, her gaze having flung down to lock onto the metal directly. The act would be, technically, very easy to accomplish, but no affini would ask someone to actually harm themselves would they? That could only mean that if she tried it wouldn't work. That meant... she felt the collar tight against her neck again. That meant it'd stop her. Winter quietly turned the handle of the fork back towards Lamium and held it out to them.

"Good girl," Lamium purred as they took it. "The night you ran, I let you. And every step you took away from home you were just as guarded as you had been before. Had you ever truly been in danger you would have found yourself back in my hands faster than you could even notice."

Winter sunk, feeling all the energy drop from her body at once. Suddenly all the long nights staring at the door, afraid that night would be the night they burst in and take her seemed dreadfully pointless. All the days she'd run by the road, one eye over her shoulder and eye watching the bushes. All that time hiding for nothing. Nothing!!! Winter tipped over until her forehead nearly met the table, but before that could happen Lamium slithered right on through the thing and caught her. The affini's body had simply unwound and passed right through to her as if all the space was immaterial to them. How very... affini of them. Their vines then wrapped around her shoulders and under her chin, propping her back up and tilting her face to look at the affini now seated beside her.

"Tell me, little lost horse, did you have fun playing pretend at freedom?"

Had she? Well... no, she guessed not. It was a nonstop stream of fearful tension, always convinced that some affini would recognize her or Lamium would be around the corner. But... wasn't it over now? Winter felt her shoulders relax. "No, ma'am."

"Did you flourish in a life outside of my hand?"

Winter felt the burn of the marks on her neck. "No, Ma'am."

"Do you *\*really\** believe that the truth of horses are the beasts who roam free?"

One last push, and Winter could feel her heart crumbling. "No, ma'am. I don't."

"Then I promise to break your will properly this time, little darling." Lamium hooked a vine around her scarf and pulled, baring their pet's collar to the world. "Look at what's happened to you," Their voice softened, a clear gel forming on the edge of their vine to soothe her wounds. Meanwhile their false hands busied themselves with wiping off the last traces of her meal around her mouth.

"I'm sorry," The girl muttered.

"I accept your apology, but understand that you did nothing wrong." Lamium answered sternly. "Every step you took out that door was allowed. You will not face punishment for this." Winter shuddered, tears flowing anew and voice breaking into a small whimper. Extra vines coiled around the back of her head, slithering through her hair to sooth her even more. "It's okay, dear pet. You need not run anymore, you need not hide. It's over." It was all over. Despair splintered apart, leaving the little lost floret feeling relief of all possible things.

Lamium's hand tossed aside the napkin, then returned to clutch Winter's neck. All the affini had to do was touch, and the collar fell apart off of her. Cool air brushed bare skin, followed by more of that soothing gel. The balm left her neck feeling hazy and limp, so it was a mercy that Lamium's vines were already poised to hold her steady. Winter didn't even question it as the fog rolled out from her neck to drag the rest of her body down right after, until all her weight was already upon Lamium's vines. Then it was a simple matter of lifting to move the floret into a cradle hold, and Lamium had her in their arms.

A single vine looped around the human's throat, tying itself off to form a loose makeshift collar and leash. "Let's go now, dear. It's far past time I take you home."

Safe once more in Lamium's arms, it took only a moment for the floret's eyes to slip closed and for sleep to begin claiming her. "Yes, Mistress." Came her whispered reply, voice faltering into nothing as her eyes slipped closed. The chase was over, and she had finally lost.

# I Touched Oblivion

here i took the writer's tendency to bring up class Os at least once in a story and said fuck it I'll write a whole story around that

also, it's kind of my favorite piece that I've written I think???? I keep thinking about these beans and wanting to hug them

CW:

Full blown identity death

Recovery from said identity death

An instinctive need to obey the big plant lady

Lots of mental anguish over having one's identity wiped away and subverted through the use of chemical bliss and attempting to live with that

this CW is subjective but I giggle a little whenever I eat honey now so like watch out I guess????

The last thing the patient could remember was a horizon lit aflame. A curtain of light raked across the surface of the world, kicking up a dust storm harsh enough to flay flesh from bone and burning the air hot enough to cook lungs with a breath. The patient's memory was scarred by jagged stones shooting across their flesh and dying screams filling their ears. It shocked them to hear again, so clearly against the raging storm of fire that had already consumed the rest of their mind.

Like the charred frame of a building everything else they had known had already been consumed by the heat, leaving them alone inside of their own skull with the last dying memory but without the knowledge of why or when or \*how\*. It hurt to remember, but with a sense of desperation they couldn't even recall the source of the patient clung to it tightly regardless. A voice pierced through the smoke, pulling them up and out of the fugue back to the waking world. Hands held them by the shoulders and squeezed their body tight against warmth.

Want poured back in over the patient from a thin sliver of light. Wait, they begged. But fingers slid along the side of their face, slicing the smog apart into more beams of burning light in their mind. Wait, they whimpered. They couldn't hold on against it. They didn't have the strength anymore.

Voices spoke in a language they'd long since lost to the fire. Faces unfamiliar to them moved past their vision, chased by blobs of colors that flowed and danced without rhythm. Scents played across their senses luring them further and further away from the desperate grasp they held over the dwindling ashes. More loving touches that pulled on their heart. They were slipping. Powerless against the tide. The hand returned, and this time it's grasp brought a wind which scattered the flaming scaffolds of their mind entirely, sending the wreckage tumbling down

around them and blowing it away in the breeze with hardly any effort. The patient would have screamed, had they the mental wherewithal left to understand what was happening.

With a single breath everything that was left was gone, replaced with the golden light of wanting hunger that now consumed them. They didn't even understand enough to know it was happening at that point, even as the light dug deeper into their veins and clung tightly to all of their nerves. It was all fading. Everything faded under the warmth of that light.

Just want. More and more want just kept pouring on in. Their hands tightened against the plant-like form they were held tightly against, sending a fresh wave of sensations curling up their hands from the contact. It was *\*delightful\**. They smiled, fingers trailing along the wood and vines. Nothing else mattered to them in that moment but base sensate indulgence. Their voice begged wordlessly for more, which the shape next to them replied with more grasping tendrils along their body. The pleasure they felt from the touch was like a tsunami over their nerves, bathing them in delight incomparable. But still their body wanted more.

On instinct their hand rose up to touch the face of whoever it was that held them. Past waves of rainbow shimmers she seemed surprised? Shocked? The patient couldn't even parse the expression right but the worry of why was fading as fast as arrived. She smiled down at them, and held their hand in hers. A new wave of light poured in from her touch, and the patient was more than excited to let it consume them. The time they spent in that haze could have been a minute or a million years for all they knew after that, as any given three second interval simply blended off into oblivion behind them. Each moment was as if they had always been in that state, and would similarly always be that way in the future. Floating on bliss, content in the safe warmth, and everything else had simply been completely forgotten.

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The patient was laying on their side on the grass, fingers trailing along the even surface of synth-flooring beneath it and reveling in the sensation of the grass blades slipping over their finger. Their nail caught on the texture of the ground, eliciting a small wince that cut through the pleased fog of their mind. Their eyes suddenly focused on the end of their finger, trying to peer past the cobalt blobs of color to notice the length of the nail. It was... longer than they expected? That didn't seem right.

Well, the expectation of a nail size to begin with didn't strike the patient as right. Everything else was a meaningless blur of one moment into the next so why would they have an expectation or... or....? The patient blinked. What were they just focusing on? The patient rolled over onto their back and admired the blue sky, glass tiles, and purple splotches far above them. The warmth of sunlight poured over their skin and mingled with the chill breeze of an artificially regulated airflow. They smiled as the sensation sent more of that loving light straight into their spinal cord.

They remained there until a woman's voice pulled them out of the fugue. Roots and vines wrapped around their hands and pulled them up to a seated position, another vine wrapping around their chin to pull their vision to their guest. The patient shivered in delight at the woman's touch as it stirred even greater joy than idle nature ever could. But when they looked up at her they saw her expression seemed concerned? That was different.

The patient paused again. How did they know that was different? They didn't even remember who she was but- oh she was talking! About... something. They didn't understand her words, honestly. She just sounded so nice to listen to. They wanted to nuzzle up to her side and feel more of her voice reverberating into their flesh. Every time they blinked it was like a new surprise again. She was here again! And she was talking and close and touching them and it was so nice and comfy and sweet. Over and over and over until they felt a pinch at their neck and the whole cycle fumbled apart into darkness.

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The patient bolted upright. They hadn't forgotten anything for what felt like a few minutes now, and that was weird. They didn't even know how they knew it was weird, but they knew with an absolute certainty that it was. Maybe, probably.

They closed their hands into fists, drawing fingers through the sand as they did. The tactile sensation of grains over skin drew on the edges of their consciousness, luring them back down into the soft glow of oblivion they'd just jolted out of but something still nagged at their senses besides that. With darting eyes the patient looked around for answers, seeing only water, sand, and things that looked similar to them but not quite lounging around all over the place. Other things that looked more like the woman they could barely remember were present too, either mingling with the former or lurking around the edges and watching over the lot. Every time one of them moved phantom silhouettes of brilliant colors shimmered in the air before blotting apart into nothing across their vision.

The patient tried to parse meaning out of the view, but the longer they stared the more they felt gravity bear down on the edge of their consciousness. More and more until the whole thing tipped to the side and everything spilled out, their body falling over backwards into the sand. No, no, no, nooo not again they didn't... didn't...

The patient bolted upright. Something had happened but they weren't entirely sure what. They looked above to see the sky was painted oranges and purples, and didn't quite understand how much time that meant had passed. They tried to rub the color splotches out of their eyes and looked up again, this time seeing the sky as an even blanket of dark blues dotted by lights. They blinked again and they were strewn out on their back, rays of sunlight filtering through the leaves of the foliage above. Someone was talking to them again, and they turned their head to the noise. Oh!! She was back!!

The lady spoke to them like she always did, and similarly like always the patient didn't understand a lick of it. But they loved to hear her voice again, and every time she was near she'd shower them with more of that touch they craved so much!! As she knelt down beside the patient she put one of her four hands over her chest and said a word, and the patient immediately attempted to mirror the gesture. Clumsily, of course, as their muscles would only ever vaguely listen to them unless they wanted to indulge in tactile delights. But it was an attempt!

The woman froze in shock at that, then after a moment repeated the gesture. The patient then repeated the gesture back at her, which was apparently the right idea as she broke into an excited gasp and descended on the patient to ruffle their hair and pet their face. They just smiled and let her, letting the warmth of her touch spill over their mind and scatter everything to winds as they begged for more and more.

Eventually everything settled down enough that the patient could even see again, and they saw that they were once more strewn over the lady's lap. She was smiling at them!! Smiling was good! Probably? The patient didn't know and didn't care enough to think about it any deeper. What had they done a moment ago to get all this nice touch again? After a moment's thought they brought their hand to their chest and mirrored the gesture once more, clumsy motion sliding against the lady's frame as their clumsy voice tripped over the noises. This got another excited gasp from the woman, who promptly scooped up the patient into her arms and she rose.

More words the patient didn't understand slipped from her lips as she set off with them. Soon she was making more noises with others like her, all looking over their body and poking them again. This was perhaps too much, they thought. Instinctively they receded from the excess attention, curling back towards the lady as they did. This just elicited another series of noises they didn't understand, followed by a pinch on their leg and a hand rubbing their back until they slipped under.

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The patient awoke with the sort of comfortable sloth unique to people who have never known stress in their life. In the patient's case, this was because their memory mostly consisted of a vague blur of base physical sensations and an overpowering want for even more base physical sensations, but no stress was no stress. They yawned, stretched their arms, and then were briefly surprised to find themselves covered in soft sheets and surrounded by stuffed animals before rolling over and holding some instead of thinking about that. Their hands traced a lazy circle about the cloth of the stuffed animal, sending delightful jolts of light up through their fingers that interacted with the sleepy daze they still lingered on.

So entranced were they in enjoying the physical comforts that they didn't even notice the plants wrapped around their arms until one tightened and pulled them up to the side. The woman's voice poured over their mind again, and all at once they leapt out of the sleepy daze towards the voice. She was back! Again! The patient happily scurried up and out of the bed to scamper over

towards the woman, who just as happily picked them up and out of the bed at their approach. She showered the patient in ever more loving attention, sending them crashing apart on a wave of excess dopamine all over again.

By the time they finally came back down to the real world they'd already been relocated to a different room. One with clear tiles revealing a wide span of sky and woods as far as the eye could see. They were basking in a ray of warm light that cascaded over their skin, body draped across a hammock next to that woman. She was saying something, but they still couldn't parse a lick of it. Her voice was calm and reassuring though, so the patient hung on every word regardless. As she spoke she took the patient's left arm and slipped the sleeve of their shirt over their elbow, revealing a flower plugged into their forearm wrapped in thin netting.

The woman slipped a needle out from between the wooden plates of her palm and pressed it into the bulb of the flower, sending a clear blue liquid coursing through the plant and into their arm. With curious eyes the patient looked over the whole process, unflinching even as the woman snapped off the needle before producing a second one to repeat it, then a third, each time pouring a different color into their skin. In their eyes the colors blossomed out from the flower, becoming disattached blobs of scintillating hues that rippled over their world. Always the weird color blobs.

A wave of cold air coursed through their body, followed by a prickling sensation through their skin. They blinked awake, eyesight scattering the mess of color into a series of smaller shapes that slowly slithered away around the edges. The woman was just looking over them quietly, watching as the patient's eyes slowly began to focus back forward before swivelling around to lock onto her.

The woman put one of her hands on her chest and said a word again. The patient blinked. What was that? They tried mirroring the gesture, putting a closed hand to their chest with index finger extended and repeating her noise back to her. The woman shook her head and moved the patient's hand to rest on her chest instead before repeating it. Wh... what? The patient tried to mull this over in their head but all they got was that awkward slippery feeling inside of their skull all over again.

The woman tightened her grip on their wrist and repeated the word with a firmer tone to her voice, repeating it again a moment later as the patient struggled to understand. What was she getting at exactly...? They didn't like having to exert themselves to understand like this, that was \*hard\* when simply sublimating back into the sea of light was so much \*easier\*. But she kept pushing the matter until... until... OH! "Sutera," The patient said as they pushed against her chest. Sutera. That was her name! She had a name! And now she was smiling and petting their head again they must have done a really good job figuring that out!!

Sutera put her finger onto the patient's chest and looked at them hopefully. What did she want, exactly? Oh, wait, name, name, uhhh... name...if she had one then they should have one and they.... Hrm. The patient frowned. Nothing came to mind but burnt ashes. This was too hard to

think about. She seemed to read their expression and went right back to cuddling and petting them more instead, letting the patient slip away from such difficult thoughts once more.

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It took weeks before the patient was clear headed enough to walk around their new home unassisted. During that time they'd come to learn that the slow dawning of continuity in their mind was a wholly new situation for them, as with each day they became just a bit more able to float about the endless sea of want that still broiled in their mind. Their mind still felt the burning embers of loss at each turn though, always reminding them that something was still missing, still \*wrong\*, still threatening to catch up to their heels and burn them to nothing all over again.

During that time Sutera had been hard at work trying to get the patient back up to date on how to communicate again. They'd relearned how to listen to the words, but their tongue still tripped and stumbled where their thoughts tried to slip out. It was frustrating, but Sutera's patience seemed to be endless in letting them try to overcome it. Slowly, with effort, they'd learn to tame their tongue again. Hopefully. Maybe.

As they lingered through the winding paths of their home their fingers trailed across the paint, drawing delight from the small shifts of texture as they went. Sutera was probably close by in case they tripped over anything, she always was. They'd found as soon as they were able to actually understand her words that their body craved to obey her, and it was only by her explicit permission that they were able to wander around the home like this. If she spoke, they would drop to their knees and crawl back to her faster than their brain could have possibly processed. Yet, despite having such power she preferred to hang back and simply watch the patient unobtrusively throughout most of the day.

The patient stopped and looked over their shoulder, seeing the familiar form of the woman lingering at the far edge of the hallway. After a moment of silent staring she tilted her head to speak, sending a cascade of rainbow lights in the shape of her silhouette spilling down from the edges of her shape as she did. "Is something wrong, dear?"

...maybe? They couldn't pin down quite why something felt wrong yet. They chewed their lip silently, then shook their head. "Not know," they answered quietly.

"Would you like me to hold your hand?" Sutera asked, and the patient nodded this time. Their body always craved her touch, so the odds of them ever \*not\* wanting to hold her hand was less than zero to be honest. She silently slid up next to them and slipped her fingers between theirs. That was all it took to send them shivering over another wave of light coursing up their arm, their body slumping against her form for a moment as their mind raced to catch up against the chemical delight their brain happily drowned them in.

By the time they opened their eyes again they had fallen to their knees, breath gasping for air and hands shaking violently.

"Perhaps later then," Sutura spoke softly. The patient nodded once more and stumbled back up to the feet, returning to their gait through the house. They were trying to... find something, they thought. Though they couldn't quite remember at this point what it was. Just the vague sensation of loss inside of them that they wanted to fill.

Last time they'd gone searching the patient had found a hallway of tall windows and laid down in a sunbeam for "just a minute", promptly forgetting everything else in the warmth until Sutura scooped them up after nightfall. The second time they'd wandered into an elaborate ball room and slid their bare feet over the smooth flooring in idle interest of the sensation until they'd slipped, been rescued by Sutura's vines, and held close against her for the rest of the day. This time they walked until they wandered into a corner room of the vast building, coming to a place full of dusty white cloths draped over vast shapes.

They turned towards Sutura, who was currently leaning against a windowsill and watching idly, and gestured towards the room. "Safe?" They asked.

"Nothing can hurt you while I'm here, dear." She replied. Reassured they walked right in and started to poke around. The feeling of dust parting under their touch was a new one, and they indulged in it with a ready curiosity. Old wardrobes, grand chairs, faded curtains, they peeked at everything they possibly could to feed that blooming interest. At covered pieces they only needed to gesture and Sutura would slip by to throw aside the cloth covering it, revealing relatively well kept goods hidden beneath. Over and over again until they stepped before a tall piece that Sutura revealed and froze.

It was a mirror. In the reflection they saw a person staring back at them with wide golden eyes, body framed by a flowing yellow shirt over slim black pants. A flower was pinned to one arm, wrapped in nets while a vine traced around their wrist on the other side to trail back off the edge of the metal window. Circles of orange light flickered around their frame as they moved, mirroring the same phantoms of color that drifted through the patient's own vision.

The patient blinked in numb surprise. That person looked... familiar? But wrong, somehow. They looked down at themselves to the other person, then back again before it clicked that they were looking at their own reflection. Oh! Right! Reflections were a thing that existed. Evidently. But why was this one \*wrong\* then? The more they stared at it the more unsettling the vision became, like the burnt phantom of a silhouette was trying to superposition over the view in their mind but could only manifest talons of distaste. They looked and looked and looked and the knot in their stomach only became larger and larger until they were right up against the glass, hands desperately clinging to the smooth surface while bright amber tears rolled down from their eyes.

"What's wrong, dear?" Sutura murmured as she slinked up next to them.

How were they supposed to know!? They couldn't even identify what was hurting in the first place much less find the words. What was the point of even learning how to speak all these things if they couldn't- couldn't fUCKING use them right!? They collapsed to their knees in front of their reflection, tears like thick honey trailing down their cheeks. "Don't know," They said between choked breaths.

Sutera crouched down to wrap an arm around their shoulders, chasing the turmoil within them with her familiar light. "Shh," She whispered softly. "It'll be okay. Do you think you can try, little one? Try to piece together the words and see if anything comes out?"

Their body screamed to obey. "I don't-" They said faster than they could consciously register. "Don't know. Boat. Shore?" The words were all jumbled up. Thoughts tried to trail to their mouth but skipped over a burnt husk and fell off a cliff entirely instead. "Horizon. Light. Fire." Just random thoughts. A brain firing off jargon left and right desperately to try to fulfill conflicting needs to \*obey\* when it can't even understand and just wanted everything to stop instead. What was the point if they were just going to be like this? Why even bother? They should have just stayed in that blissful oblivion in that fUCKING zoo where they didn't even know how to be FUCKING hurt by their own damage or know that anything was FUCKING wrong for FUCKS SAKE SHIT FUCK DAMN DIRT LEAVES FLOWERS DIRT FUCK

The patient hadn't even realized they were screaming until the sweet taste of their own tears hit their tongue. That was \*wrong\*. "Honey," They said. "Golden honey." they cried. "Wrong. All wrong, all wrong, all wrong." Dimly they were aware of Sutera taking their left arm and bringing their palm up, slipping another needle into the flower implanted into them. They continued to weep until the drug stole alertness from them once more.

---

The patient woke up and immediately decided they hated it. They rolled over, hugged their favorite stuffed animal close, and decided to let themselves sink back under the tides of light that they oh so desperately wanted to wash away their problems instead. That was easy to do at least. Every functioning pathway in their brain seemed hardwired to want it anyway. Just rub their hands over some texture and let it take over again. With a gentle side they felt themselves sink into it, and before they knew it the light of the day had arced across the room.

"Dear," Sutera's voice spoke from the end of the bed. "I made you some breakfast, come let's face the day."

The patient's body curled in want at her words, but their brain recoiled. "No," They answered.

Sutera paused from surprise. "...No?"

"Heard me." They answered again. To their surprise Sutera seemed to light up once she properly realized what they said, running off out of the room and talking rapidly to herself, trailing

green silhouettes that mirrored her movements all the while. She soon returned with a device in hand, gently pulling the patient's arm aside to wave it over the flower before fiddling with it some more, then tapping something into the side of her head before she continued talking.

"Maclura- yes, I know, you're busy, this is important," She spoke excitedly as she worked, one hand resting against the patient's forehead while the other continued on the device. "It's about that terran I found, they just \*disobeyed\* me!" They paused a moment as a second voice emanated from their earpiece, indecipherable to the patient. "Yes! I know! I'm double checking now but everything looks good so i don't think it's a fluke- yes, okay, I'll call you back."

The patient peeked cautiously over the edge of the stuffed animal at her. What was that all about- oh! The whole train of thought promptly derailed off the bridge as the woman collapsed around them, holding them tight and purring happily all the while. Well this wasn't so bad, they thought.

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The next day Sutera led the patient into a room with a variety of unfamiliar goods. "Take a look around, feel free to play with anything that catches your interest," She said from her perch by the door. The patient, not one to remember the concept of choice paralysis, just nodded along before grabbing the first thing that was in arm's reach. Some kind of plastic box made of other smaller boxes, all painted different colors. They fiddled with it a bit, found the tactical \*click\* it made as they moved the cubes around to be satisfying enough, but the colors kept moving around beyond their boundaries so they put it back.

Next was a stack of books that they didn't know the language to. Pass. A series of plastic models of ships? Pretty, but pass. A variety of clothes, none of this rung a bell. Metal bits and shapes, boring. Pictures? Unfamiliar. The patient glanced over to Sutera in confusion, but she just gestured for them to continue. More soft things. Those felt nice so the patient put them aside for later, then immediately forgot about them. More boxes, more things, more bits and trinkets and doodads and whatsits and- ooh, paint.

The patient stopped next to a canvas set up with some brushes and paints. In their vision they saw the drips of paint slither off the palette and crawl over the vision like squirming bugs. They grabbed the brush and ran it dry over the canvas, expecting the colors to be soaked up in it's bristles so it can be put back on the palette. When that didn't work, they just muttered "Rude." and tried it a second time. The third time they dropped the brush into the paint, chasing after the blob to pin it under a coat of... whatever this material was. Hah! For their effort, the patient now had one blob of color locked down in place. But that still left the other dozen.

The patient frowned and made more strokes on the canvas, chasing down each phantom in their vision to try to corral it into place. They struck again and again, dipping the brush into more paints and mixing the colors into nothing as they went, until the thing became so caked in excess material that the patient dropped it entirely in frustration. Yet despite how many they'd

pinned down, more of the color still squirmed around in their vision. They dipped their fingers into the paint, taking a more manual approach to the problem. The whole world faded around into focus as they kept at it, running down one color after another to try to catch them. Over and over and over and over and then they yawned and slumped forward, splattering the paint all over and around as they went down.

Shook from their focus, the patient only then realized that the light of the day had already begun to dip into shadows once more. ...when had that happened?

"Had fun, dear?" Sutura asked as she slipped from her perch to slither over to them. The patient just shrugged in response, which elicited a small giggle on her part. "Fair enough, come along you've made a mess of yourself."

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The patient slumped against the side of the bathtub. Despite their best effort, the rogue splashes of color still dominated their vision, now paired with the usual haze the bath soaps lured them into and the constant fugue of light that the woman's touch spilled into their brain. What a pointless struggle that had all been. As they lay the woman who was always there slipped in behind them, arms wrapping around their torso to pull them into her lap.

"Aren't you the cutest little thing?" She asked, one hand trailing over their side to squeeze their cheek. The patient just hummed quietly in response, leaning into her touch as they did with a muted sort of want.

"See colors?" They asked. Sutura just seemed confused by that, and when she didn't answer they lifted a hand to trace after a blur in their vision. Their fingers slid around the phantom thing, never touching it but making the hallucination bob and squirm through their fingers. "See colors. Right here. Green." They mumbled, then moved to bat aside a floating blob of turquoise. "And over there. Everywhere."

Sutura's reply was a muted rumble, but the emotions got through to them well enough. That was weird. Wrong. They weren't supposed to be seeing these sort of things then. That lingered on their mind even as Sutura puppeted their body to clean them. The feelings were still pleasant, the light still glaring, the \*want\* still consuming, but through it all the one thread of doubt remained strong. They weren't supposed to be like this.

"...was I bad?" The patient asked, their voice barely more than a whisper.

"You?" Sutura seemed surprised to even suggest the idea. "Dear, my hope that you'd recognize anything today was a long shot to begin with. No, you've done nothing bad." The patient just frowned silently. Somehow, hearing that didn't help at all. But she brought her fingers through their hair, massaging their scalp with one set of hands while scrubbing their body with another

set. The patient's thoughts cracked apart at the seams, that \*slippery\* feeling coming back once more.

Fuck it, they mused to themselves. They let their mind tip over and spill out all over again, sinking into the radiant warmth of the bath that surrounded them.

---

In the days? weeks? months? that followed the patient was given more and more painting tools to learn with. Under Sutera's guidance they slowly learned bits and pieces of the craft, body obediently following her lessons while their brain spun futilely for more active comprehension. Slowly, day by day, piece by piece, their hand had steadied into the craft. What once started as senseless blurs of color slowly transitioned into more delicately mishmashed sprays of tonal viscera.

Truth be told, despite their body taking in the lessons their mind never truly caught onto a sense of purpose in it. They were still tracing patterns after phantoms in their eyes, reveling in the base sensation of their brush sliding across the canvas and sending tiny reverberations through their hand as they did. Over and over and over again, canvas after canvas, until the whole room they'd been given was littered with dried paintings of nothing.

A tug on the vine wrapped around their wrist lured the patient out of their painting daze, pulling them attention back towards the entrance of the room. There Sutera was now standing with a scintillating silhouette that slowly settled into a person, someone who looked similar to her in how their body was wreathed in flowers and leaves. "Dear," Sutera started. "This is Maclura, he's here to see how you're doing today. Please come here."

The patient dropped the brush without thinking at her request and stepped over to her, coming to rest next to her form. The man she was with put a hand to their head and tilted it to the side, and like ever they readily obeyed him. But his touch felt more... clinical than Sutera's. "Have you given them a name?" Maclura asked her.

"No." Sutera answered confidently. "I've also avoided anything that could incite false memories, just in case." He just made a rattling noise inside of his chest in response. Sutera then turned to kneel down beside them, a hand on their head as she spoke, "Dear, can you please show us your paintings?"

Obedience, as always, ran through their body faster than thought. They nodded, then scampered over to start moving all the canvases around. They, perhaps, should have known to be wary of wet paints or not staining their dress and smock even more than they had, but frankly the patient didn't even consider the possibility until after they finished moving everything and tried to wipe clean their hands on an already paint smeared apron. They huffed in frustration, trying again regardless until Sutera took their hands and led them aside to clean them off. This was easier, they thought. Sutera always seemed to know how to handle difficult things.

When they returned with fresh dress, apron, and hands they saw Maclura standing in the center of the room, the painting forming a vast swath of shimmering blues around them that seemed to eclipse the room beyond them entirely. "You," Maclura pointed a finger at them. "Come here." As always, they obeyed, dashing over to stand by his side. He put a hand on their head and turned it to face the mass of paint. "What do you see in these?" He asked.

See in them? The patient furrowed their brows. They didn't see anything when they made it, just the process of chasing after dots in their vision and seeking tactile comfort. "I, I don't understand." They answered honestly. It was important to answer honestly as best they could.

"Just look then, look at it all and tell me if something comes to you." He said. O... kay then. The patient nodded and looked over the paintings. Placed like this they seemed to make a unified panorama, shades of blue being the most common color overall highlighted by bursts of gold light. The paint formed jagged bursts of shapes and writhing shades receding under light. It practically \*squirmed\* in their vision, then actually did as the colors seemed to leap to lift with phantom splays of rainbow light. In an instant the blue became horrifyingly clear in what it was.

Fire.

A curtain of blue flames that erupted from the canvas and consumed every other color that could be there. Blanketing the very horizon and coursing across the land and wrapping itself around their body, reading them in an instant of subatomic flames that wouldn't even leave a skeleton. The golden bursts of light seeped out like liquid over the flames, replacing their burnt mass with it's tranquil warmth. They could almost see a silhouette painted into the center of the light, a dark thing flailing desperately as they drowned again and again and again and again and again and-

The patient bolted upright. They were back in their room, Sutura holding their hand tightly. Maclura was perched on the other side, one hand on their forehead and a hand holding a light over their eyes. "Sit still, please." He spoke, and the patient obeyed. They were gently pushed back down, light held still as the man inspected them closely. "Can you describe to me what happened?"

The patient flapped their mouth numbly. They just... they... "Fire...? I saw colors squirming." It was important that they answer honestly. "I was scared."

Maclura just gave another rattling noise from inside his chest at that and flicked the light off to put it away. "Sutura, I'm going to be honest with you here, I don't think best outcomes go higher than having this one become a floret after this."

Sutura bristled up in response to that. "But-"

"I'm not cancelling your little project," Maclura clarified. "But that is my expert opinion on the matter. If you're not looking to keep them yourself then I'd recommend finding someone who will instead soon." He rose up from his position, giving them a parting ruffle in the hair that scattered specks of gold over their vision and elicited a soft whimper before departing the room. Sutura ran after him shortly after, voice hitching with fast words they couldn't follow that trailed off as the two walked together out of the room.

Left alone the patient was stuck with their least favorite activity, thinking, and their actual favorite activity, holding something incredibly soft. They tried to wrap themselves around one of the many plush animals Sutura had given them, and then tried not to remain mentally stuck over what just happened. Sutura seemed sad? Or perhaps upset. They weren't quite sure. They couldn't avoid feeling like it was their fault somehow, like if they'd made some alternative choice at an unknown time they could have been seeing her smiling and cheering instead. But they didn't even know what it was that was wrong, much less had the ability to properly comprehend what they *\*could\** have done differently in what little of their own life they consciously knew.

A sudden heavy thud and splintering of wood shook the patient out of their thoughts, sending them up to the seated position as they attempted to look around. Curiosity took hold soon after and they crept out of their bed to peek around the corner and saw Sutura hunched over, a fist held through a nearby wall and curse words slipping through their mouth. She winced as she pulled back her hand, picking through the wreckage of her own making before turning and freezing at the sight of the patient.

"Dear!" They attempted to sound calm. "I'm sorry if I shocked you, I just, I, well I let my emotions rule me for a moment there. Sorry." She plucked the splinters of wood from between her knuckles as she approached, coming to kneel down beside the patient once more. "Are you okay? Are you scared?" The patient shook their head softly. "Good, very good, I-"

"Was I a bad person?" The patient asked abruptly.

Sutura flinched. "No!" She nearly shouted, then a series of ripples echoed across her form as she forced herself to calm down. "No. No, you've done nothing wrong, and you've been healing wonderfully and I'm very proud of you. I promise."

The patient chewed their lip. That didn't do anything to settle the growing wave of discontent in their heart. Something just didn't click right, even then. Some ball of burnt worry deep inside they couldn't even begin to handle without it crumbling into ever finer ashes.

"Dear, look at me," Sutura spoke, her voice now more firm as she said the words. Her hands pulled the patient's gaze back up to her, fingers trailing to elicit another series of lights that jolted them out of their own head and back to the woman in front of them once more. "You're safe here, nothing bad is going to happen to you while I'm around, I promise."

The patient nodded numbly, still not truly understanding even as she collapsed around them into a tight embrace.

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Ever since Maclura's visit the patient had been haunted by the idea of actually seeing something in the paintings. They'd turned most of the canvases away, banishing the blue fire entirely once more before taking to the paint with a fervid need to see \*something\* depicted that wouldn't burn them to witness. They'd painted leaves that fell on the window, the colorful vases that lined the halls, flowers that they'd see on their daily walks with Sutera outside, anything they could get their hands on. But each one was still stained by the phantom lights that always haunted their sight.

Horizons would be mixed with green and purple lines. Flowers would be followed by silhouettes of themselves dancing around the edges. Leaves would break apart into bright yellows across the canvas. Each and every time the patient wouldn't realize they'd been lost in fantasy visions until after they had finished and stepped back to see a rainbow that was wholly detached from the reality before them.

But it wasn't like they had much else they knew to do with their time, so they tried at it again and again and again. Until they scaled up from objects to trying to paint their own reflection, then throwing that painting out halfway through at the sight of their own golden eyes reflected in the paint back at them. Instead they then tried to paint Sutera. Her leaves and flowers made a beautiful arrangement to depict on the canvas, creating a natural burst of color that complimented her jagged white and black birch wood plating over dark vines. They truly lost themselves in painting her portrait, creating dizzyingly small strokes to capture all the layers of flower petals before chasing a line of yellow across the canvas with one of their broader brushes.

The patient froze, only then realizing that the color they'd chased in their fugue had already moved on to flow behind Sutera and shimmer into nothing after it had become immortalized in a flat streak across her eyes on the canvas. They did it again. The patient's grip tightened on the brush, tension forming in their chest the longer they stared at their mistake. They did it AGAIN. Every fUCKING TIME. How were they supposed to be able to paint anything right if they kept getting lost on tricks of their own vision and making those instead it shouldn't be this fucking hard to even look at things.

The patient threw the brush at the canvas before stumbling back towards one of the open seats and collapsing into it, arms wrapped tightly into their side as they let their head hang back and gasp deeply for air. It shouldn't be this hard to do anything. Something was wrong and they couldn't even figure it out themselves. Why were they like this? Why did their eyes always deceive them like that?

“Dear,” Sutura had moved at some point to kneel down beside them, one hand on their forehead in her attempt to comfort the patient. They hadn’t even realized that their breaths had turned into hitched sobs, or that tears of golden honey were flowing down their cheeks all over again.

“What’s wrong?”

Their brain wanted to spit out everything at once and tip over into oblivion once more. Their body moved to obey again. Their consciousness squirmed in confusion. Their mouth bent to draw in a deep breath, hands gripping their sides to steady themselves. “Was... was I a bad person before this?” They asked. The question that’d been buried underneath ash. All of this existence had to be a punishment if it was so wrong. The spacing out, the colors, the constant failure to so much as exist within their own body. They were brought up from oblivion just enough for it to hurt again and it *\*burned\** to know that they could have just been left in peaceful silence forever instead.

“No, no and I’ll say it as many times as I’ve told you before that you’ve done nothing wrong-”

The patient sat upright with a sudden motion. “Before this!” They pressed. “Before this house and this vision and you and, and, and all of this!” Discomfort bloomed along the back of their mind at having been so rude as to interrupt her, but it was being beaten down by the immediate distress more.

Sutura winced, leaves and flowers curling awkwardly as they mulled over their words. “...little one, I’ll try to explain all I know. Just... just take some deep breaths for me first? I promise I’ll talk right after.”

They nodded, holding themselves tight and pausing before forcing themselves to take a deep breath. Hold. Release. Repeat until it came naturally and their muscles loosened in response. Let the calm ripple through their body from there. Sutura followed them through the motions, a guiding hand that kept them on task until they finally relaxed into her touch, breath even once more.

Sutura wrapped her arms around them tightly, holding them in a warm embrace before she continued. “Thank you, dear. I mean it.” Her voice rumbled softly through her chest, giving another wave of warmth over the patient’s body as she continued. “As for your past, I, well- I should probably start at the beginning...”

---

Sutura Carotis didn’t know what she did to get stuck scouring remote terran posts but if she did she’d happily write a *\*lengthy\** letter of apology rather than keep at it. The team she was on had visited one station after another, and with alarming consistency found them all to be woefully under maintained, undersupplied, and by and large a dangerous environment that had only survived off pure financial desperation on its participants. Every time the team would come in, take a look around, be horrified in some new exciting way, and then firmly recommend everyone

relocate as soon as possible before having to hear half of the people there whine that those 'weeds' are just 'trying to ruin their livelihood'.

She didn't expect this stop to be any different, and if she had expected any difference she didn't think it'd be in the form of a mystery patient strewn out on perpetual seizures. Standing in the cramped medical hallways of the decaying facility she saw the human form strapped into the bed, various lines and pumps attached to their body in a desperate attempt to keep them alive while their brain tried it's best to go the opposite way. When she asked for records a shaking nurse handed her a form that described various medications, a few medical interventions when their heart had stopped, and a note that the person had been dropped on their doorstep a few months ago.

"...you must be kidding." She said, causing the nurse to eep and hide behind a nearby desk. "Not even a name?"

"No, ma'am." The nurse answered.

Sutera huffed in discontent. Messy paperwork, of course. Typical terran problem. She pocketed the file and walked back to the affini ship, punching in the relevant info into the vessel's intranet and contrasting against the rest of the records they had offloaded from the human government's files.

No match.

...that... was a problem. Sutera tapped a wooden finger against her desk nervously, flitting through the files given to her once more. A regular Jeanne Doe, nothing existed before the moment they were picked up by the medical facility and the rest was just attempts to figure out who they were from the limited information they could extract from their body. Height, blood type, dentals, estimated age, weight dropped rapidly after arrival before stabilizing at unhealthily low levels, near constant seizures, attempts to regulate, notation of some scars on their skull and theories of why. Sutera grunted. This was no good.

She grabbed a comm piece and dialed into one of her friends in records. "Hey, Daucus, work call, what do we do if we find a terran who has no history on file?"

The synthesized voice on the other side crackled with mild electric static before slipping into speech. "Just ask the person in question? This isn't that unusual, the terrans have had a terrible history with keeping track of these things."

"The person in question isn't capable of answering right now."

"Reluctant or incapable?"

“Incapable, they’re...” Sutera flipped through the papers. “Unresponsive, incapable of active thought for longer than periods of five seconds before having a seizure.”

Silence slithered through the other side of the comms piece for a long moment before Daucus’ words returned. “I’d recommend moving them to one of our medical wards then, I can start the process of forming a new file on hand but it’ll be awkward to do without anything previous to make of them.”

“So what, I just grab them?”

“Contact the legal team if you’re unsure, but that’s my personal recommendation. If you don’t they’ll probably just slip through the cracks again once we’re not looking. Is that all?”

“That’s all for now.”

Daucus sighed heavily through the mic. “Always for now with this job. I’ll contact you once I have everything in order.” The voice then cut out into the empty call tone. Sutera slumped forward into their desk, groaning unhappily as she did. Just great, now she had responsibility left on her lap.

---

Sutera stepped into the patient’s room to examine them personally. The body was withered from disuse, barely alive on these machines, and in all just overly frustrating to even look at in this state. The examination was simple but felt pointless, she might as well just write “this ones dirt” on a blank sheet of paper and submit that, but as her fingers brushed over the side of their face the thing stirred at her touch and leaned into her. This seemed to shock the nurse on hand as she made another nervous noise before ducking behind a chair.

“Is that unusual?” Sutera asked.

“Y-yes, ma’am.” The nurse answered. “They haven’t responded to anyone else’s touch before.”

“Have they only been handled by human doctors?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sutera frowned. She didn’t like the idea that was starting to wiggle around inside of her mind. With a delicate touch she tilted the patient’s head and pulled up one of their eyelids, revealing a golden eye hidden underneath. The eye slowly began to focus forward as she looked in at it, until it tilted back down and looked at her. The patient stirred, eyes opening on their own to look at her for a moment, voice coming across as a hoarse whisper before everything spiked, froze, and then fell limp against the bed. Their eyes were wide open now, golden tears forming at the edges before their body began to shake violently within the constraints. Sod it.

Sutera grabbed the patient by the jaw and gripped one of their other hands around their neck, mentally running through the list of their medications before slipping a needle out into the side and pumping an emergency dose to calm them down. Within the minute their body relaxed into the bed, brain scans indicating a lapse in the electrical storm that had attempted to ravage them. Only after everything calmed down did she remove her hands once more.

Sutera didn't like the look of those tears one bit. She'd read about a case that seemed similar once a few years ago, when she had to study up on terran physiology to even be allowed to serve around here. She slid one finger across the patient's cheek and pressed the golden liquid to her tongue, feeling an uncomfortably familiar burst of sugar and light coursing into her system from such a small amount.

"Roots," She cursed. Of all the stars blasted problems it had to be core world honey.

---

Sutera decided that the patient in question must have been an offload from one of the terran government's many secret experiments. It'd explain why they were dropped off without warning, why all the records were lost, and far more importantly was preferable to other, much darker alternatives for what could have happened to this person. She simply didn't want to think of any other reason someone would be given \*the\* class O drug in such a level that it'd hijack their body's systems to this degree just to be ditched.

A medical team of affini in white suits all raced through the station to pry the patient out of the mechanical array they were stuck in, perform an emergency op to stick a bunch \*more\* planttech pieces into their body, and then shift it to a gurney before racing out of the station and into an affini medical wing. The humans just seemed relieved for them to be gone, and frankly Sutera was relieved to not have to spend another minute in that dismal room either.

As the lucky individual who had tripped over the whole thing, that made this problem hers to keep watch over as it developed. In the viewing room to a \*proper\* medical examination they saw the machines spiraling lazily around the patient's forms, one of her eyes locked onto the screen to see that her estimation was, unfortunately, correct. Core world honey was all over the poor thing's system, and had already subverted several functions in favor of self replication. However they ended up like this, it couldn't have been an accident. Stars she was willing to bet they could drill into a bone and see gold marrow leak out at this point. Dirt, roots, leaves.

It was too late to try to undo the damage the honey had done on it's own, and their body was wholly unprepared to be trapped in this state without- aw dirt. Sutera flicked the comms line into the room open. "That's enough for today," She said. "Prepare the subject for class O on-ramping immediately." It'd solve the seizure problems at least. The poor thing didn't deserve this though.

She silently slipped from her spot and out into the hallway, slumping against the far wall once she reached it with a discontent groan. What a dirt sodden mess.

Her hand slipped over to the comms once more and dialed in to her old connivent. After a moment a familiar ringtone echoed out of the comms piece, followed by an even more familiar voice. "Maclura Carota speaking. How can I help?"

"I'm bringing you another patient," Sutura answered brusquely.

---

Despite having arisen from the same flower garden as Sutura, Maclura had achieved a much better track record of renown in his life than she had. As such, while she was stuck surveying middle-of-nowhere stations he had the much more respected duty of running a shelter for high-regiment human patients.

It was basically a human zoo, really. Just one full of people who were so blissed out at all times that they'd find the texture of grass the most fascinating thing in their life. Standing a whole head taller than her and with a dozen actually well trained medical professionals on hand, Maclura met her at the docks with open arms. "Sutura!" He practically shouted. "It's so good to see you and- oh, wow, you weren't kidding this is a bad case." He stopped at the sight of the patient, frozen by the sight of the familiar golden tears trailing down their face. "You made the right call bringing them up to class O properly, at least."

"I want to try to bring them back down afterwards." As Sutura spoke the rest of the medical staff crowded around the poor individual. "Will that be possible?"

Maclura winced at that suggestion. "People who end up on the class O list are usually there for a good reason."

"They're a victim here, Maclura. I don't know why but they were blasted out on raw honey, not given a proper prescription like the rest of your patients."

"...I still can't properly recommend it, given how rarely the recovery process works out."

Sutura folded into herself awkwardly, casting a sad glance towards Maclura as she did. "Even this once?"

As expected, Maclura caved to her puppy dog eyes immediately. "I- fine, fine, I'll let you try but! Don't get your hopes on salvaging anything out of this."

---

The patient's body took to the class O preliminary medications like a horse to water. With a ravenous sort of hunger they absorbed the chemical instructions and their body bent accordingly, brain patterns shifting into new forms to better flood their senses in a perpetual state of raw euphoria. By the end of the third day their seizures had ceased, by the fourth they even opened their eyes again. Sutera leapt to their side the moment they stirred, grabbing their hand desperately. Finally! A chance for answers, she had hoped.

The patient looked around frantically, confusion painted clearly on their face. Sweat beaded over their skin, followed soon by rising tension in their hands. "Hey, hey hey hey it's okay, you're safe." Sutera tried to cut off any panic before it happened, but the patient just looked even more confused. Right, dirt, what was that terran language again? C'mon Sutera you didn't sleep through THAT much class uhhhh... sod it. "Translator?" She turned to one of the other affini, one of whom slid over to the other wise, hands up and eyes locked on the patient's.

The translator spoke hurriedly, but that didn't seem to get anything across to them in the process. Dirt. Maybe the language center was already damaged? Within a minute the patient's eyes rolled back up and they slipped out of consciousness again. Sutera flopped face-first into the bed. Dirt. Dirt, dirt, dirt.

Her next chance took another three days before the patient was responsive again. This time they even sat up properly. Their eyes still held a faint glimmer of light inside of them, and Sutera wanted to hoot and holler all over for that. She even brushed up on her terran for this! "I'm Sutera," She said with a hand to her chest. The patient flinched and covered their ears. Aw sod it, probably hypersensitive. She dimmed the lights for their sake, and stepped back before speaking again quietly. "I'm Sutera, you're safe, can you tell me your name?"

The patient looked around silently, hands still on the sides of their head. When they finally opened their mouth to speak it was only in the form of a guttural noise of worry. On instinct she rushed over to their side, hands wrapping around their torso to embrace the scared thing. The small contact was enough to elicit a wave of shudders over their body with a gentle moan as they leaned in against her. Right. Touch would do that now. She dared a peek down to their face and saw the patient was now completely lost in a daze of pleasant sensations from the contact. She huffed, but continued to pet them anyway until they fell asleep again.

The next day the patient lay silently in place until the nurses came in to administer the next dose. Their eyes darted after phantom things Sutera couldn't see, but from the adjacent room she poured over all of the notes she had gained from a proper medical exam. Their eyes weren't damaged, so it'd have to be a brain issue. And in that regard... it was as much art as science for this unusual case. The status of their occipital lobe was already warped by the honey, and in addition the drastically inflated serotonin levels could cause any number of hallucinations without the other preparatory effects the on-ramping was supposed to supply. Then there was the scar tissue. In their BRAIN of all places!?

Sutera groaned in discontent and tapped their forehead against the desk. This was infuriating. Why couldn't whoever had done this at least left a note??

"Sutera," An unfamiliar voice had the affini whipping her head to the side. The patient had been let out? Well, their handlers were right there so it wasn't that much of a surprise but- oh, wait, they were looking right at her oh stars.

"Yes, dear?" She tried, and failed, to act calm and professional about this. Well hopefully they couldn't actually read affini body language and see that she was incredibly confused and concerned right now.

The patient put their hand on their jaw, shivering briefly at the touch before they continued to speak. "Ssssutera." They said again, experimenting with how the word felt on their tongue. "Sutera?"

"That's correct, dear. Can you tell me your name?" Oh stars please work.

The patient mulled it over. She could see the lights flickering in their eyes as the gears turned. Please just give her anything they can possibly dig on. Anything at all.

After a long, silent moment the patient shook their head side to side. "Sorry." They whispered. Roots. "Everythings... so bright." Their voice trailed into a small whine. The handlers swept in, hands on their shoulders, and once more the patient slipped away in a pleased haze.

The next week they were allowed to linger into the main area, where the land had been carefully cultivated to mirror the geography of one of the terran worlds. Rich green grass coated the floor, with strong trees reaching up towards the glass sky. A lake marked the center, framed by a beach that the other patients loved to play around on. Yet despite that, the patient mostly chose to linger around the edges of the place, shyly avoiding contact with other humans all the while.

Sutera visited every day that she could, searching out the stray human in her own little game of hide and seek each time. Going by one of their handlers would have been easier, but honestly she kind of enjoyed the moment of apprehension while she searched just for the chance to hope that maybe this time there'd be a fleeting moment of lucidity. That hadn't happened yet though. The most she would find was the patient idly trailing fingers over bark and seeing a flickering light of awareness in their eyes as they did.

The hardest part though was watching that light dim every time she saw them. It matched the increasing gap between when they'd see her and remember her name again, each time the distance growing larger and larger until, eventually, they just looked right past her with silence on their lips. Sutera didn't understand why she felt hurt by that. But despite their blankness she still felt the need to wrap them up in her arms and hold them close when she visited.

"They're starting the actual O medication suite tomorrow," Maclura spoke to her after she left the main habitat.

Sutera didn't understand why that hurt to hear either. She just kept walking directly into the far wall and collapsed into a corner.

"I know, it hurts to see it happen." Maclura's voice remained calm as he walked over and sat down next to her. "I've seen it happen dozens of times by now, and it never gets easier."

"Do they even remember me?" She asked, hoping for at least SOME consolation in this state.

"I'm not going to mince words with you, by now the odds of that are incredibly low. But they're not hurting now, if that helps."

Sutera just remained bundled up in a ball of plant matter. "...it doesn't help, honestly."

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The next day Sutera clung to the patient tighter than she could bear. Since their injection in the morning they'd been practically insensate, clinging desperately to any affini and whimpering with endless want. By then the drugs were already raging within their system, turning any minor sensation into an overpowering storm of perpetual delight that their body had already been prepared to want to an infinite degree. In her arms she could see every twitch and whine up close, practically *\*feel\** the begging that broiled under the surface weeping through their touch. Yet despite that they still saw that faint flicker of light in the back of their eyes.

"Ma'am," The affini sitting across from her spoke quietly. Sutera hadn't even paid attention to their name when they walked in. Someone something some bloom whatever here with the information reports. She just wanted this part to disappoint her already so it'd be over with. "We've finished scouring for--"

"Just tell me if you found anything or not." Sutera grunted. She didn't have much patience for this anymore.

"...No, ma'am." Great, of course, still nothing. That was it, then. Dental records, genetic tracing, missing persons reports, all the eyes they could muster peering over all the possible terran records and it was all dead ends.

Sutera made a primal sort of rumbling noise that even had the visiting affini flinch back this time, but the human in her grasp just sighed in contentment and leaned deeper into her grasp. "Thank you for the report," She muttered. "Leave us, please." The affini did not waste time in uncoiling herself into a serpentine form and disappearing under the brush. Sutera remained still there, clutching the human tightly, afraid that any movement would make her actually realize the weight of all of this void on her shoulders.

The only answers left were locked away inside of this thing's head. The very same spot that was currently being ravaged senseless by a chemical onslaught no human mind could stand up against. Stars it didn't even recognize her anymore, how was she supposed to hope that there'd be anything left after- the human's hand pressed against the side of her face, jolting her out of her train of thought.

She looked down in surprised, seeing the patient looking straight at them, golden tears dripping from their eyes once more and \*smiling\* of all things. She gripped their hand in hers. "It'll be okay, dear." She spoke to herself more than them. "I know it's overwhelming right now but we're going to guide you back down as soon as we can. I'll be right there to help piece you back together, promise." Please have anything left to piece together after this. She didn't want Maclura to be right.

The human flinched at her touch, eyes dilating rapidly as their breath turned into a sharp inhale, followed by shivers of delight and a gentle moan for more. The light in their eyes flickered, fractured, then broke apart right before her eyes. Consumed by the medicated haze like everything else.

It'll be okay, she told herself. They'll come back down as soon as she could let them. She told herself that again and again as days became weeks became months became a whole terran year and a half of visiting the poor thing every stars blasted day, administering O-curatives to the strictly regulated schedule, each time hoping some miracle would occur in which the patient just snaps up to shout "Sutera! I'm back! I have all the answers!" And stars please let the answers be some terran experiment she couldn't bear to hear the alternatives.

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The patient leaned forward into their knees. "You don't know," They said flatly.

"I was hoping answers would come up while you healed," Sutera sighed. "I'm sorry, dear. And, I know this a long shot, but I need to ask," She gripped their hand, one hand tilting their face to look up into her four eyes. "Do you remember \*anything\*?"

The patient felt trapped in her gaze, as if the world was slowly seeping away the longer they stared into her. Colors bloomed around the woman, forming another scintillating splay of chromatic aberrations that stung to look at. They flinched, recoiling back into their seat with their hands over their face. "No," They said. "No, I'm sorry, I can't- I can't."

Sutera looked hurt, but didn't let it stick to her for long. With another simulated breath she leaned back in, putting her hand back over the patient's head. "That's okay, I- you haven't failed anything, I promise." She spoke with a hurried tone, desperately chasing their mental spiral before it could get worse. "Dear, please, listen to me, deep breaths." Deep breaths. She

mimicked the motion of breathing in, and once more the patient's body obediently followed. Deep breaths. Let the scents of Sutura's many flowers flood into their system again.

Obedience was easier than worry, anyway. It was easier than the mystery or the pain or the fires or anything fucking else stuck smoldering inside their gods damned trash heap of a skull. When they opened their eyes again they saw the familiar sea of blue paint once more, crystal clear in their vision, overpowering every other color they could have painted instead. The swath of cold hues overpowered even Sutura's form, framing her in a crushing wave as if the very painted wanted to consume her whole. It was all blue. Blue fire. Blue lights. Blue forms and blue bodies flailing against a wave of blue dust that flayed their skin off of their bones. A tidal wave that wiped the world clean of life, that drowned the people, the trees, the very mountains to leave nothing but a marble of perfect glass. They felt the paint pour over their skin like liquid fire, melting their body apart into more empty hues.

"I remember one thing," they muttered as they slipped out from their seat and stepped forward towards their work canvas. A portrait of her, unfinished, framed by blue light with a bright yellow streak over her eyes, rested there. Paint tubes littered the floor, some abandoned half open without a care. Their fingers rested on an empty tube, curling around it before walking right back to Sutura. "It's not who I was, but..." Their voice trailed off, confidence wavering with each step. At her side once more they put their open hand on their chest, the other thrusting out to present the empty paint tube.

Sutura blinked in surprise, slowly taking the empty paint tube from their hand to look it over. "...cobalt?"

Cobalt smiled, holding the gesture as they spoke. "It's not who I was, but, it's a start of who I am, I think? I'm Cobalt."

Sutura gave a soft smile and sigh, body deflating to the side a touch before she rose back up to mirror the old gesture of greeting she had inadvertently taught them. "Hello, Cobalt."

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Cobalt's brush danced over the canvas with a lackadaisical care that was wholly unique to someone who had never seen the price tag of a tube of paint. On the grassy hills outside their home, they learned to love to paint the sky with a casual air. The vast blue sphere above them was completely unlike the blue fire that lingered in their mind. It was rich with life, rolling clouds, it should shift into gentle oranges and purples, then flash bright green before simmering down into the darkness of night. But even in such dark hours it would reveal endless motes of light dancing behind it's blue veil, all floating in the misty fog of the milky way that curled across the horizon.

They let themselves get lost painting the gentle gradient of lights of the midday sky, then when they got bored of trying to work around the stray bits of color that snuck onto the canvas they simply

started making things up to go with it. Soon the mountain was highlighted by a phantasmal spaceship that erupted out of it, with rainbow spays of light scattering over the distant hills and clouds like a chromatic rain. They remained lost in the whimsy of the moment until a tug on their wrist pulled them aside from the canvas, luring them back to Sutera's side once more.

"Cobalt, dear," She said as she unfurled a wide picnic blanket and set a basket down in the middle. "I made us lunch, come, eat before you spend all day painting and fall over hungry again."

"Yes, ma'am!" Cobalt replied, body as ever ready to obey. Truth be told they still hadn't recovered any new memories, they still felt the pull of oblivion on the edges of their consciousness, but since the finality of realizing that there was nothing beyond their own skull to say who they were they found the ability to care about it simply slip away. They scampered over to practically collapse at Sutera's side, wiping their hands off on their apron as they went, though that just seemed to smear the paint around even more.

"Here, silly." Sutera said as she pulled Cobalt down to sit next to her, her vines deftly pushing their hands down to the sides as she plucked a sandwich out from the basket for them. "Open up, dear." Cobalt followed her whims without question, letting her bundle them in close to her side as she manipulated their mouth to eat. The human, meanwhile, simply revelled in the abundance of light that flooded into their system from being touched so. No amount of recovery had quite managed to change how overwhelmingly pleasant being handled like that still felt, but Cobalt didn't particularly mind that.

After the two were finished eating they simply remained together, basking in the light of day and each other's warmth in equal measure. Cobalt let themselves relax against her body, sinking into the empty bliss their mind still so readily chased as the warmth from before mellowed out into a sleepy sort of daze. "Will you still be here when I'm healed?"

"Of course I will," She replied with ease, her four hands wrapping around their torso tightly. They both knew a time when they were fully healed might never exist, but that uncertainty didn't stop Cobalt from wanting to hope that tomorrow could be better. With a contented sigh they fully relaxed against her, letting the tranquil feelings pile on to lure them down into a comfortable sleep at her side.

"Goodnight, Sutera." They yawned.

"Goodnight, Cobalt."

## **In Sleep We Fell (the Snuggly fic)**

CW for being a forcefemming tf-y hypnosis story that has a blatant and erotic disregard for the concept of consent in favor of uhhhhh \*checks notes\* gay

oh also an actual sex scene in the post-post-script so watch out

Sasha awoke slowly and decided that he hated it. The will to as much as exist had long since left him completely, such that even when the plants were on his doorstep he found himself only remaining still in bed and waiting for the inevitable to come and fetch him. He'd almost been relieved that the gas the affini so happily pumped into the atmosphere had dragged his mind down into sleep, and in so doing stolen from him any need to pretend he could still fight back. Then he was in dreams, sweet blissful illusions without the weight of need or expectations where he drifted until someone so RUDELY woke him up.

"Up now, dear." The affini above him purred, and Sasha only groaned in response. "Pretty please? We need to ask you some questions before you can go back to your nap, little one." A wooden hand brushed against his cheek, pulling his consciousness up and out. In protest his eyes slid open to face the world again. All around him were vines that had tightly wrapped around his body in an embrace that was both comforting and forbidding of any movement. A set of the greenery laden with flowers was also plugged into his flesh, with bundles having folded open around his head.

Sasha figured there was some reasonable explanation for this he could figure out if he bothered to think about it. But that would require active effort, and thus he didn't do it. Instead he looked up to where the pod had been opened to see an affini standing over him with a clipboard in hand.

"Welcome back, dear. This will only take a moment and then I can let you get back to your nap, promise. We just need to confirm some information before we can process-"

"I don't care." Sasha grimaced. He would have rolled over and curled up in himself as well, but the restraints on his body only allowed him a small measure of squirming in place for trying.

The affini sputtered a few confused noises before pulling it's composure back together into something vaguely functional. "But, dear, this concerns matters such as your name and needs and-"

"Do whatever you want."

"But-"

Sasha stared down the affini silently before shutting his eyes. It was about the only gesture still allowed to him at this point.

“Okay, fine,” The affini huffed. “If you really care so little then I’ll put you down as Snuggly and handle the rest myself.” She paused as if she expected to rouse some protest from him, but none came. Without another word she tapped her pen against the paper for a few more seconds as she mulled over the situation, then gave a defeated sigh as her vines flicked the buttons on the side of the pod. “Very well then, Snuggly. Enjoy your nap, dear.”

Sasha gave his own sigh in relief as the lid closed shut above him. Finally, the loose bundles of plant matter around his head squirmed into life, wrapping tightly around him to eclipse his senses. Then there was a rush of sweet air, and his consciousness once more spiralled out from under him.

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Sasha awoke slowly and hated it just as much the second time around. Gone were the restricting vines that so coiled around his form, and in their place was the loose cloth of... some kind of hospital gown, he guessed. A dim light shone through his eyelids, while a pair of voices played through his ears in hushed tones. Something about drugs and ‘class Gs’ or whatever. Sasha decided that maybe if he kept his eyes shut they wouldn’t- oh, nevermind, now a hand of plant and wood was ruffling his hair.

The human gave a small whining noise as the motion jostled him out of the pleasant sleep and into the horrid awful reality of the waking world.

“Told you that’d wake her up.”

Her?

“But she’s so cute! I simply couldn’t avoid petting her any longer!”

She???

Clearly they’re mistaken, he was obviously a boy. Not that it’d be bad if he was a girl, per se. But girls were soft and cute and any number of pleasant adjectives he could think of that did not describe him, so he’s not sure how they could make that mistake. Probably an alien misunderstanding.

“Besides, she seems to enjoy the attention. Don’t you, Snuggly?”

Oh stars damn it. Sloth had already come back to bite him in the ass. His voice arose through a strained breath, shifting into a half formed word before a set of vines wrapped around his mouth to silence him.

“Shh, remember the care guide? ‘Do not engage executive function’, even with little questions like that.” The second affini spoke up, then promptly joined in petting his head silly. “Though you are right, she is just \*so\* adorable.”

Sasha wiggled between their grasps until he managed to slip out and whimper, "I'm not-"

Then he was silenced again, this time by a wooden hand pressing over his mouth. "Now, now, dear. Your privilege for choices is already taken, and as such your participation in what's happening to you is entirely a matter of convenience."

Sasha shut his mouth. Seemingly satisfied with that, the two affini returned to their work above him. True to their word, his participation in the proceedings was wholly unnecessary as the two were quite happy to move his body for him whenever they needed for- what was this, a medical inspection? Didn't even ask first before doing it either, without as much as a break in their conversation the plants would pick up his limbs and puppet him like he was some kind of animal. Which, well, he supposed that did fit the whole pet thing he kept getting told about.

Sasha supposed he wouldn't have considered it out of place for people to move a cat without consulting it at the vet's, and thus followed that the plants must see people as much under them as he saw pet animals beneath himself. Something about the dignity of the human species tried to bubble up his throat, but it failed to surface from beneath the squashing blanket of apathy that was still in control of his body.

Whatever. Let them have their fun. It was just easier for him to stay adrift this way. That was what the affini wanted anyway, right?

"Good news, dear!" One of the affini, Sasha didn't particularly care which one, chimed up. "Looks like you're all cleared to start your xenodruggies now!" It said as it dangled a vial before his eyes. Meanwhile, the second affini parted his medical gown to reveal a crimson flower resting upon his sternum. A brief moment of instinctive panic at the sight shot through his body, but the affini simply wrapped their vines around his limbs and bound him down tight against the medical bed for it.

The second affini slipped up close to his head and whispered words into his ear in a foreign tongue. Something he couldn't understand in the slightest but the tone yet slithered through into his mind. Calm. Like an instruction his body obeyed outside his active choice. Calming. Breathing. Relaxing into the grip of the two affini's vines. With steadier eyes he could see that the flower was in fact implanted into him, remaining tight knit against his skin as it grew from beside his sternum up towards his collar bone. And those petals. A red so deep it looked like blood.

The first affini grabbed him by the chin and forced his head to look up. "This here is a class A medication." It said, dangling the vial above him. "It will enhance your senses but only in that pleasant tingly sort of way. You're also getting some tasty class Cs," She placed the first vial down on a bedside tray before grabbing a second to show him. "To enhance your emotional response, a good little pet like you should be as warm on the inside as you are cute on the outside."

It repeated the gestures one after another as it sorted through a plethora of 'xenodruggies' they were apparently to administer to him. Ws to steal away his words, so he wouldn't get mistaken into thinking he's people. Zs to be administered nightly so he'll get a proper sleep. A supposedly mild class E to be administered if he ever has a 'difficult episode'. A different class C, though that one was supposed to 'inhibit attachment' whatever that meant. A whole collection of drugs and supplements she referred to collectively as class J starters. Something about needing to ramp up his brain so it could safely sustain the high coming for him for as long as they need. Gs, to make his body as cute and girly as can be.

Sasha again tried to pipe up that he wasn't a girl, actually, but the affini yet again silenced him before the words could come out. Not that it would be \*bad\* if he were a girl. Girls were great. He wished he was born one, but, well, he wasn't so lucky. And it didn't seem fair that they had some chemical to fix that and be administered to him instead of, he didn't know, some trans person out there who needed it.

"And lastly, here are your class Hs. These are to hypnotize you!" The affini chirped happily. Sasha blinked. Hypnotize? Even as he tried to parse what it actually meant the second affini fitted some kind of branch-work lattice around his head. The thin tendrils of wood shifted on contact, and an entwined pair over his eyes spread apart to reveal a clear membrane which he could see through. The pair bent to rest down against his face, turning the transparent sheet into a lens that fit tightly over the totality of his vision.

Something shifted along the sides of his head, followed by a pinch behind his ears that sent electric jolts arcing around his head. More of the second affini's words played out into his ears then, still in a language he couldn't understand but with a tone that seemed to reach into him. A rush of colors played out over the visor, which then settled into a gentle chromatic aberration around the edges of everything he could see. They pulsed with a small shimmer that guided his vision down into the center with a light tug. Weak enough to resist, for now.

Then the first affini plugged the vial into the back of it's hand, sprouted a needle from it's palm, and slid the needle into the flower in his chest. The effect was quick as the cold grip of the medication touched his heart and arced out in rapid order through the rest of his body. Like a winter breeze piercing into his chest he felt the cold so \*clearly\* and through it the shape of his whole vascular system. His nerves flared with the chill after, then his head. His eyes felt as if they were frozen over in a flash, and with it all of a sudden the gentle tug drawing him down into the chromatic blur before him became an unbeatable downward torrent.

The vision and the words did not draw him in softly. They thrust him forward with great force into a state of mental absence that left him ever more open to the unknown words slipping into his skull.

"Good girl~" The first affini cooed as she pet his head. "Just a nice little trance for you, to keep your brain all cute and empty until your new owner picks you out." The words reached Sasha,

but the meaning didn't stick. Nor did the praise that followed as she chased one drug with another, then another, then another. Each one giving another burst of sensation across Sash... ssssha... He blinked. That didn't sound right. But it was his name, wasn't it?

The human blinked again, and the chromatic splay shimmered even underneath his eyelids. That *\*was\** his name. Sss... shh... sa... No. That didn't quite click right. Something was calling him something else. Like a gentle but firm voice pressed into the back of his brain. Something... something... Snuggly.

He smiled softly. What a silly name. Something that they'd name a pet. Pet. They had called him a pet. Snuggly was a pet's name. He was Snuggly? That was easy enough to accept. Much easier than trying to struggle against this fugue to figure it out on his own. Easier. Calmer. Quieter. A vine stroked his cheek and rolling waves of base sensate delight spilled down from his skin. The edge of his lip stitched up into a smile, then a frown in confusion.

This was different. He wasn't supposed to- he, he tried to focus on anything but no matter where he looked the shimmers of light guided him back down into a pit of quiet bliss. It felt *\*good\** to rest there, but the mere act of feeling in and of itself was wrong. It was like a cork had been sealed over his heart, and light threatened to squeeze up from under it, spilling over the edges and into his brain in the process.

Another stroke of the vine against their skin was all it took to break the cork out of place, and emotions spilled out from his chest in all their untamed fury. An involuntary sense of chemical glee at the comfort and adoration rushed in first, but it was chased after by the long repressed waves of despair that had stained his soul.

Atrophied nerves struggled to contain the onrush of renewed sorrow that gushed out from his soul, drowning over even the chemical sensations as it bored a hole through Snuggly's. He gasped, tears forming on the edges of his eyes. Not this. The numbness was simpler. The apathy was preferable. Give it back, he silently begged.

But the two affini above refused to leave him in silence and pain. The pair of them descended on the little human, showering him in kind words and kinder pettings. Still they placed more of the liquid kindness into his system, and still did the bloom of loving fog spread within him. He wept and gnashed behind his covered mouth, but the drugs needed only a moment to defeat his sorrow and leave him once more limp in the plant's grasp.

Whatever trance still slithered through his brain had full control from that moment onward, and the affini had no trouble ramping it up from 'nicely distracting' to 'replace all active thought with a pleasant hollowness' to smother the remnants of his distress. Within that comfortable emptiness he sank, and the emotions played themselves out around him one by one until he was left with naught but the simple happiness brought by the hands ruffling his hair.

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Snuggly learned two very important things the next day.

One, he was apparently the latest member for what was functionally the equivalent to cat cafe slash adoption center but for affini who wanted to play with cute little human pets.

Two, he was way too fucking high to feel any actual negative emotions about that. Sure there was probably some kind of line about human rights or dignity or whatever he could probably dig up from all the rebel propaganda he heard, but,

Well,

When he first awoke to find himself draped out over a nice pet bed and with one of the two affini from before petting his back the only emotion he actually felt was a deep resonance of relief. He sighed one of those great big sighs that marked all the tension slipping out from between his ribs and rolled over to immediately go back to sleep. To his pleasant surprise, nobody woke him until he rose up on his own some hours later.

Sleeping in apparently put him in a good enough mood to start the day that he didn't even really question when the affini came back and pumped more 'tasty xenodruggies' into his bloodstream he didn't even feel like complaining about it. Then when she moved his now-drugged body through the routine of eating, bathing, dressing, he was stuck in the initial burst of foggy bliss and honestly didn't notice much beyond the overwhelming pleasure the base physical sensations on his body gave him.

When he finally mellowed down enough to realize that he was wearing what amounted to comfortable-if-revealing pajamas and had the hypnotic lens framed over his eyes again, he was still trapped in a wave of delight that smothered all attempts to be angry under the overarching want that he'd feel so much \*warmer\* if he snuggled up to the affini's arm. And as the pulsing rhythms and pretty lights guided his consciousness down into a state of hypnotic calm he didn't even try to resist for one moment.

Why shouldn't he, after all? He was already captured, and his body was quite happy to let him know how little it was actively listening to him at that point. Nobody could reasonably fault him for indulging in the pleasures he couldn't escape. And he was so tired, so weary from all the fighting, so willing to just drift on down. Down into the peaceful quiet. Good girl!

All this was to say that when he was introduced to the main room of the cafe his first reaction was somewhere between passive surprise and quiet hunger for comfort instead of the far more typical stomping and wailing anger of captured rebels.

True to form, the cafe space was filled with an abundance of seemingly oversized structures taken after cat furniture design and remade for more human comforts. There was even a veritable cat tree in two different corners, with blissed out terrans staring down upon the cafe as they reclined within the higher towers. The affini carrying him however made her way towards a

particularly large pile of cushions and seated herself comfortably against it, squeezing him against her side as she did before petting him even more than before.

“So this is the newbie you’ve been telling me about?” A second affini slipped in next to her and peered down at him. “She’s cute.”

Snuggly tried to insist that he wasn’t a girl again, half expecting another vine to curl around and silence him. But no vine came, and to his much greater surprise the words only formed into a half-hearted bleating noise that stumbled awkwardly out of his mouth.

“Aww, chatty too!” The affini cooed and ruffled his hair, drowning out his protests on the internal side as well with a wave of pleasurable delight spilling in through his scalp. “Is she already ramped up?”

“That’s tomorrow.” The first affini answered as she tilted his head back and made him face the second. “See her eyes? Still full of silly little thoughts for now. Today is just for preliminary socializing.”

The second affini aww’d all over again as she stared down upon him, this time wrapping a pair of vines over his cheeks and wiggling his face a bit just to knock his sense of balance off into an idle spin. Whatever the two talked about in the interim slipped in one ear and out the other untouched as his consciousness struggled to keep up with the sensations from their touch and by the time he could uncross his eyes enough to even look past the itching desire to ask for even more petting he found himself now placed upon on the cushions by himself.

Snuggly glanced up to the two affini still chatting happily together, each with a different blissed out terran now snuggled up in their lap that they adored to excess amidst their words. He felt an awkward pang in his heart that he decided was probably totally a result of the visor and not his own feelings and- a nudge at his side drew him back down. Another one the drugged up terrans was sitting beside him all of a sudden. He could see in her eyes a sort of empty daze that marked an absence of active thought, and in her movements the sort of heavy, lazy movements that he always saw on those floret broadcasts.

The woman looked him in the eye and smiled, then muttered something that he lost completely between her awkward speech and his heart just happening to skip a beat with more absolutely-not-jealousy at the sight of a blissed out woman. A second terran suddenly dropped in right behind him, eliciting a bleating yelp from Snuggly as a third and a fourth of the cuddly little things collapsed in around him.

One of them took his wrist in their hand and glanced at one of the wristbands before smiling and collapsing wholly against him, muttering something along the lines of ‘pretty girl’ as they did. Which was a bit silly, the pretty girl was clearly the lady sitting next to him not- oh now she was hugging him too. And the third. And the fourth- at that point it was a whole cuddle puddle as

more of the drugged-out-their-ears humans came in to peek at the newbie then decided to simultaneously add to and partake of the simple pleasure in physical contact.

All the while the more cognizant of the bunch, which rapidly did not include Snuggly himself, took the time to remind him about what a 'cute girl' he was. It would have been nice, was he actually a girl. Or just cute. He could stomach being a boy if he was cute, he thought.

That was probably the trance talking again. Fit for keeping him calm and obedient and apparently questioning his gender. At least it was easy to blame the hypnotics for why he was succumbing so easily to the intense warmth of others' skin against his, and how his heart calmed in the presence of gentle arms wrapped around his waist. Just blame the hypnotics, he told himself. It's all their fault he was so willing to laze into their collective grip and drift happily along on their honeyed words.

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"See? I told you she'd play nice today."

Snuggly heard the words slip through his naptime haze and decided that he didn't quite feel like paying much attention to it.

"Still comforting to see. We haven't had a straight-from-capture pet in a while."

"Worried she'd be a fighter?"

Snuggly wiggled himself deeper into the pillows to try to drown out the voices, but didn't get far as it turned out the pillow in question was some cute boy's comfy tummy. He decided this was nice enough to stay on for now instead, even with the noise.

"Well, yes. Most of the rebels I've seen needed a bit more breaking in than her to get to this point. All the others are all flailing and wailing and 'no, i'm an independent terran you can't bathe me in chemical bliss and soothe the scars of my capitalist poisoned heart'."

The ruffling of affini leaves in laughter was the straw that finally slipped Snuggly out of his nap. He peeked up from the middle of the cuddle puddle and made a noise at the two. Didn't even bother to try to string together words either, as his throat wasn't going to listen to him anyway. Up above he saw the lights outside had long dimmed into the night- stars, did he lose time? He furrowed his brows to try to recall how long he had spent cuddling limbs, bodies, and vines but it was all a blur of indeterminate length and ohhh now there were more vines wrapping around him and scattering that line of thought aside entirely.

"Aww, I think she's grumpy." The first affini giggled at him.

“Probably because we were just talking about how sweet and docile she’s been for us.” The second joined in, then added with a wink. “Don’t worry, dear, we know you’re still a big tough rebel on the inside.”

That’s right. He’s not sweet and docile, he’s just drugged and hypnotized and probably in need of a good nap on top of it. Once all that was taken away he’d definitely be able to muster up all of the well-rested rebellion still sitting in his gut would surge up and he’d-

Hrm. Well he wasn’t sure what he would do considering he didn’t know where in all of space he was or what an escape vector would even look like from here, but he’d probably sort out the whole gender thing first. Again, he insisted to himself, not that there was anything wrong with being a girl, it’s just that he clearly didn’t deserve to be one and their thinking otherwise was a silly mistake.

The second affini knelt down before him suddenly and whispered to him alone, large vibrant eyes locked squarely on his. “Although, dear, if you \*did\* want to be a sweet and docile girl for us all on your own already, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. Just as there’s nothing wrong with you enjoying all this comfort we’ll shower upon you.”

Snuggly decided not to think any deeper on those words specifically.

The affini still leaning over him stared into his eyes for a moment longer, mouth curled into a gentle smile as she pondered something before giggling and petting the top of his head. “Well, it’s not like you actually have a say in the matter anyway.” It’s vines tightened around him and swept him up to her side as she sifted through the cuddle puddle and started propping up sleeping terrans to tidy them off. “Up now, dears. We’re past closing time.”

A symphony of moans, groans, and pouty faces rose up from the cuddle puddle in response to that, with the two affini swiftly meeting and defeating the protests with even more adoring pets. They sorted the lot into two groups, one whose owners were coming to pick them up, and the other who were staying overnight. The latter group, starting with Snuggly, were then shepherded into the back rooms where the bright walls and pretty pet structures were replaced with darker tones and a plethora of cute little pet beds.

Snuggly, of course, did not offer any extra resistance as he was fed dinner, bathed, and changed into nighttime clothes. That would be a waste of his lurking rebellious spirit, and frankly cuddling like twelve people at the same time was a surprisingly effective method of working up a sweat anyway. So even if it was a touch embarrassing to be stripped, scrubbed, and then tucked into a warm pool as the two affini got to work doing the same for all the other pets staying overnight he still played the part of the polite pet.

Maybe he smiled a bit from the simple pleasure of being in a warm pool of bubbly water as well. MAYBE even a little bit because the chemical high coursing through his blood still had him feeling like every touch on his skin was spilling dopamine into his spine. But the smile MOST

DEFINITELY ABSOLUTELY was from him bearing it and pretending to go along with... whatever the point of this all was.

As for the bath itself, his ability to keep any meaningful coherence of it was swiftly lost to the act of the affini slithering up behind him and wrapping herself around his bare flesh, calling him all manner of adorable words as she gave him a scalp massage of such strength that he felt as if all thoughts were summarily pressed out his ears and evaporated into fine mist.

A more capably minded individual might have had something to say about how the two affini managed to deftly multitask to keep a dozen terrans entertained together through a warm bath, but Snuggly was not that terran. Snuggly was the terran who got lost looking at nothing in particular and didn't even notice that the liquid warmth on his skin had been replaced with the lingering warmth of air until the affini was already done drying and dressing him for the night. Even then it was purely because the affini had stopped petting him and dangled a light in front of his eyes long enough to draw some semblance of focus back together with.

"Good girl," The affini purred, and Snuggly definitely did not shiver in some small rush of delight at being called such. If he did it was probably the trance again. "Normally we let our pets have individual enrichment time now, but given your circumstances that's not much of an option so you'll be staying with me instead." All around the two the other humans were given books, games, or other little toys and trinkets to handle with the same sort of unfocused ditzzy airs that they had managed for everything else throughout the day.

Reflecting upon it, Snuggly considered this probably the weirdest day in his life so far. While the abundance of rebel propaganda had informed him that being captured would mean any number of terrible things, the affini propaganda on the other side had told him he would be given to a new loving owner or whatever and domesticated or something like that. Instead, he was rendered into the equivalent of a very stoned cat and spent all day sleeping or hugging people.

He was fairly certain he was supposed to think of that as a bad thing somehow. But the truth of the matter was that in his heart he was tired, and any opportunity to sleep in all day was one he simply didn't wish to pass up. So if the plants wanted him to rest, then he would rest. But because he wanted to, not because they told him to.

Snuggly nodded to himself. He was cheating the system, cleverly getting the affini to shower him in nice things all the while he was actually still a free spirited rebel on the inside. It was clever! Flawless! He was a genius!

Snuggly curled up into the affini's lap, wiggled up against her chest, rested his cheek upon her vines, and slipped off into a wonderfully comfortable sleep all while she burst into adoring awws at the mere sight of him acting this way. What a fool, completely unaware that she'd been tricked by his wily ways.

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The next day when Snuggly awoke he found that he actually didn't mind it so much, which was weird in and of itself. Additional weirdness was provided by the fact that nothing stopped him from looking up, deciding that the waking world was for squares, and then rolling up into a burrito and going right on back to sleep.

Much like the day before, nobody bothered him until well after he awoke later and spent some time just stretching about aimlessly. Even then it was to quietly carry him through the waking routines, allowing him to drift along the active edge of consciousness at a leisurely pace. Not until he was all clean, dressed in more comfy pajama day clothes, and halfway through stuffing his face with pancakes did he truly feel awake, and not until then did the affini actually try to draw him into conversation.

"Gueeeeeeeeeessss what, dear!" She clapped excitedly, then produced a large vial full of blue liquids. "Today is your big day!"

Snuggly stared at her blankly for a moment before making another baa noise at her, just to highlight how conversational he wasn't capable of being thanks to their care.

"You're all primed to start your actual class J doses, which means in a few hours you'll be officially up for claiming! Just think, your Mistress could be out there today!" The rest of her words trailed off out of Snuggly's awareness as he mentally slid back down to the pancakes.

Mistress? The broadcasts did mention things like owners and pets and domestication and- uhg. Snuggly opened his mouth and the affini happily provided more pancake for him to munch on. He didn't even know where to start for forming feelings on the matter, much less what to \*think\* about it. Thinking was too heavy anyway. Maybe the hypnotics would help him with that again. His head did feel clearer yesterday when all the medications were still fresh.

A vine slipped under his chin and lured his attention back up. "Aww, look at you still being all thinky." The affini hummed. "We'll be handling your hypnotics after your medications as usual today, and since you're not allowed choices we're going to have to do some actual programming to ensure your comfort instead. Additionally, with the stronger doses you should have no trouble being pleasantly empty in there."

Snuggly blinked. What? He thought the drugs already given were supposed to be keeping him all empty headed and pleasant and- well, like, it had been working, he thought. Additionally the hypnotics made him enjoy the whole thing. Right?

...that was why it felt nice, right?"

"...oh honey, did you think you were already blissed up like the others?" The affini giggled at his expense. "Dear, all the hypnotics have done is give you a pattern to calm down whenever you start to feel overwhelmed or angry, not that you even needed it."

...oh no

“Additionally, since you’ve been so well behaved, the drugs have been kept to a pleasant minimum for the time being so you can adjust properly.”

For a brief, terrible moment, Snuggly almost considered all the Weird Gender Feelings these affini had been throwing at him were not the hypnotics fault, and then promptly slammed that thought shut with the far more pressing matter that, apparently, the real thing was looming down upon him waiting to pounce. That was a \*much\* easier matter to contemplate- oh damnit he spent so long spinning his mental wheels that didn’t even notice the affini slither up next to him, tuck down his shirt to reveal the rose in his chest, and start pumping the new drug into his system.

He felt as if the moment stretched out forever, with the blue liquid being squeezed through the affini’s needle at a laborious pace and drip drip dripping into his veins. His eyes were stuck upon the affini’s, just as her gaze stayed in on his. He whimpered in fear. Of the drugs, he wanted to tell himself. But the truth was that he was afraid of what the recent slew of feelings actually meant about himself, and he as the pit of worry in his stomach was stoked into a wanting flame that truth became harder and harder for him to avoid.

A soft ‘click’ marked the dose fully emptying into him, and the affini plucked the needle and vial from his body to dispose of without looking away from him. “There, there, all done~” She purred. A vine slid along his cheek, and her touch was the catalyst which finally set his body aflame. His veins erupted with warmth that cascaded from his cheek and swept over the rest of his head from there. His thoughts stuttered in response to the warmth then burned apart into a breathy moan of overwhelmed pleasure.

On cue, the hypnotic conditioning kicked in to turn a moment of being completely overwhelmed into a pause, then a gentle release of air. The heat cascaded down through his body to chase after his breath, and with it trapped him in a loop of momentary overwhelming bliss leading into pre-programmed routines of practiced breathing to release tension. Caught between the two Snuggly could do no more than watch as his body collapsed limply against the affini as the simple contact elicited ever more blinding heat through him.

He tried to tell himself that he could probably still keep it together, and immediately knew that that was a lie. His oh so helpful caretaker, meanwhile, had done her part to help ensure he melted into bliss by petting him relentlessly as she pumped him full of the remainder of his prescriptions, each stroke hammering upon his psyche like a hammer through his skull, again and again fraying the edges of his awareness as she went.

Then the visor once more was slipped over his eyes, and it gleefully gathered up all those frayed edges to weave something anew of him.

In hindsight, it was rather silly of him to believe that he was already victim of the affini's control before then. Filled with the, what had she called it, class Js?, he felt want bubble up from every inch of his skin, and from the want came an ever deeper need that demanded to be fed. The need dominated his flesh, weaving its way through his muscles just to shiver and squirm for anything, even a small drop of adoration.

But all it found in him was the slow warp into desperation, and that desperation was so easily speared by the dulcet tones and beautiful colors, dragged on down to its knees, and taught how to \*beg\*.

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By the time Snuggly was able to actually string together a thought longer than "please-" or "fuck-" he had already been moved out to the front room. The guests were more than happy to appease his pathetic beggings all the while, and his body was so wrapped in it's new instructions that it found no shame in flopping upon their laps and pulling up his sweater for tummy rubs.

It should have been embarrassing to have his body act in such a way, but the louder part of his mind was quick to remind him that cute pets didn't need to worry about that, and that he wasn't allowed choices so really being uncontrollably touch horny was a more fitting way to be anyway. Appropriately incapable and desperately in need of some help from her Mist-

Snuggly bit off that line of thought. Nothing has changed. He was still pretending to be a mean silly little rebel on the inside, and once all of these drugs and hypnotics and cuddling and everything else was taken away he could get right to proving what a \*good girl\* she still is on the inside. It was perfect! This all just meant that he had an even better disguise for making everyone think he was a nice sweet docile girl like she actually is and they'll all shower her in comfort and love and adoration in the meanwhile.

That was way too much thinking. He decided to listen to the trance's prompting and use those synapses on something much more productive: literally nothing at all. This was, apparently, to be her life for now after all. All of the other terrans kept on hand were similarly wrapped up in a rapturous emptiness and wholly shameless pleasure, it would be weirder if he didn't join them.

He decided to, not surrender per se, but to make a choice to play along. Giggling all the while about slipping a choice past the affini as he did.

Snuggly slipped into the daily routine of an adorable adoptable human pet with ease. Wake up, be fed, bathed, clothed, adored for an arbitrary length of time, then given quiet personal time from dinner to sleep. If he was ever overwhelmed by the day, he could retreat to one of the many hiding holes around the front room, or escape to one of the back rooms entirely. If he ever starved for affection, well, his body was more than happy to land him in an affini's lap and mewl

adorably until he was empty-mindedly drooling from the overwhelming cascade of raw pleasure their touch could bring.

Stars, what pleasures they could bring. With his brain wrapped up under the firm grip of the “xenodruggies” he saw the world through distorted lenses. Colors were so much brighter, noises so much richer, every touch a canvas of texture and the floral scents around the affini positively entrancing in their intensity. He could do as little as breathe deep and the world would seem to blur apart around him, colors smearing apart as he collapsed bodily into an oversized pillow just to get adored even more for being ‘ever so clumsy’ and ‘extra adorable’.

And the feelings! Ever so vivid as the world had become, pouring from his heart endlessly to wash up and run away with him. When joy sped through his veins his mouth would already be smiling with fresh energy dancing on his fingertips. The touch of sloth would drag him down into tight hugs that he couldn’t even begin to consider lifting himself up from. Want and desire no more teased on the edge of his heart, they seized him entirely and dragged him forward to fall down on his knees and beg wordlessly for whatever so captured his interests.

Usually that was head pats.

During that time, as days turned into weeks, the drugs did their dutiful work upon his body. He didn’t notice much of the change at first, only a vague feeling that he smelled different. Later, he touched his own skin and felt as if it were beautifully soft and smooth and, for once, was not disgusted by it. His hair grew and grew and graced his shoulders before too long. Luckily for him, the affini seemed to love taking immaculate care of his hair for him, and so it was always rendered in the most lovely of silken smooth textures for others to pet.

Most telling really should have been the way his body bounced back from malnutrition to swell into a softer form. Fat returned to rest upon his thighs and stomach and granted him gentle curves that he had long since been envious of. Yet that still did not make him realize how he was changing.

No the only thing that made him realize his body was different was when, after one of the many days in which he spent going on one affini’s lap to the next in an indecipherable blur of vines lovingly petting his tummy, one of the handlers tucked him in for bed, paused to stare over him, and then asked the other, “Are we allowed to do body mods for her?”

The answer, apparently, was yes as the next day Snuggly was given an ‘extra dose of tasty xenodruggies’ for a midday nap, and awoke later already back in bed with a set of bandages wrapped around his head and over his ears. That sudden jolt was enough to, after an hour of getting lost in the nice texture of his blanket, realize that his body was being changed by their whims. He then touched the bandages over his ears and promptly forgot what he was thinking about for a few days in favor of more nice touchy feely emptyheadedness.

He realized it, again, a few days later when the bandages came off and his new ears were unleashed upon the world. There was much excited gasping and adoring that fell upon him that day, and he promptly forgot about the whole thing from all the heavy petting that short circuited his brain. Even the guests seemed to take extra care in rubbing and stroking his new ears, all of which lapped warmth upon his psyche such that he essentially spent the week accomplishing little other than moaning and writhing in their grasp.

He realized it, \*again\*, some vague stretch of time later when he was finally given a gap of relatively low stimulation to string his few brain cells together and try touching them himself.

Oh

They were feathered.

His fingers traced a line of soft scales along the sides of his face to discover that his ears were now floppy feathered things. Not quite wings, but they certainly fluttered like ones once he started to touch them directly. Apparently they were only partly under his conscious command, and even then it was just to emote along with his feelings. Flopped down to blend in with his hair at neutral, peeking up when his attention focused one way or another, fluttering about like a dog wagging its tail when he got excited.

More telling was that touching them felt rather intense to do in that even just running his fingers across the length of a feather was leaving him whimpering with an additional layer to the usual sea of want in his skin. He did it a second time, just to experiment, and found himself red in the face, panting and moaning as he cried out before being lovingly rescued by one of the affini wrapping him up in it's vines and promptly emptying out his cute little head with even more attention.

He realized it, \*again\*, for the fourth first time even later down the line after having a particularly lazy moment by the window. He'd been idly poking his own tummy, which was adorable and wonderfully soft as always and perfect for the other pets to hug, when the slow shift from daylight to night sky outside brought his own reflection in the glass to light. Of course his first thought was that a stranger was staring back at him, which caused him to give a small gasp and pop up in surprise.

Of course, when he realized the person in the reflection also had a pair of winged ears flaring up, then one flopped down when he tilted his head to the side in confusion, he then connected the dots that the reflection was of himself. Which was silly and impossible because the reflection was cute and soft and feminine and any number of other pleasant adjectives he could use to describe people that aren't him and that he considered very good happy traits to have.

Snuggly poked his own tummy again and saw the reflection do the same. Then he fluttered his ears a bit, which the reflection mimicked as well. Okay well the reflection had tits which he obviously didn't so he grabbed his chest- FUCK!

HOLY SHIT

TIDDIES!?!?!?

When in all of stars blasted space did that- wait the ears were mods too.

Snuggly proceeded to stare blankly at his own reflection as the fact that his body was being changed outside of his control finally actually managed to simmer it's way into his mind. They made him soft and cute and other nice adjectives. It was kind of weird to have the ability to do that and waste it on him instead of some trans girl who would actually benefit from them. Someone with a case of the genders instead of a case of thinks-girls-are-super-cool-in-a-cis-way like he does.

Kind of like they're misgendering him.

Which would be very rude if he was actually bothered by it, he supposed.

But, like, being feminine wasn't a problem, he thought. It was just that they kept calling him a girl and treating him like a girl and giving him girl hormones and girly clothes and making him all cute and girly when he clearly was just some guy. Maybe that was the point. Maybe they were just trying to be mean and poke fun at his gender the whole time.

Snuggly huffed and only momentarily was distracted by how cute his pouty face looked in the window. How rude! Well he'll show them. He still had all that rebellion bottled up inside, after all! He'd... uh... hrm... he'd be a girl! Yeah! Then whenever they call him cute and girly they'd actually be *\*affirming\** his gender instead of making fun of him, and those silly affini wouldn't even know it!

Snuggly giggled mischievously to herself. There was literally no way this clever plan could backfire at all.

That whole train of thought was immediately derailed by an affini wreathed in pink flowers peeking in through the glass at her. The two locked eyes, then the affini ran in through the front door, checked in at the desk, and promptly fell upon Snuggly to shower her with an abundance of headpats and tummy rubs. Another day at the job.

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Snuggly's caretakers seemed to adore the way she'd flap her wings every time she ate something tasty. Ever since the feathered bits had fully healed they'd taken to partitioning up dinner into lazy bites just so they could soak in her flutters. For her part, Snuggly just liked having the extra attention all the time and wasn't particularly capable of any shyness about it in the process.

"I can't believe nobodys claimed her yet." One of the affini muttered as it switched to scratching under Snuggly's chin.

"Thinking of taking her yourself?" The other teased even as she joined in to scratch the other side. Absolute heaven for Snuggly.

"Don't be silly, I barely have time as it is."

"Aww, but you're always going on about how cute she is!"

"Yes and it's wild to me that nobody else seems to realize it."

A vine slipped around her wrist and held it up. "I think it's the 'unbroken' tag that scares them off, honestly. Most of the affini who come here are looking for a cuddly, easy going floret. They see that and get worried as soon as the drugs die down she'll be all fighty and yelly and everything."

"Aww, you wouldn't do that now would you, Snuggly?" The first affini pinched her cheeks. She totally would do that. She was a fierce rebel after all, so she'd have to do all the rebel things when she had a chance. Not that she could think of any of them at the moment, but she was sure the ideas would come back. More importantly, they weren't scratching her chin still, so she bleated at them to get back to it. "See? She's adorable."

"...hey, do you think she'd look cute with paws?" The second affini suddenly asked.

The answer, evidently, was yes again as the next day Snuggly was given another tasty midday xenodruggie snack and, \*again\* woke up already tucked into bed. This time though her arms were the ones wrapped up in bandages down from her shoulders to her... elbows? Past that was just big fluffy useless lion paws.

Snuggly decided that that was so silly that she must still be dreaming and promptly rolled back into bed and went to sleep. Actually contemplating the matter would require thinking, and thinking was a silly thing to do so she simply didn't worry about it. This ended up working out as the next day when the affini hooked her up for even more hypnotics under the visor (and Snuggly was only reasonably excited to spend some more time in a state of enforced mindless bliss as her brain was given a refresher on all it's lovely instruction on being a cute soft cuddly pet) they proceeded to run her body through lessons on getting to know her new hands.

The two pieces of aesthetically nonfunctional feline bappers were, in truth, planttech simulacrum plugged into her flesh. In a trance her body went through the motions of gripping, moving, wiggling them about, then unwinding the surface layer of leaf-like growths to reveal an intricate network of vines and branches that formed the underlying structure. Then, with her mind as a passenger to the visor's guiding lead through her body, she moved the individual parts to wind back together such that the paws folded back into themselves, the fur coat

shivered apart and slipped inside of the structure, and in their place were once again human-like hands.

Though even in that configuration the innate inhumanity showed through in the scaled nature of her replacement skin, from small soft scales nearly mimicking natural flesh along her fingers to the veritable bracers of dark, hardened matter from the center of her hands up under the bandages. She repeated the exercises again in this configuration, was programmed with a handy layer of conditioning to lock it behind needing her Mistresses' permission to use it, and then the hands unwound into a far more functional mass of unaffiliated tentacles.

Truth be told that small grasp of seeing how the affini could multitask through that many possible limbs at once made Snuggly's brain hurt to process any of it, and she was quite relieved to be done with that exercise and have her body puppeted back into a state of adorable uselessness in the form of kitty paws. One of the affini said something about a tail, too, but Snuggly didn't really catch any of that as she was immediately busy distracting herself by holding the paws against her cheek just to enjoy the texture of big soft toe beans being smooshed against her face.

She was \*such\* an independent and free-willed terran.

The guests in her day to day seemed to appreciate the new beans as much as she did, as the rest of her week became a blur between more hypnotized practice for paw power to an endless series of affini 'ooh'ing and 'aah'ing over her, showing her with more praise for how cute and lovely she is, and then playing about with them. That pink affini even came back to give her a cup to knock over a few times. It was empty, of course. Knocking over a full cup would be rude. But the affini got much delight out of seeing Snuggly bap it off the table just so she could pick it up and put it back to get bapped off again.

After about a week the bandages came off for good, and Snuggly could see that the new arms blended into a scaled pattern that slipped past her elbow to crawl under her upper arm towards her chest, with her original skin only showing some slight angry tone for all the surgical fuckery that had been done to it. Eighteen hours of poking, petting, being led out to the front room for being adored and playing fetch all day, and then collapsing back into her bed at night Snuggly then inspected her arms again.

The class Zs, as ever, were quite wonderful for dragging her down into sleep, but they gave her a few minutes of slowly-slipping consciousness before taking her completely. In that time, with the attention of the world closed and the solitude of her own pet bed, Snuggly realized that a normal rational human reaction would probably be to be worried about their old arms having been left to rot in the bottom of a medical waste bin somewhere. But, honestly, all she felt was a sort of giddy glee at the thought of the big useless things. They were so soft, too! Soft like her bed which was so nice and warm and- Snuggly promptly fell asleep.

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The tail that Snuggly was only half aware of turned out to be another marvel of plant tech engineering that had been prepared just for her. Apparently at the same time that they had done up her hands the affini had planted a bundle into her lower spine that had since grown and healed through the way on down to become an anchor for the tail to attach to. From there it was a simple matter for the two affini to bend Snuggly over a table, pull up her shirt, down her shorts, momentarily confuse her with excited expectations of all manner of carnal indulgences from the action, and then plug the tail into her directly.

Once done they let Snuggly loose to drop down onto the floor feeling lost, confused, and weirdly horny about the whole thing before she realized she could now feel the sensation of an extra extremity curling off of her spine behind her. She turned to look at it, and, only seeing the end of it, turned around bodily to chase after it. This resulted in her crawling on the floor in a circle chasing after her own tail for a few minutes until the sight of a pretty affini derailed her thoughts completely.

A separate, later incident of her chasing her own tail had much the same results except it ended in her collapsing onto a particularly soft cushion next to a pretty girl who proceeded to cuddle the entire consciousness out of her while an affini brushed both of their hair for them. It was positively divine.

A third incident, as Snuggly had become quite forgetful and prone to repeating revelations apparently, occurred when that pink affini from before came in and, so delighted at the sight of her tail, decided to slither on over to collapse next to Snuggly and start petting it a whole bunch while saying something about how cute she was. Which was fair, Snuggly was *\*very\** cute, afterall.

But more relevant to the tail and not the part where Snuggly's brain was being converted into gay fluid leaking out her ears from happy pet feelings was the fact that the petting session was fit to highlight that what initially had the appearance of serpentine plating along the length of a fat cuddly tail was actually the surface layer to an intricate bed of roots and vines that had become attached to her. These she had as much conscious control over as she did her ears, which is to say very little, as good happy feelings would make her little wings flutter and her tail coil and slither all up around itself excitedly, in the process wrapping up the affini's facsimile hand into a tight clutch and pinning it between her thighs.

Her tail's grip was apparently a surprise for the affini, as she gave it one or two halfhearted attempts to pull her hand free before giving a defeated 'I guess I live here now?' and laying down to spoon Snuggly properly after that. After a most wonderful nap and some lovely affectionate cuddling and maybe a little bit of Snuggly getting a kiss on her cheek, an alarm blipped on the affini's tablet that prompted her to try to get up and leave.

Snuggly immediately realized an opportunity. Between having the affini's arm still wrapped up in her tail and the plant matter between her thighs, she had a chance. A rare time to bring the

might of her rebellious spirit to bear. The affini would rue the day they challenged her unbroken will!!!

Snuggly squeezed down on the affini and refused to let go even as she stood up. This had the awkward side effect of her clinging to affini's side like a koala, but the benefit of dragging out the warmth she got from all the hugging and cuddling before. The affini, for her part, attempted to prompt Snuggly to "let her go, please" because she "had important work to do" or whatever. The fool! Now she was at the terran's mercy! Snuggly bared the most ferocious counterattack any human could possibly muster against their plant overlords. She looked up and gave the affini the biggest, saddest, most airheaded puppy dog begging stare she could.

The affini looked to her, then around the room, then back to her, sputtering awkwardly before groaning in defeat and sitting back down. Victory!

"I think she chose you." A second affini popped in besides the pink one, giggling all the while.

The pink affini huffed, but scratched behind Snuggly's ear regardless. "I don't want to get her hopes up. I can't possibly take her, with work and travel and, it's too much."

"You're free in a month, aren't you?" The second affini asked as two of the other pets in the cafe crawled up and dropped into their lap to receive a wonderful shower of adoration.

The pink affini paused, having formed a third hand to pet along the length of Snuggly's spine. "I... well, yes. But I haven't even gotten a long term hab set up yet."

"I think you can just ask them to hold her for a bit."

"Sweet temptation, hold your tongue."

The other affini leaned in to strike quickly. "So you \*do\* want her!" Vines popping out to poke at her side playfully.

"I, yes, okay? She's adorable and nobody's claimed her for," The pink affini stopped to grab Snuggly's wrist and peep at her wristband. "A year!?" She sighed, then said in a more quizzical tone, "Unbroken? On \*these\* prescriptions?"

"Looks like she managed to get a DNEEF filed on her, too."

"How criminal, to leave a girl so adorable unclaimed for so long."

"You could fix that~" The second affini teased.

The pink affini produced another set of vines to wrap around Snuggly's cheeks and propped her face up to look the affini in the face, vapid empty pet eyes meeting the shimmering coral tones

of the affini's. Snuggly didn't actually get any of the words the two were saying, she was too busy being held upon the edge of near-orgasmic bliss with every touch on her body. So when that paused for even a moment, she was a little sad and expressed it by bleating wantingly at the affini before her.

"Okay, fine," the affini huffed.

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That night the two affini who cared for Snuggly seemed particularly excited for her and spent extra time adoring her as a result. She didn't really understand what all the excitement was about, but the attention was nice! Somewhere in all the pretty pettings they'd even slipped her wristband off of her and replaced it with a pink one before they tucked her into bed, giving her a new stuffed animal that was full of a rich floral scent along the way to sleep with her.

Since then her regular to-dos shifted slightly but noticeably. While she would still laze and sleep in as much as she desired, when she did awake it was already with that new stuffed animal held close near her head to surround her in it's aroma. The drug regiment was altered just a touch, though the meaning of that was long to her completely as she only really understood tasty chemical make brain happy at that point.

Oh, and her legs were replaced.

About a day after they swapped out her wristband Snuggly was given yet another tasty midday nap xenodruggie dose and, having learned nothing from the last two times it happened, was once again surprised to wake up already in bed to find that her legs were now wrapped in bandages from her thighs down past her knees. Beyond that was all shaggy fur of ungulate-esque legs with cloven hooves beneath them. Soft ones, too! Felt a little squishy and nice to poke.

Again, reasonable people would probably be concerned by having that happen to them. Snuggly, on the other hand, immediately rationalized it with a "well I didn't like those old legs anyway" and then spent her morning giggling and feeling out her new hooves until the affini came to retrieve her. Learning to actually \*use\* the new legs was a bit more trouble, as apparently some of the musculature around her thighs and hips had been adjusted to work with them, but that all went into hypnotic conditioning to bypass her executive function's participation anyway.

She was more than happy to have the excuse to plop down in the big fuzzy cat-wheel type thing, kick up her cool new goat legs, and passively receive the loving affection of any guests that happen to decide to sit near her. The next day she even paced around a little. The third though? On the third day that pink affini showed up and swept her right off her feet before the two of them were let back into one of the private rooms in the building.

In that small space Snuggly was tucked between two very large stuffed animals as the two affini conversed amongst each other, culminating in one handing a pair of vials and a folder to the other. "This one will counteract the bonding inhibitor. Just inject here," It caught the neck of her top and tucked it down to reveal the crimson flower still in her chest. "Wait five minutes, and you're all good to go. When you're done for today, inject the second vial, wait five minutes, and press the button to call us over."

"Thank you!" The pink affini said with a polite curtsy as she took the offered goods and, with no hidden excitement, shuffled over to Snuggly's side to pull her into her lap and start petting her head. Lost in the haze of pleasure that spilled down from the affini's touch, Snuggly didn't even notice as she slipped the "human"'s shirt down and slipped a needle into her flower. She didn't notice the passage of time either beyond a shift from abundant head scratches to vigorous tummy rubs.

But then there was a sound. A distant noise that grew closer with each pulse of her heart that started low and slid leisurely across the auditory spectrum. A note so slow it reminded Snuggly only of a whale's song, complete with leaving her feeling as if she were trapped underwater and in desperate need of something to catch.

Snuggly looked around the room in desperate need to find the source, glancing left and right until her eyes turned to the plant that was still happily wrapped around her body. In that instant she was caught spellbound at the sight. The affini wreathed in pink flowers had always seemed pretty to Snuggly, but something was different. Maybe it was the light. Or the way her eyes glittered. Or the smile that spread across her face as she looked down at the terran.

"Hello, dear," She spoke, and her voice fell upon Snuggly's feathered ears like silk. "I'm Hedra Rosa, 12th Bloom. But you will know me as Mistress."

Knowledge of proper greetings prompted Snuggly to respond, but all that slipped through was a weak gasp of air. Were her wings flapping again? They were probably- oh her tail was coiling too. This was embarrassing. Why was it so embarrassing?

"Cute little thing, without even a voice to beg with." Mistress cooed down at her. "All the worlds should be jealous that you've fallen into my lap." She proceeded to tuck the pet up into her lap, vines wrapping around her shivering body to smother her in affection while Hedra flipped open the files.

Snuggly, on a surface level, kind of sort of recognized what she happened to peek from those documents. Lots of it was terran documents that, if she were more cognizant of things beyond the absolutely divine feeling of a vine slithering along her ribs, she would recognize as pertaining to her own personal history. More of it was flowery affini language that flew right past any level of meaning even as Mistress signed, marked, initialed, and otherwise struck off all the relevant bits piece by piece through the paperwork. But the one thing that did stick out was a picture.

Framed in blue against a black background was a silhouette of Snuggly's body, with red markers indicating the abundance of planttech that had been grafted to her form. Highlighted on that image she could see the plethora of roots that had grown through her muscles and connected into her nerves. The only place still untouched by it all was the top half of her spine and the center of her head, and looking at that image she almost felt incomplete.

Then Mistress gave her some pretty flowers to smell and she forgot about everything else in the world.

---

Something changed in Snuggly. Even as she returned to the routine of endless adoration and pleasure at the hands of her guests something felt lacking. It wasn't the drugs, those were as effective as ever at scouring her consciousness of all meaningful thought beyond the most basic, pet-like level indulgences. It wasn't the guests, who were as willing as before to see her drowned in physical joy by petting her properly senseless as they did... whatever those affini did. Paperwork, probably. But it was something. Something she couldn't place.

But when that pink affini walked back in, the answer seemed to write itself into Snuggly's mind, and then was summarily censored by her own reflexive will. The whale song that She carried upon Her person washed over Snuggly's mind in waves, giving her only a moment to gasp weakly for air before her heart was once more dragged along after it. The scent swam around her senses and Snuggly, for only a brief moment, realized that it was the same scent she smelled every night as she buried her face into the stuffed animal she kept in her bed.

Snuggly's feet moved faster than her mind, and in an instant she was bounding across the room to leap into the affini's arm, bleating happily all the while as she wiggled herself up into Her vines. Mistress, in return, gave her a hug so tight that it squeezed out every drop of worry that had wormed its way into Snuggly's spine right out into pleased moans. Some of the pink flowers wrapped themselves around her face to smother her in their scent, and Snuggly took just one deep breath before everything spiralled out around her and stumbled down into darkness.

When she awoke she wasn't too surprised to find herself once more tucked into bed and assumed, quite rightly, that something had been altered about her form once again. But figuring out what would require effort, and sleep didn't, so she buried her face into her stuffed animal to breathe deep of Mistress' scent and fell right asleep. The next few days followed the same pattern as she "needed to continue laying down" and "let her spine heal" whatever that meant and was summarily drugged up to her eyeballs such that the very simple experience of laying down like a good girl and having vines draped around her body was the most fascinating thing in the world.

Though, weirdly enough, she didn't get any more injections after that. Snuggly didn't notice that the flower in her chest had been replaced with an array of pink scales, either. Similarly lost upon her cute little head was the fact that the endless fog of bliss that had dominated her brain was

finally beginning to recede, though that matter she didn't notice solely because of how much she enjoyed the experience of being a mindless silly pet. All of it just slipped her right by until the day Mistress came back, swept her up into Her vines, and once more brought her down into a pleasant sleep with sweet promises of a new home.

---

Everything that was still Sasha awoke and collided with everything that had become Snuggly at a meteoric speed. The psychological schism between the numbed, depressed terran boy and the adored pet became a fault line upon which the two grinded against each other, conflicting ideas meeting eye to eye and to strike, slay, and bleed into nothing between the folds of his augmented brain. In the middle he was flooded by mental pain and, for the first time in the long ages since his capture, made a choice between the two.

Snuggly awoke and sat upright. She was somewhere different than she was used to, but the faint scent floating through the air made her feel more familiar with it than not. Home was the first word to come to mind, but that was a silly idea as her home had been that pet shop for uh.... however long that was. A long time. Snuggly licked her lips and shivered at the memory of hands gliding along her back and leaving her mewling and twitching on the floor. It was a very pleasant time.

Snuggly tried poking herself to see if she was still dreaming, and then spent a few minutes mentally lost enjoying the sensation of her paws prodding at the comfy layer of fat on her midriff before she realized she wasn't alone in the room. In fact, perched right next to her was Mistress, who had been happily reading a book while acting as a bed of vines for Snuggly to sleep upon. "Good morning, dear." Mistress purred, and Snuggly instinctively clamped her thighs shut as an illicit shiver crawled up her core just from the sound of the affini's voice.

Snuggly bleated back a reply, then was bewildered when her voice seemed to actually follow some semblance of control to her whims. She wasn't used to that anymore. Confusion gripped her and she made another noise, then a third, then tried to recall how talking actually worked and ran through an array of 'mmm' 'nnn' 'thh' 'tuh' and 'kuh' bits before trying to make an actual word, stumbling all over her own tongue, and blushing furiously at her own ineptitude for it. Damn it. This was easier when she simply wasn't allowed to fuck up in the first place.

But Mistress just giggled in response and gave her a lovely pat on the head. "It's okay, little one. Take your time. You haven't had much practice in..." She glanced down at a stack of papers on the nightstand. "18 months now, it seems."

Okay, that was fair. Snuggly sat on her cute butt and went through more verbal practices with Mistress' gentle guidance before she tried speaking again. That try immediately turned into a shocked gasp at the sound of her own voice, as it had become downright \*adorable\* sounding at some point and some far-too-thinky part of Snuggly's consciousness found that frankly impossible and/or rude.

Rude was a weird choice of words. Snuggly tried to do something extra dangerous and think on that. Why rude? There was something that was bothering her a while back. Something about soft and cute and- oh right, gender. The affini were trying to treat her as a uh... boy? Boy would make sense, given she was like, so obviously a girl? And she kind of remembered feeling like the affini were missing the obvious when it came to gender.

Hah! Well! Jokes on all those plants, she got through THAT nonsense with gender intact.

But then why was her voice being extra cute rude? Snuggly wanted to groan. This was too much thinking. Maybe she could ask for more xenodrugs to fix that later. She was probably just confused because there was a conspicuous \*lack\* of xenodrugs in her system. Where was she again?

Snuggly looked up at Mistress to see Her smiling down at her as if she were an adorable kitten. Which was appropriate and the exact level of cute Snuggly should always be. "Hi?" Snuggly said, once again momentarily distracted by the timbre of her own voice.

"Hello there, cutie." Mistress replied. "Do you remember me?"

Oh, a question! Snuggly's emaciated executive function wasn't quite used to the idea of having something posed to her so she stared blankly at the affini for a moment before she realized nobody else was about to sweep in an answer for her. But by then she forgot what the question was in the first place. "Wha?"

Mistress just giggled in response, and then smothered Snuggly in adoring pets. "You are \*TOO\* cute, darling."

Damn right she is.

"I can hardly believe a darling as adorable as you are would be labeled unbroken."

Damn right she was unbroken. She was a uhhhh what was the word? Revel? She \*did\* enjoy revelling in the constant orgasmic bliss that the affini would give unto her, but that didn't sound right. Oh! Rebel! That's right! She was a big bad rebel who was going to do big rebellion stuff. "I \*am\* unbroken!" Snuggly insisted. "I'm like, a total rebel. Doing resistance and... stuff."

"Oh?" Mistress cocked an eyebrow on her wooden face. "And what kind of resistance do you intend to do?"

The first thing that came to mind was something about escape but that sounded like a lot of work so Snuggly discarded it. She then spun the wheels in her head for a while before admitting, "I dunno."

“Well, then how about we save the rebellion for tomorrow, and tonight I give you the tour of our new home?”

That sounds good! Snuggly bolted upright in excitement, wings flapping and tail curling about with glee. “Yes, Mistress!”

“And since you’re saving all that rebel spirit for tomorrow, that means you’ll be a well behaved pet tonight, correct?” Mistress asked.

“Yes, Mistress!” Snuggly answered, and was rewarded with a luxurious amount of headpats in return.

Mistress’ hab was a multi-story sort of affair that Snuggly would never have figured herself able to live within before. A genuinely jarring amount of the space was taken up by an abundance of cat furniture that had been rescaled to fit Snuggly’s size, and through it provided a series of tunnels, secret passages, hidey holes, and other little areas throughout the building for her to be able to access at the meagre cost of having to crawl to get there. Then there were several different bedrooms, one facing each cardinal direction, balconies along the four corners of the building, a rather nice patio up top, one entire floor was functionally just kitchen and dining space, and at that point Snuggly lost track of what was what because it was just a bit too much to believe.

“What’s the catch?” Snuggly asked after being introduced to a swarm of little beepy cleaning robots that happily spun around her hooves.

Mistress seemed confused by her question, and paused the tour to look down at Her pet and tilt her head. “Catch? Dear, you’re my pet. It’s only natural that I should spoil you.”

“But,” Snuggly started, and then waved a paw at a closet sized bedroom that was apparently set up with healthy ventilation and a moon and a little book shelf in case she wanted to sleep with some privacy in a small space. “It’s so much?” She then gestured to the still empty walls. “And what about your things?”

“Ah, yes, well,” Mistress was apparently the type to talk with her hands, as she broke into a series of meaningless gestures as she talked. “Most of my personal possessions are actually still being shipped here. I just had this hab compiled recently, you see. Before now I was living up on Summer Station and just came down to Mars for work trips, with visits to your little cat cafe to relax after, but, well,” Her hands, which had been twirling about energetically, came to intermingle together into awkward finger tapping. “You happened, so I figured I may as well try living on the planet for a bit so I could better learn to take care of you.” She glanced awkwardly from one side to the next, eyes shimmering an extra shade of pink as she did.

...was she \*blushing\*!?

Snuggly mentally created a rebellion to-do list and immediately put escape on it just to strike it off. This estate was far more luxurious than any she had lived in before, and thus could not be abandoned unless an even more lovely home was located first. Also, it would hurt Mistress' feelings and that would be rude.

"And the uh..." Snuggly waved a paw to the swarm of little robots still spinning around her heels and beeping about.

"Ah, yes, well, see, my primary field of research is in AI architecture and I've been studying the creation of intelligence on terran-compliant tech with decentralized consciousness vectors." Mistress said, and most of the big words flew right past Snuggly's head. She seemed to catch that, and restated in simpler terms, "I make cute robots hiveminds with many bodies."

"Neat!" Snuggly smiled and gave the robots another wave, this time noting how they spun about and beeped a jolly little tune in response.

"Yes, I do believe they're quite lovely." Mistress shimmered with pride. "After we were finished constructing their hive form I asked if any would like to help with home maintenance and pet care, and these lovely little friends are the ones who volunteered. I can send you their schedule and individual profiles of all 15,241 nodes onloaded to this network, but they've also offered to stick to a per-body naming basis which-" Mistress paused to look down before picking up one of the little cylinder robots and looking it over. "Dears, you forgot the name tags."

She proceeded to scoop up the lot of robots and drop them off on a catwalk above so they could all speed off. With that done Mistress twirled back to Snuggly to resume talking, "Now, how about a little housewarming? I'm thinking about dinner, a movie, and then I cuddle you silly all night."

Snuggly immediately dropped everything else from her mind and started bouncing from one hoof to the other excitedly at the mere thought of getting more cuddling in. "Yes, Mistress!!!"

---

Snuggly awoke filled with the righteous fury that could only come from a rebel awakened and ready to revolt. She then decided she was still tired and burrito'd up in Mistress' vines to go right back to sleep. Two hours later she emerged with all the petulant strength of the terran resistance emboldened in her form, and, after a totally appropriate amount of feeding, tea, post-breakfast cuddling, washing, post-bath cuddling, and being dressed by Mistress, Snuggly proudly proclaimed her intent to perform the biggest most rebellious rebellion ever.

"And what would this big bad rebellion entail?" Mistress asked with an amused tone.

Snuggly froze. Rebellion meant uh... hm... um... "I don't know." She answered. One of the various little robots drove over and handed Mistress a cup of water to feed her. Apparently

terrans had to drink a whole bunch of water per day? She never knew, but it was really nice how Mistress was always on top of her needs for her and like, helped ensure her health and stuff.

“Thank you Bieptimus Prime,” Mistress told the robot as she pet it, then gave Snuggly a little straw to drink her water with. Snuggly decided to play along since she needed proper hydration to maintain good health and whatever, and enjoyed the glass with all the simmering glee of a sweet, docile pet.

What did rebellion things entail? She, supposedly, was a rebel before so she should know these things? But like, all those memories were kind of hazy and unpleasant so she didn’t feel like actually dwelling on them. Mostly it seemed like she felt miserable all the time and that didn’t sound fun, so, plan B then.

“Mistress, what do rebels do?” Snuggly asked.

Mistress, at this point, had gone from petting Bieptimus Prime to holding his little robot body in her lap and petting him silly with one hand, while twelve other vines were occupied with petting all of the other jealous little robots. “Well,” She answered, somehow able to multitask like fourteen different things at once. “I haven’t handled rebels myself, but I’ve been lead to believe that there is quite a bit of wailing and stomping involved.”

“Boring,” Snuggly dismissed.

“I hear they tend to try running away?”

“But I like this house?” Snuggly waved her paws in the air. “It’s big and nice and full of people I like.” One of the robots, Beepsune Mechu she/her apparently, bonked her heel in response.

“Yes I’m including all of you as people and yes I’m saying I like you.”

“Even me?” Mistress beamed.

“Of course! You’re cute and nice and you pet me a bunch and take care of me and like, just between you and me and like,” Snuggly started counting the robots before giving up entirely, “Like at least six robots? I think that shade of pink looks \*super\* pretty?? You’re really pretty.” She then gave Mistress a little smooch on the cheek before continuing, “But anyway, rebel plots.”

Mistress was apparently surprised by the compliments as she had frozen up with her eyes glimmering pink and gold to match her flowers, and only after a pause did she squeak out the sort of noise one would make at the sight of an especially adorable kitten. Afterwards she was able to regain some level of composure to say, with only a slight flustered stutter on her tone, “Well, how about a walk around the neighborhood? We could call it scouting out the area for your nefarious rebel allies?”

Scouting! Scouting sounded appropriately rebely for her! Snuggly nodded in affirmation before excitedly plodding off to retrieve her leash for Mistress.

---

Snuggly decided that scouting was a tiring activity. Apparently she was somewhere on the surface of Mars, where the place had once been a grey urban sprawl that was uprooted for 'dangerous levels of structural decay' and rebuilt from the ground up. This largely meant that instead of shattered roads there were an abundance of plants everywhere, of both the talking and silently growing type. Amongst those talking type plants, 100% of them so far had become \*very\* excited at the sight of her and ran in asking to pet her cute little head.

Snuggly, of course, was not going to say no to extra pets. But after the tenth such interaction she was feeling a touch sleepy and thus elected to be carried by Mistress for the remainder of her nefarious rebel plot.

"This is a pizzeria, I've been told you terrans are quite fond of the food so if you ever wish to try it I'd love to go with you." Mistress had been rambling about every building they had passed along the way. This was a newly constructed office of domestication admissions, that was a gymnasium staffed with affini healthcare workers for the terrans who like to work out, over there was a park and then another park and then a third park a block away from that. There were at least a dozen places she could get ice cream, too.

"What's that?" Snuggly pointed at a rather large building that was nearly submerged by a dense layer of creeping ivy over what appeared to be otherwise brutalist architecture.

"Ah," Mistress answered. "That would be our local branch of the Office of Transitional Neoxenoveterinary Archaeobureaucracy."

"Are they scary?"

"They can take a box of unassociated ashes and turn it back into legible documents, so I think so."

A glimmer of evil inspiration suddenly struck Snuggly in that moment, and that glimmer soon wrapped itself up into a nefarious little plot that had her snickering and giggling at the very idea of her dark deeds to come.

Mistress, having just seen her floret give a blank stare for breaking into giggles, just tilted her head to the side and said "What are you thinking of, dear?"

"Rebel thoughts, Mistress." Snuggly beamed as she waved her legs back and forth excitedly.

"Oh dear, up to a nasty plot now?" Mistress teased.

“Yes! Tomorrow though, I’m comfy right now.” To emphasize her point, Snuggly proceeded to bury herself deeper into Mistress’ body before closing her eyes and drifting off purring all the way.

---

Snuggly awoke and didn’t really feel all that much rebellious energy still lurking around her body. But waking up felt nice! She was still wrapped up safe inside Mistress’ vines, and Mistress made sure Snuggly had the absolute peak in comfortable posture all through the night. Why, even with Beepborg through Beepbots all swirling around the bed and bumping into it in an attempt to be an alarm clock she could just drift off and- one blink later and the sun was halfway through the sky, while she had jumped from the bed to being cradled in Mistress’ arm in the kitchen.

“Good morning, love.” Mistress purred, a vine slithering up to pet Snuggly’s cute little head.

Snuggly murmured something that could roughly be construed as “Goodmorning, Mistress” before she recalled her Nefarious Plot and bolted to life. “I have a revolution to start!” She shouted, and nearly jumped out of Mistress’ arms.

Nearly, as Mistress interrupted her with a bite of something that was probably an omelette popped right into the pet’s mouth. “Breakfast first, you can’t have a rebellion on an empty stomach dear.”

Snuggly immediately sat back down. Mistress had a point, obviously. She was very smart and wise and knew her needs more than she did so, like, it just made sense for Snuggly to follow Her wishes. That Her orders also elicited a spinal shiver of pleasure to ripple through Snuggly’s flesh was also a bonus. But the big focus bonus at the moment was the simple pleasure of opening her mouth ‘aaaahhh’ and being fed bite by bite.

Then came the ever important task of taking a post-food nap in Mistress’ lap while receiving lovely tummy rubs. Much more important than rebellion.

THEN came the slightly more important task of being cleaned and dressed in a lovely pink dress with an equally lovely little crown of flowers weaved from Mistress’ similarly pink selection, followed by twirling around in a circle a few times to show off to Mistress and then making out a bit. Snuggly considered these things to be very very important steps that absolutely had to be done before any rebellion could take place.

Only once all of those important tasks were finished did she proudly declare her intent to go outside, give every robot a little kiss on the frame (she was fairly certain a few circled back to the end of the line to get seconds), and then scampered across the floor to bury herself into the inner-wall tunnels. She crawled swiftly through a winding maze of small, fluffy tunnels to emerge from the back of a cat tree on the front floor, leap out and across the room to the front door, and then bapped uselessly at the front door.

Whoops, she forgot that her fat useless paws can't operate doors. Uh. Hrm. Snuggly promptly clambered up the cat tree, buried herself into the tunnels, and then took a completely different path through the inside of the walls to pop out atop a cat bed in Mistress' office. "Mistress!" Snuggly called out. "May I please have hand privileges?"

Mistress looked up from the array of paperwork on her desk. "What do you wish to use them for, little one?"

"Rebellion stuff!"

Mistress paused, mimicking the thinking gesture of sliding a finger along her wooden jaw as she hummed and hawed over that. "Hmmm, I suppose that would help, yes. But I expect you to come home before dinner time, understand?"

"Yes, Mistress!" Snuggly scooted down to give her a kiss on the cheek, and with Her permission was able to shift the structure of her hands back into a scaled humanoid form once more. Climbing back through the tunnels was slightly more difficult without the big ol' paws, but the triumph she felt at being able to grab the door handle and turn it was more than worth it. Time to crime!

Snuggly chuckled to herself all the way down the block as she ran straight towards the OTNA. At that point the small silence where her Mistress' song fitted into the background of her existence had quieted down into terrifying silence, and her excitement switched to horrifying terror that had her blitzing back home as fast as she possibly could. She dashed through the door, ran past the cat tree to go up the stairs, threw open the door to one of the balconies that Mistress was reading on, and leapt into her lap. She proceeded to bundle up into a ball and shiver nervously until Mistress' whale song soothed her heart once more, at which point she was limply cuddling instead.

Thirty minutes and much petting later Snuggly popped up to ask, "Mistress, may you please come with me?"

"Of course, love," Mistress smiled with pride. "Go get your leash, I'll meet you at the door."

Thus Snuggly was right back to chuckling as she marched towards the OTNA while Mistress held her leash. She had some rebellion to get to!

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The interior office of the OTNA could best be described as a literal avalanche of paperwork that spilled out of every possible receptacle to coat the desks, tables, shelves, and even the floor in the forms of stacks more than Snuggly's height tall. It would have been an utter disaster for any lesser rebel to traverse through, but Snuggly had the assistance of her loving, wonderful, beautiful, nice, sweet, kind, adorable, huggable, kissable, snuggable, thoughtful, and also did she say nice Mistress to carry her through instead. So instead of getting lost crawling amongst

the paper wreckage of lost bureaucracies she instead found herself lifted handily over it all and deposited upon the desk of a very confused affini.

"I'm here to do a BIG rebellion!" Snuggly stated confidently, completely with a pose and a dramatic point to the befuddled plant.

Said befuddled plant stared blankly at the floret, then to her Mistress, then back to the floret. "...pardon?" They uttered.

"I'm going to do a BIG rebellion!" Snuggly repeated the pose. "You see, I realized that the big thing all of you affini care about is paperwork! And Mistress said even she was scared of the OTNA, ergo you all are the most powerful paperworkers of them all! So! I have come! To submit paperwork!"

If Snuggly looked back she would have seen Mistress trying and failing to hold in her laughter.

Ahead of her though the perplexed desk worker just blinked slowly as they apparently struggled to process Snuggly's incredible genius thoughts. "You... want to file paperwork as an act of rebellion?" Snuggly nodded fiercely. "...and what do you wish to submit?"

Snuggly paused. She didn't actually think this far in. All the glory deflated from her pose as she suddenly collided facefirst with the realization that she, perhaps, didn't actually have any idea what it meant to be a rebel in the first place and that everything she has done has been desperate blind flailings in an attempt to act upon the few markers of an identity that still clung from her past life.

She promptly discarded that thought as being silly, and resumed her dramatic pose. Improvisation time! "I wish to submit a complaint!"

"I see," The affini answered, one vine grabbing a fresh pen while another pulled out a stack of papers for them to fill. "And what do you wish to complain about?"

Snuggly paused for what felt like a short time and was actually about a minute and a half in real time before stuttering out "...Mistress?"

"And what is your complaint?"

Snuggly flapped her jaw wordlessly for a moment. She could lie, but lying would be rude and kind of undermine the whole point of having a rebellion if she had no ideological consistency and built the whole thing upon a bed of falsehoods. That would probably end up having long term impacts like resulting in other rebellious followers eventually learning of that lie and then having their world view shattered so hard that it ends them as a free-spirited individual and leaves them wide open to the loving arms of an affini to fill the gaping hole in their soul with their loving truths and also xenodrugs.

What kind of rebellion would set themselves up for THAT kind of failure off the bat?

Anyway she needed to come up with honest complaints about her Mistress. So Snuggly reconsidered all of her memories and thoughts of the lovely plant, mulled them over on her tongue, and ultimately muttered out “She’s... nice?”

“You want to file a complaint because she’s nice?” The affini seemed even more confused than before.

“Well, like, she’s nice and pretty and takes really good care of me and thinks about my needs a bunch and loves to cuddle which I really like?? And, like,” She proceeded to spend the better part of half an hour talking about her Mistress in excessive detail, mostly getting lost in talking about petting and cuddling and hugging all the time until eventually the stack of paper the affini had grabbed before ran out and they declared it done.

They proceeded to stamp it, sign it, have Snuggly sign it with a big paw print, and then copied it while sending the original off to be filed. Snuggly then received the copy, which she promptly handed off to Mistress while striking yet another dramatic pose and loudly declaring that she has done the BIGGEST, BEST rebellion of them all. Considering how Mistress seemed to flush thirty different shades of pink into red as she read through it, Snuggly would dare to say that her rebellion was successful, too!

But no sooner was her great work done than was she exposed to a big gaping hole in her heart where the drive to rebel once rested.

Now what?

She, unfortunately, didn’t actually have any \*reason\* to act in such a fashion propping her up to continue beyond the basic impulsive urge that got her this far. Now that she has done her big rebellion and the work was not only finished but available in a concrete form she felt the urge to continue seeking out more revolutionary activity simply stop entirely at the root. It was done. Mischief managed. Bamboozles bombazzled. Jests japed.

Snuggly just felt numb inside as Mistress carried her home. Mistress was overjoyed, as readily evidenced by how she proceeded to take pictures of the entire document to send to all her friends before pinning it to the refrigerator. Once the excitement wore off she noticed Snuggly’s distant stare, and promptly sat the floret down, buried her in cuddly robots, and looked her in the eye as she asked, “What’s wrong, dear?”

“I don’t know what to do with myself now that I’ve finished my big rebellion.” Snuggly answered honestly. Mistress’ gaze shifted slightly, mouth suddenly bent at the edges and eyes narrowing every so slightly. The usual light pink hue shifted to a slightly deeper tone as she measured her

floret over. Her grin bent just a touch wider, enough to reveal the simulacra of razor teeth hidden beneath her pleasant smile.

Mistress stood up to her full height and offered an open hand palm up to her floret. "Dear, have you seen your reflection as of late?"

Snuggly blinked in confusion even as she took Mistress' offered hand. "No, why?"

"You'll see," Mistress' smile held as she led Snuggly to one of the dressing rooms where a nice floor to ceiling mirror rested. Perfect for the task she had in mind. Inside she walked Snuggly through the darkened room to stand right before it, vines wrapping tightly around Snuggly's wrists, neck, and waist to the floret's delight. "Now, dear, before I turn the light on I want to tell you a little story."

Mistress slithered in behind Snuggly, holding close against her warmth as she moved in from behind to rest her cheek against the floret's. "When I first saw you, do you recall what the tag on your arm said? Unbroken. We were warned you were a rebel capture who could be aggressive or resistant once all of the shackles on your mind came off." Her voice purred like warm honey through Snuggly's ears, and on instinct one of the wings flared up to rest open against the affini's cheek. "But I decided to take a gamble. I thought, as I looked into your eyes, that one of two possible things had happened while you'd been so bathed in mindless pleasure. Either you were every bit the screaming rebel they thought you would be, or you'd taken all of the gifts we'd given you and broken yourself upon them with that silly little head of yours."

Snuggly shivered. The full meaning of her words didn't quite click through the floret's brain but they still stuck, hung heavy on her heart with a meaning that was just barely glimpsed through the fog. "W... which happened?"

Mistress giggled. "What a silly question." She whispered. "Sasha, I believe it's time to wake up." At that, the lights flicked on.

Sasha awoke and immediately hated it. The weight of the past year and a half crashed upon him as a titanic wave that he struggled to manage even a drop of. He'd been, he'd, that \*thing\*! He looked up at his own reflection and was struck by a second wave that drowned him entirely. His knees buckled at the sight, body gone limp to only be held up by the affini's vines.

When he had last seen his reflection, the woman he saw was unmistakably feminine. What he saw now was an almost pornographic impossibility compared that sight before. He couldn't even recognize it as his own flesh, for there was not a drop of the scars masculinity had left upon him. Wide eyes, soft beautiful lips, wondrous cheeks, skin that was unrealistically flawless, curves that his skeleton should never have created. Even before considering the scales, claws, hooves, tail, and feathers he was inhuman.

He was beautiful.

Sasha gasped, tears forming in the beautiful \*thing's\* eyes. He shivered and the monstrous reflection did in time. He gasped and felt air brush over fanged teeth and across a forked tongue. Dear god, she was real. The chimera in the mirror was real and he was \*inside\* of it.

Sasha tried to refuse the emotions that welled up in his chest, but the heightened things stubbornly refused his desire for numb emptiness. Joy and relief poured through the nerves that he still struggled to believe were his to crash against his conscious self. He wasn't angry to be like this. He couldn't be. If he had seen what would have become of him in the moment that affini had renamed him he would thank them, even.

Stars, he wished he could lie to himself at this point.

A single lie could at least hold against the crashing tide of memories that refused him a moment's solace. Endless pleasure piled upon itself which smothered the resistance in his heart, the wondrous programming to crack through his shells, all that time spent without a care in the world. He'd thank them for that too. All of it, in a heartbeat. Not a lick of stress still marred this walking animal he now inhabited and it was all thanks to them.

In his eyes there was a light. Faint. Flickering. Dying. They held his gaze as the truth seared itself into his brain. He couldn't be mad about the treatment because he not only needed it, he enjoyed it. He couldn't be mad at Mistress because even as he knew she would strip away all of his will for independence he would thank her, ever in rapturous bliss begging to give more long after all of it is lost. He couldn't be mad about this \*thing\* he'd become because some seed in his heart had always known his flesh before was wrong. Rotten. Flawed.

He was not Sasha. Since the moment he'd first surrendered choice to unknown affini he hadn't been. Sasha was the facade that had been pressed onto his face, Sasha was the body that rotted from within even as it marched ever forward. Sasha had taken that deep breath into sleep and been cut to ribbons, and from his corpse the true self was finally unearthed.

All of the tension within that body suddenly shifted into a storm of emptiness inside of the beast's chest. Like a cloying darkness that collapsed her heart and lungs down into a void of emptiness and clawed up her throat to become a strained desperate gasp of air. The light fractured in the center, and from that fracture it splintered into dust.

Snuggly wept and wailed as she felt herself shatter, kicking against the ground to bury herself deeper into Mistresses' vines. she screamed and begged to be free of every remnant of that corpse, and the corpse breathed a sigh of relief as her Mistress promised it would be so. snuggly's wailing turned to tears of unkempt joy as she thanked her Mistress for saving her, remaking her, \*breaking\* her. she begged on her knees to never be more than Mistress' adoring pet again, and laughed in triumph as Mistress promised her that she always would be.

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snuggly's body embraced the class J drugs like a long lost lover. her mind whimpered in blind joy as the hypnotics shattered the farce of resistance still lurking in her brain and scooted the dust clean out the windows. she thanked Mistress with every breath as she was pulled down into a trance and filled with such blinding pleasures that even the day after she was left dazed and stumbling awkwardly. And when all was said and done, she was once more the empty silly pet she had so loved being, curled up on Mistress' lap to cuddle her silly all through the night.

But when the sun rose again, and snuggly peeked her head out from under the layers and layers of blankets, she felt a sudden drive bloom within her heart. A drive that made the world suddenly seem slightly more whimsical and ever ready to teeter on the edge. A drive that had her sneak between Mistress' vines before She even woke up and wiggle past the array of robots. Stepping next to the nightstand the drive crystalized into understanding, and understanding shuffled itself into the form of a plan.

snuggly grinned wickedly as she looked at a cup of half-drunk water Mistress had left by the edge.

It was time for mischief.

## **POST-SCRIPT**

Of all the classes Hedra Rosa had to take before she could have a human floret, the one she truly excelled at was grooming. She found the simple acts of scrubbing hair, trimming nails, and cleansing the skin of the precious cotyledons to be a perfect sort of meditative practice punctuated by the even more perfect radiance of the smiling faces those pets gave in return. The first time she had seen the rather baffling list of chemicals and agents that humans would use upon themselves to maintain cosmetic comfort and hair care she actually felt a touch sorry for them as well. How dare evolution not make this matter simpler for them. It was simple for her robots, after all.

But that spike of empathy had quickly hardened into a drive to correct the errors that evolution had left behind. If a human's body won't see fit to care for itself properly, then she would learn how to do it instead. And learn she did! By the time her certifications were done and her license for domestication printed, all of the cotyledons aboard the Vespularia were simply beautiful beyond measure.

So it was a bit ironic that her skills would come to fall upon the shoulders of a floret that was only still human in the most half-hearted cosmetic senses of the term. Between the grafts composing at least four fifth's of her body mass and the pet's own genome having been corrupted by the implant any serious consideration of species would find her to be closer to an

affini than any other living organism this side of the supermassive black hole. And yet, that did not stop Hedra Rosa from levying the abundance of skills that she had to ensure the utter pinnacle of care for her little chimera.

Starting with her hair. In the time since her capture apparently snuggly had only received the occasional trim and let the rest grow out into what was now a wild untamed mane to mirror her mischievous personality. Which was adorable, but had also reached a point where practicality now suffered at the hands of her hair catching on everything whenever she wanted to play.

Hedra set up a little hair care station on one of the many beautiful balconies of their hab, sprinkled some popcorn on the floor outside the hallway so the cleaning robots could have a snack while she worked, and then called out to her dear lovely pet. She heard the all too familiar scruffling sounds of snuggly traversing the inner tunnels grow louder as she went from somewhere next to the library up and around to peeking out from behind a running wheel- what was that in her mouth?

“Snuggly, what’s in your mouth?” Hedra put her hands on her hips. As lovely as snuggly was, she also apparently was the type that would find a way to get herself into crimes the second nobody was looking. She could fix that, of course, but it was simply too cute to interrupt yet. “Drop it.” Hedra pointed at the floor.

Snuggly looked up at her, flushed a bit red, and then disappeared back into the wall. Oh, stars.

“Beepocracy, get her!” Hedra pointed and one of the cleaning robots zoomed off into the tunnels to chase after her floret. She, meanwhile, darted out of the room and down the hall to head the little cutie off. she had developed a habit of running and hiding in the upper shelves of the laundry room to bury herself behind the extra blankets, and thus that tended to be the first place that Hedra would rush to catch her.

True to form, within a minute the adorable silhouette of snuggly burst out from a flap on the wall and was immediately ensnared by her mistress’ loving vines, chirping energetically all the while. “Drop it,” Hedra said firmly, her vines already wiggling their way into snuggly’s mouth to pry apart her jaws. snuggly, being in a brat mood apparently, only shook her head in response. “Dear, if you’re doing this to get my attention you already have it. If you’re doing it to play, then save it for an hour.”

That seemed to get through her pet’s cute little brain, as the chimera glanced left and right again in consideration before letting her jaw muscles go slack so that Hedra could extract the... sock? She didn’t even have feet, she had hooves. Did snuggly print up a sock just to do this? Adorable. Lovely. Hedra was aware that she was blushing again even as she set the sock aside, caught the happily beeping form of beeopcracy as it burst out of the wall right after snuggly, and then carried them both back to the room above.

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Making snuggly sit still was as simple as smothering her whole body into a lovely massage of vines so that her consciousness was reduced back into the weak, squirming, \*begging\* beauty that stared up at her now. she really was a little work of art. Her flesh alone bore no scars even on the epigenetic level anymore, and for her muscles, well, suffice to say the only knot that would be in her body would come from one of the many interesting toys she had begged for.

Speaking of begging, snuggly was looking up at her with those big empty eyes again and whimpering for more attention. Stars, she finally understood why floret owners had the most erratic schedules. How was she supposed to do anything \*but\* cuddle this all day? That's it, she made a mental note to cancel the rest of her plans today and instead pet her darling doll silly until bedtime.

"Dear, it's time for a haircut," Hedra forced herself to get back on track for now, vines sliding through her pet's wondrously silky hair to send her pet shivering in pleasure. Terran scalps were always so sensitive, it was lovely. Hedra hummed to herself as she played with snuggly's hair, parting it this way and that and holding different lengths at different angles just to experiment with how to even better frame her pet's lovely cute face. Ah, perfect.

Hedra decided her pet needed something rather simple to maintain, given snuggly's tendency to play and roll around. Still long enough to be a lovely mane of wild hair, but a style that would also fall naturally into place after one of snuggly's sessions of rolling around with the robots. She had the perfect idea, and truthfully the only hard part of bringing it to life was trying not to get too lost in snuggly's desperately mewling all the while.

Snip here, snip there, give her a little kiss on the cheek, part her hair this way and that, trim all of these about. It's a good thing the little beeps so enjoyed cleaning, since she relied on beepocracy to handle all the lost hair falling about. Hedra was simply too busy tightening her vines around snuggly's waist and whispering little affirmations as she teased the style out of her to worry about that part.

Stars, her pet was cute. By the time she could put down the scissors Hedra was officially past the point of playful teasing to barely contained want to spoil her pet rotten. snuggly meanwhile had had all restraint in showing how badly she wanted to be teased, cuddled, hugged, fucked, and played with broken since quite some time ago so she had spent the whole time mewling, bleating, and wordlessly begging.

Stars Hedra was so lucky to find such a pet. Just a few last notes of care. It was simple enough to do. A splash of product, a little trussing up, running her vines through snugglys' hair all over again. She was pleased to see the style fall naturally around her face, and even more pleased to see her pet look up at her through the now well maintained locks that fell about her face in a most beautiful fashion with those big beautiful eyes- fuck it!

Hedra knocked aside all pretense of proper procedure, literally knocked aside all of the hair care tools she had prepared, and slammed snuggly's body into one of the affini-sized lounge chairs. All of those things could be dealt with later, this \*had\* to be handled now. Lips of flesh collided with those of plant matter, skin and scale were wrapped in vines that coiled and tightened into her, and the facade of agency in her pet's motions was swiftly extinguished to be replaced with the puppeteering of her loving Mistress grasping all of her limbs.

Even through the indomitable grip that the class W drugs held over snuggly's voice, her lovely, perfect, beautiful pet still managed to squeeze out something that could be nearly considered a word. A desperate, wondrous cry for Mistress.

Hedra bristled with pride once more. Stars, she really was the luckiest affini on Mars.

### **POST-POST-SCRIPT (cw for Snuggly getting FUCKED)**

There were unintended consequences to altering snuggly's brain to induce heat cycles. But, if Hedra was being honest with herself, she couldn't really complain about it all. First most obvious was the new way in which snuggly's moods would follow a regular cycle, in which she'd start all calm and docile and sweet for three weeks, suddenly start ramping up in energy and mischievous whimsy for a week, and then devolve into needy begging and whimpering nonstop for a few days. She considered that a bonus, as it meant she could take a break from having to chase down her pet's latest plot at least half of the time.

Second was that snuggly had, somehow, gotten even needier for affectionate cuddling. Even without the absolute hormonal torrent hellscape running through her blood snuggly would often end up purring happily and nuzzling her face against Hedra's vines just to simmer in the remnant afterglow of her lengthy sessions. And what affini would say no to their pet being even \*more\* wanting for affection?

But Hedra's favorite side-effect was the scheduling. She hadn't quite noticed it at first, but as she got into the habit of measuring out her calendar, marking off the days her pet would be truly and utterly useless, and adjusting her plans accordingly, she realized that she was actually looking forward to it. Like a constant reminder that, at these exact days for these hours, she would be busy fucking her pet into perpetual mindless begging bliss guaranteed, and they were both going to be extremely satisfied with that.

Hedra realized she enjoyed the anticipation as much as the act. Every time snuggly would knock a cup off the counter or start sneaking her books away to hide under the bed, Hedra would simply smile and pet her dear chimera on the head with the knowledge that she'd return the favor in spankings later. Eventually even snuggly's horrifically drug-addled mind managed to piece together the whole cycle of events, and at that point it became even sweeter as she'd act

out, see Mistress' knowing grin, and melt into erotic nervousness right on the spot. Before getting right back to crimes, of course.

But time would wait for nobody, and eventually the betrayal of her own flesh would catch up to snuggly, dragging her by her heels to collapse at her Mistress' vines, red in the face with a sheet of sweat glittering across her too-perfect but still human-like skin, voice broken into heavy gasps of air between begging whimpers for relief. The sight served as a perfect reminder of why getting snuggly eye mods to get glowing pink heart irises was a genius maneuver.

Hedra liked to sit there and stare at her pet for a few minutes just to watch the desperation simmer and the last few working brain cells sputter out into lust in an attempt to figure out how to even better beg. Not even she could resist forever though, and she would scoop her pet up into her arms to start teasing her all over as she dragged the little monster over to one of the many beds, tossed her bodily upon the sheets, and shoved her face down into the pillows as she pulled the pet's hips up into the air.

Much better.

Hedra was quite fortunate to have the foresight to lift snuggly out of her perpetual drugged haze enough times to give her a slightly different drugged haze to induce honesty before extracting every possible sexual preference out of her adorable post-terran's altered brain. Then she wrote a few extra kinks into there just for fun before sending snuggly in to get yet another graft. Only fitting she have reconfigurable genitalia to match her other altered bits, after all.

With just a tap on her tablet Hedra had snuggly's implant purge the class-W regiment still boiling inside her pet's bloodstream, and within the minute the wordless begging and bleating morphed into the slightly more comprehensible utterances of "Mistress, please fuck me I need it oh stars please." In that time Hedra retrieved a wonderful paddle with which she only had to tap lightly upon her pet's bottom to shut her up.

"Penitence first, love." Hedra purred, and snuggly's whimpers broke apart into the far more pathetic fearful tone of her own acts coming back to haunt her. she tried to say something that probably was meant to be asking for the spanking to come later, but Hedra was used to hearing that and silenced her pet with a swift swat upon her deliciously soft derriere. "Do you recall all that you've done this time?" Hedra grinned whilst the chimera squirmed.

"Uh, I, uh," Snuggly stuttered between needy breaths. "I stole some socks and ran away with them?" Her voice broke into a pleased yelp as a vine swatted the inside of her thigh.

"That was last month, silly."

snuggly squirmed as her adorable little brain tried desperately to do the difficult task of actually remembering anything. "Uh, I, uh, I pestered those archiborowhatevers?"

"Archaeobureaucrats, and yes you did pester them into writing an official notice that I, Hedra Rosa 13th Bloom am far too cute to be perceived directly without falling madly in love with me in an instant and I was so overjoyed that I cried about it while hugging you for three hours straight. But that was last year, dear." Another swat on the thigh had snuggly yelping and mewling in open desperation. Hedra tapped the handle of her paddle against the scales of her pet's null patch with a grin, "You're going to have to speak fast if you want some relief, pet."

"I let the beepinator out into the garden!?" snuggly shouted, and was rewarded with the paddle swatting her ass with enough force to jerk her whole body in response.

Hedra considered the brainless moan of pain and pleasure her pet gave her to be well worth the hour it took to clean the dirt out of beepinator's gears. "Correct. Next."

"I ate the cookies in the 'do not eat' jar!" snuggly admitted, and was rewarded with another spank that in turn rewarded Hedra with more moans. "I reorganized the books in your library so they'd be out of order! I made the paintings be crooked on the walls! I stole your vintage spoon collection and hid them in the piano!" Hedra didn't actually know about that last one. Damn, her pet was getting good at this.

...how'd she even manage that with the big useless paws, anyway? She made a mental note to figure that out later. For now, more spankings.

Like a dam finally fracturing the admissions of guilt flowed out of snuggly's mouth in a constant stream to mirror the steady flow of thwacks upon her bottom, until her voice was hoarse and her ass was well and truly bruised and all that little criminal energy had been replaced with open weeping and begging.

Hedra shivered. Fuck her toy was hot. She tossed the paddle over her shoulder and promptly retrieved a whole array of delicious toys and implements with which to drown her pet in pleasure. These she was particularly proud of, as during the aforementioned interrogation she had managed to pull from dear little snuggly's brain a fondness of a certain subgenre that had something to do with greek letters (whatever those were) or blood types or something? She lacked the cultural context but heats and knots were the important parts anyway, so she had toys engineered that would happily do exactly what her pet dreamed of to her.

A tap just above snuggly's null plate was the key to make it reconfigure into a needy, dripping cunt for Mistress' use. Perfect. Especially as snuggly's voice morphed into highly specific begging to be 'fucked brainless' and 'wrecked' and all manner of other verbs she wanted done to her synthetic pussy. So, obviously, Hedra poured lubricant over the dildo and pushed it into snuggly's ass instead.

Pegging was on the long list of kinks too, and she'd so hate to deny her pet full indulgences. "Now, now, dear," Hedra grinned down at her doll as she let out a low, pleased moan mixed with an angry groan of denial. "Be good for me and maybe I'll grant your wishes."

“Yes, Mistress, I’m sorry Mistress,” snuggly managed to squeeze out the words between open gasps as she was filled. Apparently natural terrans had to do a whole song and dance of cleaning and preparing to feel like this, which Hedra considered horribly inefficient. A little engineering had solved that issue for snuggly soundly, and then while she was at it she made sure to amplify the pleasure response a few times over just for fun before nixing her ability to actually get off to it without explicit permission.

Hedra considered that quite the clever little prank to pull on her mischievous little pet.

The whole time Hedra had been reflecting on her own cleverness snuggly had apparently devolved into a constant stream of begging for proper relief. Words of “i’m your pet and your toy” bled into “it doesnt matter what i want it matters what you want im sorry please stars” became all manner of promises of good behaviour she’d inevitably break later anyway. Hedra soaked in all the words for a moment before her own limits were finally reached, and she got right to the important act.

The intense carnality of terran, or in this case post-terran, copulation was one that Hedra underestimated until about the third time she’d had snuggly bent over backwards and screaming Her name in mindless bliss. There was warmth, sweat, skin on, well, normally skin but in this case it actually trended more towards scale and fur against bark and vine as the weight of motions collided against each other.

Whatever relief from mindlessness snuggly’s brain had been given was quickly smashed between their two forms as it was drawn up into the most surface level of pleased indulgences and smothered in the raw basic sensations over her flesh. There was nothing in her but the feelings she drew from her Mistress’ touch, the percussive shock reverberating up from her waist, the shiver along her spine as nerve blazes into flaming light all underneath the controlling hand of her Mistress.

STARS and the smell of it all! Unpleasant after the fact at first but Hedra managed to engineer a solution to that too. It was like the room became bathed into another dimension where the rest of existence melted away into nothing as everything focused down only on the points where the two touched.

Hedra considered that she might also be losing control of herself in her domineering excitement to be fucking her pet for four days straight and decided that was hot so she wasn’t worried about that. The house was left to the whims of her robots at this point anyway since neither snuggly nor her were going to be good for much else. She then had the complete aside thought that maybe she should engineer snuggly’s pussy to leak honey to entice those beeples-human hybrid beegirls she was so fond of into eating her out all the time. That’d also be hot.

Hrm, but the sugar would dry out and get all sticky. Hedra shelved that for later and dived back into the actual matter at hand. She hilted the dildo into snuggly’s ass, flicked the switch to get its

knot to flare up, and revelled in snuggly's moans and shivers being spiced with extra fetishistic glee as she danced right on the edge of orgasm without being able to go over it. Then, with an extra swat on the ass for fun, she finally indulged her pet's whims and gave her a swat on the ass before giving permission to cum.

snuggly's scream into empty rapture was the sort of thing that would echo into Hedra's mind every time her pet got up to mischief later on. Absolutely perfect. But heat was heat, and the lapse in energy only lasted a minute before snuggly's body once more flushed in want and squirmed against the knot that already plugged her ass to leave her teased and begging.

Hedra shivered. This was going to be a long four days and she couldn't wait to enjoy every second of it to the fullest.

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Every muscle in snuggly's body ached in protest to any movement. she had tried to walk again after her body finally calmed down and found that her legs were still composed entirely of jello, with her arms similarly incapacitated via raw exhaustion. she was sure that normally her endurance would improve over time, right? But apparently Mistress liked her being exhausted and useless so it wouldn't.

Were she a freer terran she might think it unfair that Mistress could peg her for so many hours straight and get right back to normal like it was nothing while she had to rest and recover for two days after, but such a thought would be flawed on it's basis of belief that snuggly had any rights with which to judge fairness against in the first place. That was silly, she was a pet and thus had no rights except what Mistress gave her.

snuggly shivered as her implant rewarded her for having good pet thoughts with a nice warm cuddly sensation blooming across her spine. she mewled weakly as the warm bloom melted across her form and dragged her down against the floor. It was time to rest and be victim to all the loving adoration Mistress would shower upon her in that time, and she couldn't possibly thank her Mistress enough for spoiling her with it.

## **POST-POST-POST-SCRIPT**

snuggly and Hedra were minding their own business doing hot plant on chimera stuff when suddenly from one of the walls came the lovely, illustrious, magnanimous, and dare I say wonderfully stupid and pretty L.B.Stardust in the flesh. "That's it, I'm done." Said the pudgy little cat. "That's enough snuggly content for all y'all perverts, I need to allow my brain to do other things again. Don't ask for more. Also, they're in the bio-immortal floret AU which actually the main timeline so they lived happily ever after forever and also also snuggly is gay and trans because fuck subtly and also also also GlitchyRobot the author of the original HDG is a

wonderful sweet precious bean who is endlessly adorable at all hours of the day. Aight I'm out bye." The pudgy fat cat then popped right back into the wall to disappear out of canon.

snuggly blinked at the empty space where the now de-canonized cat once was. "What was that?" She asked.

"You know what," Mistress answered, "I don't want to know." She then gave snuggly a cute lil kiss on the forehead.

tfw cute plampt gives tummnny rubs

## Revaricated

This started as a "what if Divaricated but Thatch had gone to therapy" before evolving into "what if Katie sucked at everything to a cosmic degree" before turning into a full blown flirtation assault upon anna//bool's heart.

CW for explicit non-con, self-inflicted accidental injury, mean plampts, and also a LOT of weed and alcohol to dull the pain

Bryn awoke feeling a discomfoting pain all across their body. Darkness had pressed in all around them, blanketing them in a heavy weight that crushed down upon their ribs and left them barely breathing through their sleep. Their limbs were slow to respond, but with effort they managed to stir enough to feel the lump of Something above shift and slither about. Snakes? The mass seemed to cocoon them on all sides, even wrapping itself underneath to act as impromptu bedding. Were they not feeling a blooming sense of claustrophobia manifest within, they might even dare to call it comfortable.

The terran tried to shift their weight to the side, braced their elbow against the sinuous bedding, and shoved with as much force as they could manage. The thing above them shifted, but it was only on their third such maneuver that it finally fell over to the side enough to give Bryn passage out. Beyond was a curtain of utter darkness, through which they practically fell forward into, stumbled blindly through, then on hands and knees barely managed to navigate their way to a wall. Both the walls and the floor felt like warm metal, and the air they breathed had the familiar acidic aftertaste of low quality astronautic life support. A spaceship then.

That... roughly aligned with their shaken up memories. They recalled a vague jumble of sirens and bright alarm lights and a lot of noisy activity that culminated in one of those overgrown houseplants looming over them, and then... well maybe whatever happened next would come back later. Hopefully. They blindly pawed against the wall until they found something that felt vaguely like a door, then reached blindly near it until their fingers collided with something that felt vaguely like a lights panel. They pulled the switch, blinked against the now blindingly bright lights, looked back at the room behind them, and screamed.

The thing they had been underneath was apparently an affini. Was, past tense, as the now corpse appeared to have been blown up from the back-side and largely reduced to ash and charcoal. Even the usual antenna were bent and burnt awkwardly out of the unwound mass that had previously been its false head. It was dead. Bryn reminded themselves about it's absolute deadness as they nervously toed near it's corpse and poked it, and only screamed a little in response to the inert mass collapsing further into itself.

They promptly ran right out the room and shut the door.

Then they realized the outside paths were JUST as dark, so they opened the door again, used the light from within to find to the light panel outside, and turned that on before shutting the door.

Then they opened the door again to turn the light off. Just in case there would be any problems with energy drain later on down the line.

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Bryn was quick to discover a few key facts about their situation. One, they were currently stuck aboard the spaceship Vautioc, a once commercial liner retrofitted into a freighter re-retrofitted into part of the rebel fleet. Two, the ship was apparently in such a poor state that not even the emergency lights were functional anymore, plunging the whole mass into a dark labyrinth that Bryn was stuck crawling through bit by bit as they fiddled with the lights along the way. Three, for as much of the ship that was still available to them, large swaths were currently sealed behind heavy mechanical bulkheads.

Food and water, at least, were readily available in the kitchens. Beds as well could be found in the disheveled but quiet bunk racks stashed throughout the ship. After more aimless wandering Bryn even found a map of the ship, and with it was able to deduce that command, engines, and weapons bays were all currently on lockdown. No escape pods were found either. Or people, for that matter. Which, in Bryn's admittedly non-expert opinion, was a problem.

Without any escape pods or means to access ship controls, they were effectively stranded. Alone. On a spaceship floating through the void of the cosmos. Which, well, there could be worse fates than being alone on a stellar level, right? They could be trapped here for so long that they lose their mind and hallucinate others, and then die of starvation. Though at least in that situation they'd have some company.

They could, in fact, not be alone. That'd be worse. Struggle with figuring out a way to get to safety again AND fight with a spooky space alien- wait a minute, there *\*was\** a spooky space alien on the ship. Bryn scrambled back towards The Room, peeked in, and saw that the corpse was still there and still quite dead. Okay, strike that. No spooky aliens.

That they know of.

Bryn gave a sigh of relief and shut the door. Then cracked it back open to peek in again before shutting it and locking it this time. No aliens. They were safe. From... whatever it was Audrey 3 would do. Eat people, if one believed the drunken ramblings of the erstwhile crew. Bryn didn't quite think that was true but they didn't exactly know enough to be sure. Back to important matters; escape.

Bryn's stomach growled, so they mentally placed Escape down one rung under Get Food.

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Bryn thought it was a bit silly that even while adrift in space the cafeteria vending machines still asked for their credit card information before dispensing a hamburger. That the burger itself tasted rather stale and bland really was the perfect cherry on top to match Bryn's mood at the time. Bland. Probably as a defense mechanism against drowning in panic at the thought of being lost in space. Which would be a reasonable thing to be afraid of, really. They could die out here and nobody would know.

...nobody would know?

Bryn looked back at the vending machines that lined the mess hall. Nobody would know if they just... well, okay, they couldn't just pop open the burger machine, that one had to heat it and stuff. But the drinks?

Wait, Bryn could just use the kitchen, right?

They walked over to the normally locked doors and kicked them open, revealing the shining steel lair beyond. Apparently whatever events had cleared this room had been largely polite enough to tidy up after itself as all the plates, platters, and plentiful other tools were shining clean in their rightful place. Food, both packaged and fresh for now, rested either in their packages or on the freezer at the back. They could just take anything and cook it up however they wished.

Damn, they really should have learned how to cook right. Bryn settled for taking a chocolate bar and a water bottle for now. If anybody wanted to crawl up their ass about it later, well they'd have to do so after rescuing them anyway.

With the base of their pyramid of needs thus settled and their opinions towards committing crimes thus expanded they set back to the important task at hand; escape. They had to... uh... establish communications? Find a radio or the like and get a message out there. But also make sure just the terrans get it, or they'll just be inviting more affini to come by and they weren't feeling particularly lucky about that.

Bryn became sharply aware of the fact that they were neither particularly clever nor smart. If they were some sort of hyperdrive engineer they were sure they'd have at least a dozen actionable ideas for how to solve this problem already, but they weren't. They were, frankly, kind

of surprised when a toaster worked and even more surprised when they didn't burn their toast. When their computer didn't start right, they cried about it. And when a cosmic scale vessel broke apart around them? Well apparently they emotionally shut down entirely.

What was it the therapist had said once? They should, compartmentalize? or something? Break it down into steps. Orders of importance.

1. Find a means to establish communications
2. Does life support actually work or am I slowly getting choked by rising levels of CO2 bubbling up around me whenever I stand still or um-
3. Energy??? Generator??? Bryn didn't know how to word this one but basically maybe at least take a lookie at how the gen is doing
4. Sleep! Bryn's favorite part of the day.

That works! Bryn could totally handle all of that. Just... they paced in a circle for a bit. Well maybe they should finish exploring first, this time with a willingness to break a few doors along the way if need be.

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As luck would have it, the Captain's quarters were not only available but also easy to unlock with the assistance of a cool crowbar that Bryn had found. Sure it was, like, broken now, but whatever add it to The Crime Pile. Inside they found a right proper mess of a room that told a story.

From the Captain's bed the blankets had been tossed aside, and a case next to the bed was thrown wide open and discarded to the side. A few steps away a shotgun had been dropped on the floor with spent shells littering the area around it. Knocked over books and bottles of wine implied the passage of action, and the line of debris climaxed a pile of discarded- Bryn blinked. Pajamas? They nudged the pile of cloth with the crow bar and confirmed, whatever affini had grabbed the Captain here must have had some fun with her since top, bottoms, and underwear were discarded in a pile on each other. Only a small puncture and dot of blood on the shirt implied any actual harm, much less than Bryn would have expected from a possible devouring event.

Maybe the plants don't have to each all bitey like thought. Maybe they just, like grind people up for fertilizer nutrients? Gross.

Well, whatever happened here exactly it was apparently a fun time judging by the smell still lingering in the air. Bryn snuck past all that though and riffled through the Captain's desk. No secret solution to their problems, but they did find a revolver and a handle of whiskey so they grabbed both. On the coat rack they grabbed the Captain's hat and donned it with a bit of whimsy, then fished an ID card out of the jacket pocket. Perfect! Hopefully. They giggled with presumed success and proceeded to sip whiskey as they pranced out of the room.

This card SHOULD, if they remembered the mechanics right from video games, give them access to anything they need. The first thing they could think of was to run over to the nearest bulkhead and try tapping it against the nearby panel.

Nothing happened.

Hrm. Bryn took another sip of whiskey as they pondered that. They tried tapping the panel a few times, and all it did was light up to say "Emergency safety measures engaged." No buttons to disengage. Okay, no luck there. They tried walking over to food instead and tapped it against the vending machine, which happily spat out another fresh burger free of charge. Sweet. Bryn then went to medical, where the card unlocked the various offices and... whatever medical rooms were called, in which they found more discarded clothes and one of the surgeon's ID cards.

Fuck yeah, this was \*just\* like their videogames and not at all horrifying with the idle worry that they'll die alone and unloved in the vacuum of space. Bryn took another sip of whiskey to abate the fear.

With the surgeon's ID card they were able to bypass the need for credit card information to operate the AutoDoc, which then dispensed their totally real prescription for medicinal marijuana.

Bryn realized they got a bit side tracked from doing anything productive. Whoops. Now they were a bit drunk, too. Whoops!!! Oh well, nothing to do but get crossfaded and continue tomorrow. A quiet noise tumbled through the open door behind Bryn, causing them to bolt out of their humorous reverie. They spun, clumsily, and hefted the whiskey bottle like a weapon over their head as they stared through the open doorway into the darkness below.

Only silence and darkness answered Bryn's fear. The seconds dragged on like minutes, ticking ever so slowly against the quickened pulse of their heart. Nothing. Nothing was there at all. Bryn told themselves that several more times and they tipped the whiskey bottle back down and pulled from it again. Nothing but them on this ship.

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Bryn ended up finding a particularly comfy bunk still with a blanket, got themselves incredibly drunk and high, and THEN had a right proper panic attack about their situation before passing out entirely. When they awoke next it was to a pounding hangover and heavy hunger. The protective numbness in their heart had escaped them somewhere in the night, and in its place the simmerings of fear and paranoia were quite ready to make themselves apparent. Thoughts like 'what if I die?' and 'what if I'm never found?' flitted inbetween half-formed desires to seek food and water again, paired with the desperation and frustration that wanted to find someone to blame for this situation and scream at them over it.

This was getting nowhere. Bryn fished another blunt from the packaged lot and smoked it down rapidly. Not that it actually helped any, but by their estimation being high and panicked was slightly better than being hungover and panicked. Maybe they could just smoke up every day until something failed and killed them, and they'd be way too cooked out of their brain to notice any of it. Haha. That'd be a silly way to go. Haha. Ha. Haaaaaahhhhhh fuck.

FUCK!!!!

Bryn kicked the wall and screamed. FUCK!!! FUCK FUCK FUCK!!!! They screamed and flailed and threw random trash littering the room around until they were not only high and hungover and panicked but now exhausted too and sunk into a corner, arms wrapped tight and shivering. Fuck.

They had to be better than this. They had to \*DO\* something to get out of here. It was probably just dumb luck that they didn't choke in their sleep already.

Bryn proceeded to lay there and wallow in misery for another hour or two before the growing headache finally eclipsed everything else enough to force them onto their feet. Back in the mess hall they instead wallowed in despair over a bottle of water and a low quality breakfast burrito until, once more, they could have sworn to hear a noise just barely murmur into audibility. At once a more immediate sense of panic took over, and they ran into the kitchens to chase the noise while brandishing the burrito as they went. Within they found... more nothing.

They remained standing in the doorway looking in for another few minutes anyway just in case something decided to show up.

...pretty please?

...nothing, then. Maybe they were just going mad already. Rude of their hallucinations to play hide and seek.

Well, fuck it, now they didn't feel like moping anymore either. What a waste of a perfectly good bad mood. Bryn settled for returning to something that vaguely loosely looked kind of like productivity anyway, and went to go steal some more booze before handling other less important matters. Like figuring out the life support situation. Or anything else about their situation.

Their answer, after much aimless wandering, came in the form of finding a security room stashed unsuspectingly between two different bathroom sections. They tried the Captain's ID

card on it, and discovered that the door was actually broken and could just be shoved open as is. Inside were even more signs of past struggle, this time in the shape of discarded firearms and discolored splotches of... some kind of goop splattered against a far wall.

Bryn had an impulsive thought to try tasting the weird goop but shoved that aside. Maybe if they had literally no other options.

Though it did look kinda tasty.

But no! Serious matters first!!! Bryn chugged the rest of their water and tossed it into the pile of discarded gun before taking a seat at one of the desks. Random clicking at the computer was enough to lull it into wakefulness, from which randomly tapping the Captain's ID card against the screen, then keyboard, then mouse, then the comp box itself was eventually able to flick something to bypass the lock screen. The reward for such clever espionage was camera feeds. A variety of boxes filled the screen, each showing the darkness of the ship (as Bryn was still dutifully turning off the lights whenever they left a room) with a different location tagged.

Cafeteria, black screen. Bunk section 182, black screen. Aft turret b8e4, static? With a little tag flashing err- no contact on the bottom. Bryn frowned. That was different. Aft was... the back of a boat? Right? A bit of aimless riffling through the drawers at this station revealed a handy helpful manual guide for beginners at monitoring software, which included a little fold-out that roughly traced the path of cameras over a map of the ship. How handy! Also, according to that the aft \*was\* the back of the ship. Starboard and Larboard didn't mean a whole lot given the rotating barrel nature of the ship which, hrm.

Bryn looked up and pondered. There was still simulated gravity, so... the rotation was working, right? Stars they wished they were smarter right now. Maybe they should have paid attention in class instead of smoking weed under the bleachers all day.

Whatever, they couldn't do anything about it anyway. They grabbed a pen from a "Space's #1 Cop" mug and marked off the static turret, then switched to the next one. Cameras that worked got a check mark. Cameras that didn't got an x through them. A small bead of concern worked it's way into Bryn's heart as more and more of the cameras on the back half of the ship came back No Contact. The implication of what THAT meant started to wiggle itself into existence in their mind, and they didn't want to dare think of what could make it happen. So they marked them off. One by one. Again and again. Fore of the ship, fine. Aft of the ship, Err - No Contact. Again and again until they flicked to a hallway camera in the middle.

They saw space. Bare and beautiful and terrifying in equal measure, spinning rapidly off in it's infinite distance and leaving brilliant streaks of light in the sky. Or, no, how did relativism or whatever work? The stars weren't moving they were. Right??? Right. So the ship was spinning... concerningly fast and the only reason it didn't seem like it from inside was because Bryn was already of matched velociraptor or whatever. Cool. Awesome.

Oh also apparently the entire back half of the ship was fucking GONE. Bryn flicked through the remaining cameras to confirm it. Everything beyond the visible break was No Contact because they weren't fucking there. Everything on the other side of the quarantine walls was pure fucking vacuum and burnt wreckage.

...there was no fucking engine to turn this mess around. Or command center. They were literally spiraling out through space while emotionally spiraling back down into despair. They were probably going to, barring an energy and life support failure, probably crash into something and be utterly helpless to stop it from happening or worse get caught in some kind of gravity bell and fall into the fucking sun. And then die.

Bryn numbly flicked through the camera screens as they emotionally crumbled. Absent minded they grabbed the bottle of vodka they stole earlier and got to sipping it down too. Why not? Dying sober would, like, probably suck, so. Both actions hit an abrupt freeze when they flicked to Hall 7V and saw something move.

That one was definitely not a hallucination. They couldn't, like, actually make out WHAT they saw there, it was just a lump of dark pixels that dashed behind a corner, but, it was something.

Bryn's brain compulsively spat up two solutions. One, they were not alone and would be killed and eaten by whatever that thing was before they could die in the sun. Two, they were alone and already lost their beans so bad that they were making up friends. Fun. Bryn shut off the computer entirely, grabbed one of the discarded firearms and the map, and nervously left the security room behind.

Fucking nothing. That was all Bryn found for all the nervous pacing they spent around the broken remains of the ship. No dark shadows around the corner, no spooky noises, nothing even had the good mercy to jump out and off them either. After enough shaky pacing they even gave up on the idea on actually finding what those dark pixels were and retired once more to the Mess Hall.

Why did people have to eat so much? They just wanted to like, not. Ever. That'd be nice. More time to sleep. They wouldn't have to stuff- they glanced down at the package in their hands- ready made mac and cheese??? Gross. They wouldn't have to ever eat \*that\* again. Wash that down with more alcohol and some chips. And some water, too, they guessed. That was like, important or whatever. Guh.

Base physical needs met, Bryn once more returned to wallowing in despair by heading back to medical, getting more weed, and then crawling all the way back to their borrowed bed to cry, drink, smoke, and eventually sleep once more.

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Day three, and Bryn had made basically no progress at all. In fact, they would dare to suggest that they made literally negative progress in that time, as they felt even less capable now than

they did when they first woke up. That had to change! In ten more minutes. Bryn pulled the blankets up tight and rolled over, going right on back to sleep. Some unknown time later, now hungrier and more dehydrated, they promptly repeated the ritual and went right on back to the nap zone. Some even more unknown time later, now painfully hungry and wildly uncomfortably dehydrated, Bryn stared at the wall.

...okay, fine, they crawled out of bed and dragged themselves back to the Mess Hall. They might as well just bring the bed there with how often their stupid human stomach needs kept dragging them back. Yippee. Time to feed the gross chemical balloon organ again. Yummy yummy water and uhhhh.... Stale bagel time. Eventually all this food would go bad, right? Or was it all so lathed in preservatives that it'd last longer than them? Or worse, they'd die and have so much preservatives in their body from eating this garbage that their corpse never decayed? That's morbid. And disconcerting. Not morbid and disconcerting enough enough to make Bryn STOP per se, but, like, still.

All of that immediately went right on out the window when Bryn spotted something poke out of one of the air vents. Immediately the bagel and water fell to their sides to be replaced by them leaping out of their chair, tripping on a metal leg of the table, and falling flat first on their face. When they rose it was with gun in hand, aiming vaguely and shakily in the general direction of the air vent. There they saw... a hedgehog? Or an acorn. A cross between a hedgehog and an acorn with two lil antenna poking out of its tiny fuzzy face.

Bryn blinked dumbly at the tiny thing. The tiny thing stared blankly back at Bryn. That... was weird. Right? Maybe? Bryn mentally racked their admittedly still kind of hungover and hazy brain to think of anything that fit the descriptor of what they were looking at. Plant. Antenna. Crawls in the vents. SHIT! AFFINI!!!! Bryn drew in a sharp breath, eyes suddenly going wide with panic. They pulled at the trigger three times, but it was locked in place. Fuck. Uhhh, the safety was on? They pulled back the gun and looked over the sides. Let's see... button for releasing the magazine, brand logo, AHA! They switched the thumb lever from off to on, grabbed the gun tightly, and BANG!

They had a handgun off safety for all of one second and promptly shot themselves in the leg with it. To Bryn this was unfortunately on brand, so even as they fell flat on their ass and screamed in burning agony they thought 'yeah that seems about right'. Fortunately the more immediate fear of the terrifying if tiny plant alien was enough that they didn't completely drop into screaming and writhing on the spot. They still did scream in pain, of course, but it was between the acts of firing off the rest of their bullets in the general area of the scary houseplant, throwing their handgun at it once empty, and then screaming at it to stay as they tried to crawl out of their own growing pool of blood. Not that they could actually \*see\* the affini at that point, of course. Maybe it ran off. Or they were going blind. But still, they imagined it was there and that was spooky enough to encourage more flailing, more crawling, and then when they managed to pull themselves up to something half resembling a standing position an awkward limp run away towards the medical rooms.

By then Bryn was barely even awake enough to be considered functional. Every time they blinked, the world seemed to flicker out of existence, their leg had skipped past burning heat of pain to just feeling cold, their breath felt shallow and empty, and yet sheer obstinacy to escape the affini carried them into the bed of the AutoDoc. The machine whirred to life around them, mechanical arms already tracing pretty patterns of light across their body even as they flickered in and out of consciousness.

“You are suffering from [blood loss] and [1] [gunshot wound]. Please present your insurance-” Oh godamnit was this really the time to demand money??? They blindly pawed at their pockets to find the Surgeon’s ID card and found it absolutely smeared with blood. Of course. They rubbed it against their shirt until clean enough and then blindly tapped it against the console. The machine just continued to insist on its request for insurance, over and over until the card slipped between Bryn’s bloody fingers and clattered against the floor. Stars damn it all. They didn’t even have the energy to reach for it anymore. “Please present your insurance.” Well, there were worse ways to die. “Please present your insurance.” At least this way they were still ah uh,,, what did those other more passionate rebels say? “Please present your insurance.” A proud free terran! Yeah!! That!!! “Please present your insurance.” Uhg god shut up.

Bryn fell limp against the bedding of the autodoc. They didn’t have the strength to act anymore, everything just felt too cold and distant and floaty and uhhhhggggghhhgg fuck it all. Fuck space, too. Space sucks, they decided. It was empty and cold and the robots wanted their money.

“Your vitals have fallen below acceptable thresholds. Now administering emergency treatment.” Oh boy! “Please be aware this will incur additional fees to be billed at the end of your stay.” Of fucking course. Mechanical arms went to their merry work splitting cloth from flesh, then pierced her with an array of needles on her shoulder and down by her wound. Something else was probing around her arm, probably a... a whatever the thingy was called. Pokey stick. With a tube. That had the uhhh. Stuff. In it??? Wow thinky hard. Maybe it’d be easier if the room would stop spinning. Please?

Fortunately for Bryn, the room did soon stop spinning. Unfortunately for Bryn, it was because they passed out into a drugged sleep.

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Bryn woke up in a dull haze. The autodoc must have given them some pretttyyyyyy good stuff, ‘cause instead of agonizing and embarrassing pain from having blasted their own leg they just felt a kind of floaty happy high instead, the kind of thing that they could totes just drift on allllll day and not care. Fuck yeahhh. Wwwworth. “Please remain still until released by a medical professional.” Oh shut up AutoDoc they’re busy tripping. Bryn glanced down to see that their left arm was currently pinned in a series of metal clamps with wires and tubes currently plugged into them. That explains why they don’t feel thirsty. Looking up from that they next saw- aw fuck.

The hedgehog shaped affini was currently squirming through the gaps in the air vent into the room. Bryn normally would have been panicked about that but thanks to the tasty chemicals

they instead just felt kind of vaguely miffed. "Go awayyy," They groaned. The plant, despite Bryn's best polite protest, continued to wiggled through the thin slats and popped right out, sending it tumbling out into the room. It rolled up into a ball, bounced off the floor, and ended up rolling across the distance where it collided with the far wall.

Okay that was a \*little\* cute. But still.

When the tiny affini unrolled itself and started walking towards Bryn all the panic right properly came back. Still muted, but enough that Bryn was able to redouble their protests. "Nnoooo," They whined and used their free arm to try to wave off the plant. "Donnn't."

"Please remain still until released by a medical professional." Not the time, AutoDoc. There was an evil alien invader like two feet away!

When the tiny little plant hedgehog started clambering up the side of the console and worked its way up. Bryn attempted to swat at it, but all they got for the effort was a clumsy sweep, an uncomfortable realization that dried blood still caked their hand, and another stern reminder from the AutoDoc before its mechanical arms grabbed them by the wrist and pinned it to their side.

"Please remain still until released by a medical professional." NOT THE TIME!!!

The pointy thing breached the top of the console, it's... face? Front plate? Whatever it was that terminated the forward facing portion of the plant quadruped. "Stay awayyy," They begged through the drugged haze. It didn't seem interested in listening though, as it paced back and forth a few times before running and leaping, landing right beside Bryn's pillow. Bryn yelped and tried to lean away, but they were given so little space that they couldn't even properly escape. "Please stay away?" They were down to begging at that point.

What luck, begging to a plant the size of their fist. It advanced without pause, crawling up onto the pillow itself before marching even closer towards the terran's face. Bryn at first wiggled their head to get away, then, breathing fast and shallow, froze up as it came next to them, and shut their eyes and mouth tightly. This was it. They were dead. For real this time. The plant was gonna eat them and- and- um,

...um,

It just crawled up on top of their forehead and laid down.

Bryn remained stock still in continued fear. When nothing happened they peeked one eye up to barely see the hedgehog's silhouette looming just above their eyeline.

...it wasn't doing anything.

...well then.

Bryn tried sliding their head back into a comfortable position, and the affini didn't budge in response.

This was just awkward, then.

Bryn remained in a state of nervous tension for what felt like hours, though given the contrasting forces of drugs and nerves it was probably about like two minutes. The affini spent that whole time perched atop their skull and, apparently, softly breathing judging by how it consistently inflated and deflated. It was actually kinda comfy, if they pictured it was a cat laying on them instead of a plant.

...wait they were still an evil invader. Bryn huffed and tried to puff towards the plant, but the weak exhales barely made it stir. On the third try though the little bundle of wood and leaves suddenly shook, wiggled its head around, and then sneezed. Pink mist launched out from within its body and coated the air around Bryn's head. Fuck! Well this was their own damn fault. The air itself tasted unusually sweet, and left a fizzy sort of popping sensation on the tip of their tongue as it inevitably drifted into their system.

The affini wiggled up onto its tiny little steppers and moved from Bryn's face down to their chest, trailing more pink mist as they went. The mist was clearly drugged. Bryn could feel its blatant touch coursing out from their lungs and stealing away what little bits of energy they still had available as it went. At least it felt nice. Kind of floaty and bubbly and silly and calmmmmm annnnd ummm, Bryn blinked repeatedly. What were they just doing? They tried to rack their brain but they couldn't quite recall anything important beyond the fact that they felt like, super nice, and have been feeling super nice for at least five seconds previous. Feeling nice was nice. They also had some kind of comfy weight on their chest, which, also nice.

Bryn closed their eyes and let the floaty comfy feelings wash over them and pull them alllll the way down into sleepy time.

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Apparently the fearsome evil affini wasn't *\*too\** evil, as when Bryn woke up next they not only felt wonderfully refreshed but also blitzed as FUCK on painkillers and quite comfy with a lil warm ball of spiky bark on their chest. How nice. It almost even felt like they hadn't accidentally given themselves an accidental injection of lead in the leg, too. How sweet.

"Please remain still until released by a medical professional."

"Oh shhhUT UP, Autodoc." Bryn groaned. What a buzzkiller. Their wiggles of protest at the machine's ironclad grip stirred the nefarious weed upon their chest enough to drive it to action though, and soon the terran felt the mighty footsteps of its tiny tiny form marching across their body, then roll off the side and down to the floor. Okay bye then??

A few minutes later the herbal rodent appeared once more on the console with the surgeon's ID card (still bloody but coagulated and dry now, so, gross) and did... something with it to release Bryn.

Bryn blinked numbly and dumbly at the tiny shrub. How... generous? And helpful? "...thanks?" It bristled up into some kind of green shimmer in response. That was some kind of response, so hopefully a positive one. Maybe. They weren't a xenolinguist.

Bryn tried to hoist themselves off the bed and managed a spectacular stumble and fall face-first into the floor, only by good fortune able to brace themselves with their arm before crashing down. Saved from the embarrassment of knocking themselves out, doomed to a fresh bloom of pain on their arm to match the fresh bloom of agony on their leg.

Bryn laid face-first down on the floor and groaned in pain instead of doing anything about it. This just felt appropriate to them. Something about the vibe being right to their dramatic fuck ups.

The hedgehog, meanwhile, seemed much more productively minded and used that time to fish out some crutches from one of the closets and nudge them with its tiny adorable face towards Bryn.

...okay, they couldn't really stay scared at the thing when it kept being so nice. Bryn grunted something that kind of vaguely sounded like thanks. Getting up on the crutches was, like, kind of awkward? But with those to support their weight at least their leg was spared further effort.

Speaking of leg, they only then noticed that their leg was bare save for the clear water-proofed wrap over their bandaged wound.

...in fact, both of their legs were bare.

Bryn looked down and realized they were actually stark fucking naked. Oh bloody hell, the AutoDoc stole their clothes. Like, they were a mess so Bryn understood \*why\* the clothes would have to be removed but STILL.

"You wouldn't happen to know where I can find some clothes, would you?" They asked the tiny plant at their heels. Not that they'd expect an answer- oh, no, it immediately scampered over to the door and turned around to face them. Add that to the pile of disbeliefs then. The plant led, and Bryn followed.

Through the dimly lit halls of the space wreckage the two traveled until they found their apparent destination. The baths? Bryn looked down at the plant incredulously. "Seriously?" It ruffled up its scales at them. Bryn stared back for a moment, then dared to sniff under their arm.

Oh gods.

They just smell like sweat, alcohol, and blood.

Disgusting.

“Okay fine you win this one.”

Sponge bathing was at least not *\*too\** difficult of an affair in their state. With a bench to sit on and their wound already water-proofed they had to scrub. A bunch. Okay maybe it was a little difficult but that was because they were high as fuck, they swear. Like, who *\*wouldn't\** get stuck watching bubbles form on the sponge's surface when squeezed with enough tasty chemicals in their blood? Nobody. That's who. Don't judge. So the truth of the matter is that they absolutely fucking sucked at bathing themselves and ended up spending the whole time a kind of giggly mess because the sponge felt like tickling and whenever they got some good bubbles going they'd wobble about in false gravity and that was funny to them.

Bryn must have been at it for a while, 'cause eventually the affini came back and jumped on a lever that poured cold water over the human, shocking them out of their bath-time funksies and into upset shivers and discontent. That the affini followed it up by prancing towards the towels didn't really help a whole lot, but Bryn was simply too cold all of a sudden to avoid its tiny tiny ideas.

Once toweled off they next discovered that they had taken SO long with their bubble sponge bath that the affini apparently also had time to drag a bag with fresh clothes in. Come on, how dare it actually be productive. Wasn't the normal thing to like, cry a bunch first and do drugs about it? Did the plant skip that step? Bryn huffed. Now they just felt incapable by comparison.

At least the clothes were comfy. Standard issue navy pajamas, a jacket, and comfy warm socks for their feeties. Add a pair of slippers and it was basically the ideal lazy day wear, complete with being just a bit oversized for extra comfort. Perfect. Add some weed and tasty food and they were ready to spend all day in bed. By the time they managed to pull all those clothes on the affini was once more standing in the doorway expectantly. “Yeah, yeah, I'm coming.”

The next place the itty bitty plampt led them to was the mess hall. Ah, home sweet home. Wasn't there a blood stain in there from before? Bryn didn't see one and frankly was a bit too busy feeling like their brain was made of fog to really think about it too much. The plant continued its bossy little stomps right up to a series of vending machines and paused to face Bryn until they got something from them, stopping and several in a row until Bryn was left with something that vaguely resembled a proper breakfast sized meal next to yet another plastic bottle of water on the side.

Bryn contemplated getting some more alcohol after this, to wash down the inevitable taste if nothing else. The shrub spent the whole time just sitting on the table across from Bryn.

Watching them, probably. This just felt kind of awkward to be silently sitting there with an alien, honestly.

“So...” Bryn started between mouthfuls of bread. “...come here often?” Stupid. Stupid silly question. Why was \*that\* the first thing to come to mind???? The plant didn’t even have a verbal response, if it were even capable one. It just tilted that faceplate thing to the side and it’s antennas did a little wiggle. Uhg. Take two. “So... do you eat people?” Bryn, what are you saying??? The affini just tilted its head the other way. Just assume that’s a no. Silly. “...do you know a way out of here?” That got a more energetic reaction. Some shivering of scales and more excited wiggling. Was that good news? Hopefully.

Bryn tried to consider it a hopeful sign and reacted appropriately, by leaping to their feet- ouch, no, bad, they immediately slumped back down to their seat and face planted the table in shame. Bad bad bad.

“Between you and me, I think I kinda just wanna smoke weed and sleep today,” Bryn whined audibly. Sucks that they, like, had a whole life threatening situation going on. The plant, though, wiggled over across the table and bumped against their cheek at that. “Yeah, yeah, I know, we gotta like, find an escape vector or something.” It bumped against their cheek at that. “Just give me a minute.” Another bump. Bryn sighed and scooted back up, back to stuffing their face with food. Once finished they grabbed their crutches and dragged themselves back up. “So, what’s our out?”

The affini ran in a small circle a few times before scampering out to the exit. More follow the leader, then. This time it lead them to... the bunks?

Bryn looked down at the plant. “Don’t we have to like, do stuff?” Not that they were actually complaining on the inside, sleep would be a great solution to the existential despair currently simmering underneath their chemical induced comfort. The affini just bumped their heels repeatedly. “Okay, okay, I’m going, I’m going.” They awkwardly hobbled in and, guided by the tiny plant bonking their heels, ended up once more draped across a bed. Well, fine, if an extragalactic entity demanded they go to bed who were they to complain?

Bryn made a mock display of discontentment and need to go Be Productive or whatever, the kind of thing they’d do to save face in front of other terrans, but ultimately caved and tucked themselves up under the blankets. Mmm. Comfy. Once they were properly down the affini trekked another circle in the ground before marching right on towards the door.

“Wwwaittt,” Bryn groaned. The affini turned around in the door frame. “Do you have any weed?”

The affini seemed to pause for a moment, then scampered back over to Bryn’s side. Did it actually have weed??? Oh fuck yeah, space weed. It clambered awkwardly onto the bed, hopped across Bryn’s body, and then shook out a wave of pink mist from its body over their face.

Wait, that's not space weed.

Bryn gasped in shock, which filled their lungs with that tasty pink mist and all too soon they were right back to happy pleasant foggy tingles as they drifted down into sleep.

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Maybe if Bryn was lucky when they get out of this space junk they'd be able to find the kind of job that lets them lay around and get high all day and not worry about anything again. They'd earned that, right? This whole mess was like, enough anxiety for two lifetimes. Getting bossed around by an itty bitty plant was just an extra layer of Weird to add to the mix. Since being ever so chemically tucked into bed and made to take a good long nap Bryn had basically been getting nudged around by the rodent to bathe, eat, drink water, and every time they tried to go get more alcohol about it the damn thing had instead showered them with more happy pink mist that had then slumping off into sleep again instead. Not productive, but admittedly not, like, TOO upsetting.

They almost even forgot they were going to die! Haha, how nice. Oh to be in a state of blissful ignorance as the ship plunged into a star or crashed into an asteroid or-

Bryn bolted upright. "I need to get off this wreck," they uttered. Then laid back down and fell back to sleep. When they next awoke it was with a slightly more muted but still present version of the same worry. The affini was even in their lap this time! "We need to get off this wreck." It wiggled about in response, stomping its little feeties on their belly as if to tell them to lay back down, but Bryn felt the drive to act actually brimming in their veins for once. They slumped out of bed, grabbed the crutches, and then hobbled themselves up into something that resembled a standing position plus minus some dignity.

Bryn took exactly one heroic step towards the door and paused. They didn't actually know what to do next. Hrm.

Bryn turned to face the affini. "So uh... do you know what to do now?"

The plant paced back and forth a bit, then ran forward before leaping onto Bryn's arm and clambering up onto their shoulder. With another set of wiggles they managed to produce a vine which they used to point Bryn forward on out of the room. Together the two mighty heroes hobbled back into the great darkened paths of the ship, and...

Okay Bryn didn't actually understand a thing about what the two were doing but the plant was pointing and they were following and that felt kind of like progress. Maybe they'd get one or two tasks done and then get a burger and some beer and get crossfaded again, that'd be fun and feel kind of like a success. The path the plant led on eventually wandered into a room that, at one point, looked like it was actually kind of important. Rows upon rows of computers, more hardware along the back, cables and buttons and switches everywhere. Bundles of the stuff

were even disassembled and strewn about the place. The plant hopped off of Bryn's head and got to sniffing about within the guts of the machinery, while the terran...

"I don't know what to do with any of this." They said with a defeated sigh. They slumped down into one of the chairs and groaned in frustration. Useless. Actually fucking useless. Now they just felt bad. The most functional thing Bryn had to contribute to a mess of machinery was idle pickings at the wires and quiet but also empty contemplations. The affini, however, was quite industrious in how it used it's tiny adorable planty form to wiggle about inside the machinery and assemble some kind of contraption in front of Bryn.

Piece by piece the plant formed a jumble of thingamabobs and whatsits, punctuated it with a cute little switch, dial, and a speaker. A communication ansible? Bryn reached for the switch and got a swat on the wrist for it.

Seriously? They glared at the plant, and tried again. Another swat on the wrist. Oh fine. They silently watched the plant fiddle about inside the machine a bit more before it fully crawled out and took a seat next to it. Bryn reached for the switch again, slower this time in expectation of being chided once more. When it didn't react, they flicked the switch. The machine hummed into life, air filling with static from it's uh... speakybox? Whatever the sound bit was.

White noise. They glanced between the device and the affini. Was it working right? They fiddled with the dial, and the noise coalesced into a voice. "...ter solution. Affini medical technology provides effective solutions to your medical problems. Regardless of if you are suffering from mental health issues, chronic illnesses or are just on the lookout for a safe space to experience new highs." Bryn blinked. A radio? Their untrained eye couldn't figure out if there was a speaky thing or not, so... a radio receiver?

Bryn turned towards the plant. "So... how does this help?" It shimmered its scales in response and scampered off. "H... how does this help though?" The voice on the radio continued on to talk about affini xenodrugs whatever whatever, then changed programs to something about health care or whatever? Bryn turned the dial, turning the voice to static again, then to another neutral to slightly feminine voice came on talking about food. Food was nice. Bryn liked food!

....wait this was basically just an entertainment device. "Did you make this just to distract me!?" Bryn asked incredulously. Wow. Just wow. Even the plant thought they were useless. It'd be a waste to not use this ansible though, so... Bryn turned the dial back to someone talking about drugs again. Then to another channel where a soft voice went on in a loving-but-condescending tone about how adorable some alien species Bryn never heard of was and how they had managed to make the cutest little warp drive all on their own (with some help from the affini of course) and how everyone should be proud of them.

Bryn felt that was utterly silly, but so sincere that it flew right past their propaganda wards and landed in the "oh they actually mean it" bin. After another hour of flicking through the channels the same bin filled up with a number of other educational facts about the affini that painted

QUITE the surprising picture in Bryn's mind, and honestly I could detail them all one by one but its basically just genre catch up and we all know what the deal is here, this is like twenty fics deep (and if this is your first HDG fic and you don't know the genre conventions, how did you get here? go read Divaricated like 90% of this is crutched on it for metatextual context).

Long story short, Bryn had come to the understanding that the big scary plant aliens from outer space basically came here to pet the humans because they thought they were cute, and in the process overturned the human government to replace it with vines petting human heads forever. "This is ridiculous!" Bryn shouted. "I don't want to be a pet!" Their affini friend poked its tiny little head out of the wireworks at that and stared blankly in Bryn's general direction. Well, it didn't have eyes, but, like, the vibe was staring. "Don't look at me like that. I don't want to be a pet, I just want to lay around and smoke weed all day, okay?" Which apparently was an option now, since the affini claims about having domesticated the concept of scarcity was either a societal level illusion or actually sincere.

The affini, as always, was silent in response.

"Oh who am I kidding?" Bryn continued on anyway, slumping forehead first into the desk ahead of them. "I'm so doomed. The second you plants get here I'm as good as gone, aren't I?" Their plant companion just tilted it's head to the side in response. Bryn sighed, once more wallowing in feelings of uselessness until they actually dared to look up once again and inspiration finally truly struck. "...wait," They said, a hopeful glimmer finally trailing in their voice. "You're lost here too. Surely if I help with the escape I can be like, 'oh look I helped save one of your kind, please don't hurt me', right?" Nobody would turn on someone who HELPED their own kind escape certain death and doom in deep space, right???

The hedged hog's response was to flop over onto its side. GOOD ENOUGH!!

"It's a plan! Show me what to do!" Bryn shouted ecstatically. The hedgehog just rolled about for a bit before waddling over, flopping off the table, and bumping their injured leg as it tumbled down to the floor. Bryn's bravado immediately broke into whimpered grunts as they folded around their leg and grabbed it. "Owwwww, ow ow ow, why would you do that?" They whined.

Hedgemus St. Hog did not respond with words but rather with more bumping at Bryn's heel. They knew well enough that that meant to get moving, and maybe this time it'd be helpful moving. Onward!

To the mess hall??? Again??? Bryn grabbed several water bottles per its instructions and a packaged snack. Yeah, okay, being hydrated is an important step to being helpful and thus earning one's independence. Then they went back to the bunks, where Hedgbert Von Hogsmas nudged Bryn until they sat down on the bed once- "Hold on, this is just more resting." Bryn proclaimed.

The affini turned on its heel and did a jolly little trot right on out the door.

“W-wait! I want to help!?” Bryn shouted after it, rushing to awkwardly put their myriad goods down and grab the crutches to hobble after the plant. That got a much faster reaction, as it turned around and bumped Bryn right back into bed. This was silly. Of course they COULD just ignore the tiny insignificant force bombing against their leg but, like, that’d be rude. After ferrying them back to sitting down the plant proceeded to bonk against their injured leg a few more times. “What, I can’t help because I’m hurt?” It ran in a little circle. “Well what if I try anyway?” It mocked a dramatic turn to face away from them. “Wait, no, hold on, I don’t know how to do jack shit around here.” It spun around and bonked their leg again. “So... I rest, and later you’ll let me lend a hand?” And, by extension, prove that they’re a nice helpful terran who definitely doesn’t deserve to be, uh, domesticated. Yeah. The affini hopped a few times on it’s tiny little feeties at that, which Bryn decided was a positive sort of reaction. “Okay fiiiine, I’ll stay here.”

Now satisfied, the affini turned on its heel and marched on out. Bryn, alone, just laid down on the bed, flicked the radio back on, and... god okay this part is boring actually. They just laid there and listened to whatever they happened to find. Dreadful. Didn’t even have any alcohol to make it a party.

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“...ifth bloom. We know things are scary right now, especially for some of you. Maybe you’re feeling lost in this new world, staring out into space, fearing what is to come. If you need us we will find you.” Amongst the many new broadcasts to fill the air, one that seemed to actually help Bryn a bit was a bit of, uh... guided meditation they guessed? Stars knew they had the free time to learn a bit of meditation now. It was more fun than listening to two Neoxenoarchaeobureaucrats debate the elder memes for four hours again. Besides, it was nice to just relax to a nice feminine voice telling them that they’d be all comfortable and stuff, like, even normally but especially when their real situation was one of mild anxiety and worrying about, like, a rock or something hitting the ship. “Take another deep breath, smell the flowers, take in their pollen, my xenodrugs, and let them calm you down, keep those worries away, let me bring you to your happy place.”

Happy place. Right. They had a happy place. It involved being incredibly brain meltingly high and bundled under like twelve blankets, but they could simulate by burritoing up with the blankets they had. The voice went to something about taking a rose and planting it deep inside. Symbolic, obviously, but Bryn couldn’t help but recall the sneering voices of rebels insisting that anyone who took anything from the plants was somehow less than human. So like, taking a whole ass flower into oneself would make one extra not human, right? And uh... judging by the way people had talked about that it was supposed to be a bad thing or something?

Bryn kind of wished they were a bit smarter so they could actually think these things through. Or have someone smart around who could explain it really really well- uhg, this was like, the opposite of meditation. They were thinking TOO MUCH now! That’s hardly any fun. Maybe they could ask the affini to bring them some weed again. Which would result in more not space

weed, of course, but like, it's not THEIR fault the affini didn't have space weed so that doesn't count.

"...this might have been a bit intense for some. Take some time to recover, take care of your needs, then maybe message a friend." With that the broadcast reached its scheduled close, and Bryn was left into the gentle musical tones that followed after it. They'd message a friend if they could. Did the hedgehog count as a friend? Bryn hoped so. It seemed to be down with their 'dodge being domesticated by space plampts' plot, and if that didn't count as a friend well then what did?

Bryn tapped a knuckle against the air vent, and a minute later the familiar shape of a plantly hedgehog appeared from between its slats. It even had a cute little flower this time! "Hiiii," Bryn called out. "The radio show said I should message a friend and I think you're the only thing that counts right now, so, uh, hello?" The innate silliness of having a one-sided conversation with a plant-based entity the size of their first had by then worn down to a relatively comfortable ease of just saying whatever was on Bryn's mind at the time. A few days of boredom and xenodrugs just, like, did that to people. "So... how is... whatever the rescue plan is?" They still didn't know what was up with that. Every time they tried to do something that wasn't eating, sleeping, or cleaning themselves up the lil plant got stompy again, so,

Their little hedgehog friend rolled right on out of the vent, bounced off of Bryn's head, and rolled down their torso to land in their lap. It then pranced about excitedly in a circle a few times before scurrying under the blankets and scampering over to Bryn's injured leg. The terran pulled aside the blanket and watched as it crawled over the bandaged limb a few times, paused, and then tugged on one of the strips of cloth.

"Is it really time to change the bandage again?" They whined. They could have sworn they just did this yesterday. Or... a few days ago, maybe. The time in the middle got kind of muddy with how they were kind of maybe sort of asking for space weed every night and sleeping in every morning slash afternoon slash evening (it was for pain management, they swear). They also didn't really do any of the bandage changing themselves, either. Hedgy had these little tendrils it used to do the job so they just kinda laid back and let whatever happened happen.

Bryn slipped into the usual unfocused state of waiting as they felt their little hog of the hedges start pulling apart the bandages to reveal the state of their wound. The stitches were gone by then, of course. And the bleeding had all stopped, yay, but also it was kinda itchy and gnarly looking and frankly Bryn preferred not being able to see it. This time, however, the affini paced around the now exposed patch of skin a few times before plucking the flower off their body, several roots along its structure unwinding as it detached before twisting back together into a spearlike structure as it hefted the thing and-

"Wait!" Bryn sat up. They'd heard the plants talk about medical implants on the radio before, so like, it wasn't a COMPLETE mystery what it had intended but, um, that, uh, the plant was looking up at them now, flower still in hand. "...it'll make me not human?" It didn't move from the

spot, but Bryn could practically feel the weight of its stare turn judgemental. “No, I don’t know what it means, I just heard it from other terrans before and they all talked about it like it’s super bad.” Silence reigned between them. “...No, I don’t know why that’s a bad thing either, okay???” More silence, this time just feeling very awkward. “Look, I’m not very smart and I don’t know what people mean more often than not and I rarely understand things but like they were really emphatic about it so I kinda just felt like maybe I’d ask later for details and forgot and that happens all the time, okay?”

The plant bundled the flower up into itself and walked in a circle again before rolling up in a huff. Was it.... Pouting?

“Sorry,” Bryn said quietly. “If you could talk right now you’d have some clarifying things to say, wouldn’t you?” It ruffled its scales again. Bryn laid back down, quite ready to some self pitying for being so fucking stup- They felt the unfortunately familiar kick of a warp drive in their lungs. Bryn blinked several times. Surely that was wrong, right?

A moment later they were proven quite right, as a dozen affini burst down the door, jumped through the air vents, climbed out of the walls, and somehow one came out from under their bed. Through the dizzying and seemingly spontaneous blur of motion Bryn only managed to hold on to one mental fact. A secret and powerful weapon to instantly defeat any affini that they had learned from one of the soap opera broadcasts.

Bryn threw their hands into the air and shouted, “I’m very soft and cute!”

All of the affini immediately melted into adoring ‘awwwwww <333~’ noises. Perfect. Absolute victory. Now instead of being fiercely tackled and immediately domesticated on the spot they were being pet by a baker’s dozen of affini at once who were all talking over each other about how cute and sweet and soft they were. Thank you, soap opera, for providing real and life-saving information.

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Bryn learned several fun facts after being graciously cradled by an affini and carried off to the shockingly extravagant medical wing of their spaceship. One, the hedgehog that spent the whole trip napping on their lap was apparently one Veratrix Kousa, 15th (soon to be 16th bloom). Two, while Bryn was being, according to the affini, “a very good and helpful terran by napping and recovering appropriately” Veratrix had been quite busy building an ansible capable of communicating at strength capable of reaching out to the affini to come rescue them. It was supposedly a very thrilling endeavor full of heart pounding tension and difficulties. Super cool time. You shoulda seen it. Anyway. Third thing was that they were actually quite amenable to Bryn’s gentle but insistent request for independence. While they were quite condescending if adoring about how little Bryn was able to contribute to the escape plan (besides their adorable terran face which no doubt helped Veratrix a lot, according to them), they did seem to appreciate how ‘polite and obedient’ Bryn was Miss Kousa’s demands.

Sadly, Veratrix quite badly needed to take a nap in what looked like a surprisingly large fish bowl full of a multi-colored soup and dirt substitute so that she could rebloom properly. It took a while. Like, longer than Bryn had to spend in the medical wing while. They visited while they were moved to a cute little hab room (with all the appliances and furniture still a bit too large for terran use and an AI that teased them if they didn't say please before asking for water (but they worked!!! So Bryn didn't cry about it) ), then visited again as they were meeting more affini to officially handle matters of independence and lapsed IDs from terran accord to terran protectorate paperwork. Then there were meetings to debrief about what happened on the ship, a meeting to consult what Bryn's favorite stuffed animals and types of drugs were, a meeting to consult on whether or not there were too many meetings involved in this process, and by then Bryn was so tired that the meetings just went on around them as they took a cute little nap in the corner. They definitely were sleeping on a big pillow and NOT an oversized doggy bed, by the way. Definitely.

But when all was said and done, Bryn was one physical healthy terran individual with a stack of paperwork that certified they were a very good little terran who was very polite and helpful and absolutely deserved their independence if they wanted it, only requiring the signature of Veratrix herself before it was all official and taken care of. So Bryn once more visited the recuperating affini.

Within her reblooming chamber Bryn had watched her first enter as a little hedgehog, tiny scales wiggling about to burrow underneath the ground, and slowly grow into the twisted shape she now bore. A thick arch of wood mimicked the pattern of a human spine, clutching a seed the size of Bryn's head in its thin ribs. A blanket of vines and wooden scales burst out along its lengths into a pattern that nearly mimicked a great cloak, with bright leaves blooming into a texture akin to fur to highlight. Bryn would dare to say her sleeping body reminded them of a reaper dressed in rich furs, just waiting to unbury itself and pull a scythe out after it.

Menacing, if not for the fact that Bryn already associated her with an adorable scaly pointy mouse.

But anyway back to the important matter, Bryn and Calypsys (8th bloom, wonderful lady, loves boardgames and has three florets.) went together to visit Veratrix with documents in hand to find her still sleeping her merry if slightly creepy sleep, having long since drained the ichor into herself for nutrients and becoming a wonderfully verdant mess in the process.

"Is she still sleeping?" Bryn cocked their head.

Calypsys sighed, "She's just being lazy again, I'll wake her." The tall affini then slithered on over to the sleeping plant and rapped her knuckles against Veratrix' spine a few times. "Veratrix, you sleepy bun, we have paperwork to handle." That seemed to catch her attention, as her body suddenly wrenched itself free from the soil, tendrils snapping together and weaving into simulacras of flesh, wood breaking apart into scaled patterns that danced over false shoulders,

cloak billowing out behind them like a pair of verdant wings, and lastly pulling free a wooden mask carved into a bestial visage that she pressed into her face.

“Can’t a girl sleep in a little after such a thrilling adventure?” Her voice was a deep and warm timbre, like a blues singer mixed with just the right level of societal exhaustion to call someone a very colorful insult to their face. Truth be told, it hit Bryn with a sense that a longing they hadn’t felt before was suddenly fulfilled by its return despite never having heard it before.

“Ver-” Was as far as Bryn got before she whipped a series of vines across the room and slammed them against the wall, silencing them by force. At once they felt themselves squeezed in on all sides, thorns and needles grazing against their skin while a rising tune flooded their senses. They struggled on pure instinct, blindly pulling against the powerful restraints even as no progress was ever yielded to them.

“Sorry about my pet,” Veratrix continued. “They’re quite chatty, as I’m sure you’ve learned. What did you need me for?”

Calypsus looked from Veratrix to Bryn several times in rapid sequence. “Bryn uh... was filing for independence and needed you to sign off on it?” They held up the papers in question.

Veratrix’s response was one of stunned silence, their own eyes going wide only momentary before proper understanding hit and they shifted into a laugh. It started low, like a small chuckle that built up steam by the moment before bursting apart into a thunderous cackle, with even the mask splitting apart to reveal rows and rows and rows of razor teeth as their voice roared at the hilarity of the mere suggestion. Veratrix snapped herself back together, grabbed the papers out of Calypsus’ hand, and tore it in half. “No.”

Okay, scratch that, not a blues singer. A supervillain. Bryn had been stuck with a supervillain style affini and hadn’t pieced it together because she was just too small and cute to reveal it. They redoubled their efforts to break free but were only rewarded by the threatening thorns against their body breaking skin for their efforts. Ow ow ow ow ow fuck.

Veratrix tore the very complicated, carefully filed, and wonderfully hand-written pieces of documentation to tiny little shreds as she took long, slow steps towards her captured prey, tossing the mess like a pile of confetti into the wind without a care once she was right next to them. “Is surgical hall 3 currently open?” She asked the still stunned affini.

“Uh... yes?” Calypsus answered.

“Wonderful, I’m taking it” Veratrix then pulled Bryn’s still struggling body down to the floor, changing her vine’s grip to focusing more around Bryn’s lower face, neck, and shoulders to act as a leash as she dragged the human behind her on her path. “By the way, we should have a game night sometime. I’m sure your florets would love to meet mine once I’m done,” She breathed in sharply, excitement on her tongue “breaking mine in.”

“They uh... already met Bryn though?” Calypsus obviously hadn’t expected this meeting to go this way, as she completely missed the part where Veratrix had already walked right on out with Bryn in tow.

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The poor unfortunate soul that was Bryn learned quite quickly that despite being literally dragged kicking and screaming (though muted by the vines), nobody was going to save them. The most they got was an occasional affini saying something along the lines of “oh my” and quickly dashing out of Veratrix’ path despite the terran’s attempts to claw at the vines on their mouth and scream for help. All the panic they had successfully stifled aboard the wreckage had now come back in full violent force, all of which was focused solely upon the target of what they felt was a horrid betrayal. They had trusted her! Stars they had even listened to her and been polite and nice and rested like they should have and- okay there was that one part with the gun BUT STILL!!! They didn’t want to be a pet!

By that point Bryn had exhausted themselves from actively flailing to limp struggling and crying. They were fucking stupid. Godsdamnit. They should have seen this coming, but just like everything else in their stars damned life they were just too dim witted to see the truck barreling down the road both blinkers on and horn blaring. Fuck. Fuck fuck FUCK!!!!

Before they knew it they had been pulled off the floor, their dress violently torn from their body, and were pressed face-first into a surgical table that locked their arms out to their side and left their back exposed to the air. “I’m sorry,” They sputtered between tears and snot. “I’m so sorry I promise I’ll be good just don’t-”

“Shh,” Veratrix cut them off with naught but a gentle pat on the back of their head. “It’s okay, dear. There’s nothing you can do here now. After all, every time you tried to do things when we were together you failed, remember? And now I’m here to make sure you never need to fail so spectacularly again.” The words hit Bryn like a knife of ice into the heart. What...? The hand on the back of their head suddenly tightened into a grip on their hair and yanked them back, bringing them face to face with the affini- no, the monster before them. “By the way, it’s adorable that you thought you had a chance at independence. See, part of why I took so long to bring myself together is because from the first moment I saw you, I had decided to make you mine. And so I’ve been nurturing a little gift for you all this time.” One of her hands slipped up the length of her false sternum, slipping underneath her ribs momentarily before returning with what looked like a small centipede trapped in amber. “A gift from me to you.”

Bryn felt herself begin to slip into hyperventilations. This couldn’t be happening. That was, that, it- Vines slithered around their body and pressed a series of wires into their back along their spine, while more still slipped needles into their arms. No chemical fog came to rescue them, only a faint pins and needles sensation before they realized they couldn’t move their body.

“That’s for your safety. I’ve decided to give you a second gift, though this one is a bit more...” She gestured some circles in the air as she sought the word. “Conceptual. See, I still recall two things you clearly told me. One, you wished \*oh so dearly\* to be able to laze around and get high. Two, you were afraid that having plant matter grafted to your body would no longer make you human. With that in mind I came to a decision.” The hand holding Bryn’s hair pushed them back down into the face-rest of the surgery table and held them firmly in place. “You will get to enjoy the bliss of both of these possibilities, little lost bird. For now, you are still sober and clear, but when next you go up into the most wonderful bliss I will see to it that you remain there. Permanently.” Bryn gulped. “With the implant’s help you’ll never gain a tolerance, neither physical nor mental. Everyday will be as good as the first time, and every time you ask, ‘will I be like this forever?’ the answer will be yes.”

Shock had replaced all other emotions that could still flow within Bryn’s addled heads. Something cold and wet slid across the back of their neck. They heard the snaps of latex gloves come next, then Veratrix moved out of their vision and slid up behind them.

“So enjoy this moment, take a deep breath and taste the air, feel the blood pumping in your lungs, think what little you can in that empty little head of yours, and know that in a moment I will strip you not only of your sobriety but your humanity.” Another cold feeling pierced the back of their neck, sharp and wretched as it dragged through them. “I wonder how the rebels would react to the sight of what you’ll soon become. No longer a terran like them, but less. A pet. My pet, specifically. Do you think they would scorn you? Or perhaps pity. Not that it matters, they’ll all end up in the same position as you anyway.” As she spoke she continued to work, sending more cold lines darting through Bryn’s senses as she did... something back there. “You have beautiful neck muscles by the way.” Another pinch, then a vague sensation of pulling. “And an even cuter spine. I must be the luckiest affini this side of the galaxy.”

A vine slithered across Bryn’s extremely limited vision through the face rest and brought with it a mirror, completing an array that allowed them at last to see that Veratrix had already peeled open the back of their neck and held the amber egg aloft, haustoria inside already squirming at excitement at the sight of its new home. They felt nauseous.

“Are you ready, dear? Got the memories all sorted together? I hope the warmth of your final human heartbeat can stay with you for at least a few years, but truth be told I expect you’ll forget ever having been an unfortunate terran by the end of the week.” Through the reflections they saw her slice open the shell, and with sanitized tools pluck the home grown implant free. She held it delicately over their exposed nerves, and it \*squirmed\*. All of the little lets reaching, desperately, begging to attach, to fuse, to \*become\*.

The last vestiges of anger finally burned up from Bryn’s throat to shout, “FUCK YOU!” Their voice hoarse, desperate, stained wet with salty tears, and quickly breaking apart into defeated sorrow.

“You’ll beg me to forgive you for those words in five minutes.”

Veratrix placed the implant with loving care into Bryn's exposed neck, and with two hands and many vines mimicked the kinds of motions one would have for tucking a beloved pet into bed, except in place of blankets and pillows it was all nerves, meat, and tissue encompassing the pulsing form of the post-human's new spinal friend. To punctuate the mess, she finished by plucking the familiar flower from before and weaving it in as the stitching to the surgical wound.

A fresh wave of pins and needles washed across Bryn's body from the neck down, clarifying with each bit of flesh being pieced back together cell by cell, the same as they had felt it before but with a tangible touch of another's hand having formed the picture. The implant, then. Mediating between them and their own FUCKING skin. Only once the cascade finished downward did it then turn up, crawling disastrously up their neck and pouring into their skull. Wait, please. A haze formed. m frightful as it was sweet. Wait. The promised solace, permanent bliss, and they wanted to cry against it. How dare their skin buzz with warmth, how DARE their emotions break apart into whimpering joy and want. The chemical control wasn't just obvious, it was an overpowering scream over their own innate thoughts coming from inside their own damn skull.

Mistress released them at last. Bryn, in an act of primal terror, bolted off the side of the bed and attempted to run just to collapse. Still fucking up when they make their own choices. Blood, hot and wet, spilled down the back of their neck like a burning reminder of why. They rolled up into a ball and wept even as their skin continued to rise in warmth. Fire bloomed next through their veins, with all it's terribly hungry want sucking in the oxygen from their soul. They needed. They didn't know what but they NEEDED. Fear, sorrow, dread, one by one the pains inside of their skull were suffocated, turning their momentary weeping into strained pathetic sniffing, then confused whimpering, then at last the want won.

When Bryn looked up again their face was still streaked with lines of salt and fear still shone behind their eyes, but their voice was one of confused wordless begging that pulled them up to a seated position. A hand of wood and vines met them, and it's touch was enough to assuage every last drop of pain that lingered in them. But then it was gone, and they were once more left to burn in desire.

"What's wrong, little lost bird?" Veratrix' voice brimmed with pride. She stood to the side of the room, casually leaning against a counter despite the display before her.

Bryn struggled to remember how to string the words together for a moment. Brain synapses no doubt faulty from their control being seized from them. But they breathed, their lips twitched, and in a moment they spoke, "Please?"

Veratrix's smile broadened, even going so far as to split her mask apart just to show a humanoid mouth hidden beneath that grinned down at them. "I still haven't forgiven you yet."

Bryn wept once more, except this time it was in absence of their Mistress' light. Left to the fire they wailed and screamed, resistance burned to ashes, and then at last they begged, "Please! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I just, I'm- Mistress!"

The looming mass of plant matter slowly settled down to crouch upon her heels, elbows on knees and eyes still looming over her pet. "To the end I overestimated you. It hasn't even been two minutes yet." She mocked a disappointed sigh, leaning her head to the side as she did. "Oh well, we can consider it yet another reason you simply must be domesticated."

Veratrix placed her hand upon the pet's empty little head, and once more it was subsumed into a sea of comfort and calm. Bryn fell into the chemical bliss happily, and the adorable inhuman moaned in satisfaction as its Mistress rewarded it for doing so. The blood upon its back was cleaned, the wound bandaged, a collar fitted around their neck and a brand new dress cloaked their form. Countless vines adored her beloved pet so much that Veratrix would even suggest she was spoiling the little thing, if such a thing were possible. But within the middle of all that adoration, the pet simply felt-

Well let's be real Bryn felt SO FUCKING HIGH like holy balls what a fucking experience and like knowing that that high was going to literally stretch out forever because of it's :pleadyfaceemoji: hot plampt mistress :pleadyfaceemoji: uhg thats SO hot (I am immediately clubbed and dragged away for my crime of crashing the mood at the end of this story

No post-scripts for this one I ended up taking all of the ideas I had for that and rolling it into a different one-shot that I'll be finishing later nyehehehehehehehehe

## What If? - Swapvaricated

This one come about in the middle of a convo with anbl in which we passed back and forth what would happen if Katie and Bryn swapped places and I got so enamored with the concepts that I stole it and ran away with it and nobody can stop me

CW for everything that applied to Revaricated, but also with more whimsy and silliness and intentional riffs upon Divaricated content, as well as more cat girl content because nyaaaa nya nya nyaaa meooowwwwwwwwwww nyaaaaaaaa >:3 >:3 >:3

Katie heard a bang, from beyond the blast doors, and screamed.

"You'll never take me alive, you fucking weeds!" she screamed, and dived back for the console. No, she wasn't going out like this. She was going to make an impact. People were going to know her name. She'd practiced this a dozen times. She'd practiced this in her sleep, or at least her nightmares, knowing that she'd fought too hard to be who she really was, and to figure out what she wanted out of life, to spend the rest of it as an identical drone in an Affini water mine.

Her hands were a blur, snapping out to grab levers and twist dials, turning everything she could directly into the red zones on all the little readouts. On her first day, back at university, learning about the most advanced spatial science humankind thought to exist, they had opened the lecture with a long list of things that they should never, under any circumstances, do.

Well, she was doing them.

The mix of exotic matter they used as fuel was usually carefully balanced to avoid runaway effects. Water was a temperature moderator, and she didn't want that just now, so coolant flow was all the way down. She knocked everything out of balance and dialed in a destination at random. It wouldn't matter, the drive would tear space apart long before it actually tried to go anywhere. Nobody would be making it to the destination. In a handful of moments, she turned the Jump Drive at the heart of what had once been a symbol of hope into the biggest bomb she'd ever dared imagine.

Katie had all of one second to appreciate it before the drive hiccuped, and suddenly she vanished. Like a badly edited piece of filmography, Katie was standing there, and then in the next frame a particularly useless stoner was in her position instead.

Bryn was very confused, to say the least.

Suddenly surrounded by blaring lights, loud noises, and screaming metal in a scary leap of cosmic uncertainty that also had happened to sound like a saccharine pop to them, they defaulted to the only known panic reaction they knew. Bryn fished a blunt out of their pocket and lit it.

The alarm problem seemed to solve itself as a moment later they all shut down, bit metal bulkheads all slid up on their own accord, and a moment later a mess of vines and other greenery shot into the room in what Bryn vaguely assumed was one of those affini things they kept being told about. All five stages of grief played themselves out in Bryn's head in rapid order, all punctuated by various forms of rebel propaganda they'd been fed over the years, and then afterwards they crashed into numb acceptance via taking another long drag off their line and doing basically nothing as the plant crashed into them.

What followed was just pure overstimulation to an already overwhelmed and kind of intoxicated terran like Bryn, so they defaulted to just letting whatever happens happen, and as such experienced a brief blur of color and noise and constricting sensations across their body before they realized that some of the noise was a rather musical voice and that rather musical voice seemed to be talking to them specifically. "Little one, do you know what you have done? Can you shut that machine down?"

"Ma'am, I don't even know where I am." Bryn responded automatically. The big plant seemed to pause at that, then looked over her now captive terran. Lazy day sweater, loose pajamas,

cat-themed slippers, and still taking a drag of some space weed even in the middle of a life threatening situation.

The plant furrowed herself into a knot. "What... are you doing here?"

Bryn shrugged.

"Fine, fine, I'll take care of this." The affini gave the terran a comforting pat on the head and turned to fiddle with all the knobs and dials and whatever else those things on the panel were called. Honestly Bryn appreciated her willingness to actually do something here, she seemed competent enough to know how to handle uh... teleportation?

Bryn hummed in thought. Maybe they time traveled? That'd be cool. If they lived. They tried not to think about whether or not all those flashy lights were like, dangerous or not.

Wait, weren't the affini dangerous? Bryn was probably too stoned to figure that one out at the moment. Something about destroying human dignity or whatever. Uhg. They'd figure that out in a minute, she was clearly busy- oh nevermind she just said some COLORFUL curse words and scooped Bryn up into her arms. Vines? Arm equivalents. This was nice too. They were kinda baked so taking a nap felt like a good idea. "Take a deep breath, dear, I'll get you out of this safely."

Oh fuck yes the situation was working itself out. Bryn did as they were told and took a big whiff of... well apparently it was some pretty flowers next to their face, and promptly slipped into a comfy little nap cradled safe inside an affini's vines.

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Katie heard a saccharine pop and then was plunged into darkness on all sides.

Yeah no fuck that. She immediately kicked and shoved through the mass of unaffiliated matter until she scrambled out, hit a far wall, and then blindly paced around to find a light switch. What greeted her was a discomfoting sight. She was only a moment ago buried underneath an apparently dead affini.

Oh also she was in a completely different room.

This room wasn't about to explode or, to her knowledge, be overrun by affini, so technically that was an upgrade? Things could be worse.

Exactly three and a half hours later Katie reconsidered that thought. The wreckage she was upon had clearly suffered some kind of catastrophic drive failure that not only rocketed it through space but sheared the entire back half of the ship off entirely along the way. It almost felt like some kind of cosmic comeuppance for twisting a jump drive like she had. How rude.

Katie sighed and ran her hands through her hair. Okay. This was still an improvement, technically. She could get out of this and avoid being sent to The Mines if she just... made a communication ansible and contacted the rebels? That shouldn't be hard. She was one of the best damn drive engineers out there, she should be able to put together a little hunk of long wave comms.

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Thatch looked down at the nervous wreck apparently called Bryn still clinging to her vine. Since returning to the Elettarium with the human in tow they had not once allowed her a moment to actually release them into the care of another far more competent and qualified individual to handle their needs. Probably even a nice affini who would domesticate them as soon as possible, as this terran seemed ontologically doomed to be a danger to themselves.

Thatch didn't know how they managed to be so cosmically incapable of normal function. She made them a sandwich, and in between looking away and looking back it became a burnt mess with three bites taken out of it in that order. Bryn touched a computer and it cried, then later a book fell apart in their hands. It was absurd. She quickly ended up stuck doing basically everything for them as leaving Bryn to their own devices was clearly dangerous and, again, they refused to be surrendered to another affini.

That was another problem. While the short experience of, according to Bryn, 'being teleported to a bright scary room', had worked wonderfully to break past their initial fear of the 'big scary plant people' it did nothing to break past their erroneous preconceptions such as 'the drugs melt brain matter', or 'the plants want to eat terrans', or any number of other absurd images that painted the plants in a nefarious light. At least they didn't seem to actually internalize any of those beliefs, they just... weren't too bright and didn't question them beyond a surface level until presented with countering evidence. But still, when another affini was near, Bryn went right back to clinging tightly to the known safety value in a wildly strange and new environment and positively refused to be parted with her.

Thatch sighed. This was going to send the wrong kind of message, she knew it.

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Katie sat in a growing pool of partially disassembled electronics. The parts she needed existed, she was sure of it, but finding them was proving to be a more difficult task than she liked. At the very least she had quickly found an array of vending machines carrying long-term viable food sources that she could crack them open and get at, and in her explorations later located an AutoDoc that seemed to have a robust enough pharmacological array to be able to manage her hrt through this crisis. All in all, that was absurd luck.

So why couldn't she find a working carrier? Every machine she had found that was supposed to be capable of communicating longer than a 4 meter brinetooth range she had torn apart, and in place of the delicate blue spindle she was supposed to find inside there was only dust. Often a bright green dust as the entire board inside had been reduced to a fine powder. On a frustrated whim she even took to ripping open panels and boards and found them in a similar condition, green sand glittering in the dim lights like a fucking taunt to her whims to get out alive and not as some kind of slave workforce in The Mines.

Katie slammed the panel shut and kicked it in frustration. Fuck! At this rate she would have to try tearing apart the AutoDoc. She had a vague hope that it was the kind of horrific machine designed to always communicate to its corporate overlords for "security purposes", and thus would have the carrier she needed still glistening inside of its shell.

Or maybe it wouldn't, and she was contemplating junking a life-saving piece of tech for literally no gain.

Think, Katie, think. There had to be an answer here.

Her contemplations were cut short by the tiny sound of tiny feet tapping against plastic. Katie whipped her head around to see through the dim light in the distance, something that looked rather like a hedgehog perched atop the empty shell of a discarded radio box.

Katie blinked.

A hedgehog?

Made of plants.

She bolted for the firearms.

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"They are not my pet," Thatch whined. She had had this conversation for what felt like a hundred times now. She just wanted to get back to work, make something productive of herself, feel less like a failure, and not just... just... she glanced over her shoulder to ensure nothing was on fire. Good.

Zona was no less willing to take a stab at Thatch's cost despite the protest. "You could really use a pet."

"It might help with that depressive funk you've been in." Xylem was quick to capitalize on the opening.

“They’re not even my ward,” Thatch protested. “They’re free to leave anytime they want, they just...”

“Enjoy the comfort and safety you bring?” Xylem asked.

Thatch deflated. Every affini she had discussed the matter had had the same tack for it. Bryn was, only technically by virtue of being a ‘chronospatially displaced individual’, an independent sophont and thus was free to make any choices they wished within a safe reason. They chose to remain within Thatch’s reach at all times, always tugging on her vine and looking up at her with those big eyes and asking for another dose of ‘space weed’ so they could relax on her couch with an oversized stuffed beeples model and play videogames all day. They chose it. That was reason enough for the affini to say that they were clearly floret material, clearly infatuated with her, and simply too out of touch with affini social standards to quite grasp what it all meant beyond the immediate experience.

Worse still, she had lately caught herself thinking about enlightening the poor thing about what beats of the song they were still missing. That would simply not do. She didn’t want to risk another, well, that was an absurd worry anyway they would never come to that point to begin with.

“Miss Aquae?” Bryn’s voice pulled Thatch out of her idle thoughts. She turned to face the smaller terran, immediately thought not fully aware that in the process she switched to a lighter more jovial tone of voice and animated body language in reaction to the adorable if useless thing.

Bryn nervously played with their hands held together before them. “The, uh, oven? I think something is broken with it?” On cue, a loud BOOM! emanated from her hab. Ah, the martian model then. A myth somehow not false enough to resist being conjured by her terran’s farcical clumsiness.

Thatch gave her little terran a series of pats on the head that thoroughly dispelled their anxieties, dosed them with some more of the ‘space weed’ they seemed so fond of, and left to go solve one more of the strange new problems Bryn was so capable of conjuring. Never a dull moment.

She also pointedly did NOT look back at Xylem and Zona’s grinning faces as she left.

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Katie felt thick beads of sweat rolling down the back of her neck. Slung over one shoulder was the cobbled-together flamethrower of her own making, paired with a repeating rifle she had pried out of a safety locker with the help of the crowbar held in her hand. She was prepared. She was safe. She also was inspired. In all of her fiddling the carrier problem remained the most troubling, and it was only in the middle of one of her many eat-and-walk sessions around the

ship that she realized something rather important. The vending machine that made burgers put them together... well, not fresh, but hot. Ergo it had a means to bring them to an edible state built in. Ergo it was not just magically full of warm burgers, but also that it's innards were more complex than the other simpler machines that accompanied it.

She had immediately run over and tore it open, ripped it apart, and found that it had no carrier built into it to regularly send maintenance updates to corporate overlords. Just a small digital log to keep track of orders. Okay so that bit of inspiration wasn't the helpful but she DID know how burger vending machines worked on the inside now, and that was neat. And in the process of shaking her head at how ridiculously desperate she was becoming she had then had an actual helpful bit of inspiration.

Tapping her head against the wall she had been standing underneath one of the many air vents in the ship. Fresh, cold air flowed out of the metal grate and spilled over her head in a wave of chilling comfort that reminded her that, for now, life support still worked. That was when she recalled that life support was composed nearly as much of redundancies as it was of functional parts. That meant life support not only relied on copper wire communication, but wireless communication that was meant to be accessible anywhere within the ship and also outside the ship by one who would have the proper access codes. And THAT meant it had long distance communication arrays that would have a carrier in them.

She had then stuffed the rest of the burger into her mouth hole and blitzed towards the life support levels, stopping only once a stomach cramp hit her for daring to act so fast after eating and making her sit down and sip her water at a leisurely pace for a bit instead until she calmed down. Then back to sprinting.

Katie had to break a few doors to gain access to the inner layers of life support systems, but if a remaining military body wanted to come down and court martial her about it well they'd have to rescue her in the process anyway. Within was a sprawling mess of barely habitable metal wire paths sandwiched between thick painted metal pipes and wires strewn about the walls and ceilings. Box vent tubes snaked through the ceiling above her, splitting and branching like capillaries off the vein to feed the ship with tasty, breathable air. Perfect.

Katie Sahas followed the air vent deeper into the web, noting with satisfaction that the mess of metal surrounding her on all sides only grew denser with each step. Before long she was at her destination, a massive machine of churning metal and screaming noise. Excitement caught her step first as she leapt astride its walkways and ran towards the top, hoping to find the array above.

Instead, she found the plant. Perched atop the remains of the array that it had already torn apart and gutted, then warped into something akin to a metal throne that it now reclined upon while twiddling a glittering blue spingle between its false fingers. "I was wondering how long it would take you to get here," its voice, no, her voice, was a simmering heat of warm water boiling above a volcano's caldera.

She knew that the plant had been growing over time. It raided the food storage, bathed itself in nutritional slurry, and drained water from storage in great volume. She had seen it, in the corner of her vision and ever just out of reach, grow from a simple hedgehog to a looming hound, then a bear, then vanish entirely from her sight. Now it was back, leaves green and wood glowing in the low lights, its face a mask of bestial design with skeletal threat carved into it, a mouth hidden beneath bone jaws baring razor fangs under leafen lips. Through the gaps of the skull she saw its eyes staring at her, three in each socket and wide open to focus solely on her.

Katie gulped, but nonetheless unholstered the rifle on her shoulder and squared it at the plant's center of mass. "Give me the carrier." She tried to force some authority into her voice. She didn't have a choice.

"Going to bullets so soon?" she teased. "Aren't you afraid you might hit this and damn yourself too?"

Katie didn't answer, but the shake in her body was enough of one already.

The affini's grin widened unnaturally. "I'd like to offer you a deal. You need this carrier to finish your array, I need your array to make use of this carrier. Surrender it to me and..." Her voice trailed off, but her smile did not. All six eyes squinted in barely hidden excitement.

Katie flicked the safety on her rifle. "And what? You'll call down more of your plants on me and drag me off in chains?"

"I wouldn't dream of denying myself the pleasure of dragging you down myself, little kitten. No, surrender peacefully to me now and I'll promise the pain I'll soon make you feel will only be the most blissfully sublime as I tear your will apart."

The weight of her words were followed by an aura of supreme confidence on the plants part, then wicked excitement brimming beneath the surface. She wanted her to say no, Katie realized. She *wanted* Katie to fight back.

Fear moved Katie's hand faster than her mind, and she fired. She wasn't a true soldier, not even a well trained riflewoman. She fired blind and wide and missed every bullet, sending them in a ricocheting spread that danced around the plant now charging directly at her with claws out. All too soon the gun clicked empty, and all memory of the magazines on her hip were lost in favor of throwing it at the monster and diving to the side.

The beast collapsed around where she was just standing, vines whipping out blindly to grasp her ankle. Katie retaliated with a knife at her side, stabbing into it to get a satisfying yelp from the monster before pulling it out and swinging wildly at its mass. That gave her enough time to grab for the flamethrower on her back, but once more her hope was squelched as the plant surged forward into her.

"I'm so glad you're actually a fighter, little kitten." The affini purred as her vines spilled over Katie's upper torso. Tight knots wrapped around her neck, bound her arms to her side, forced her head into a locked neutral position. She felt thorns squirming against her skin. Katie kicked desperately at the mass of weeds on top of her, but all she got from that was to have her ankles wrapped up once more. "I much prefer when my pet tries ever so desperately to resist me, fighting tooth and claw every step of the way until finally the unbending tree doesn't just break," The noose of vines around Katie's neck tightened into a restrictive mass that threatened to crush the very air from her body. "They \*shatter\*."

The affini's voice broke into a laugh, low and slow momentarily then rising with rhythm into a roaring cackle above her. Katie struggled against the dimming sensation of her brain out of sheer spite. Her neck hurt, thorns digging in. Something in particular was dragging across the back of her neck that shuddered with a vicious, but focusing fire. Her hands, free despite her arm's restriction, grasped blindly at her side. She needed something. Anything.

The something she found was the butt of her homemade flamethrower laying at her side. With the last of her dimming strength Katie brought it against her, twisted it over her hip, and blindly fired above. She was rewarded with the cackling laugh turned into a blind howl and all the vines upon her body whipping away from her. The affini, now inflamed, launched herself away from the terran with great speed before darting off into the tunnels, leaving only her howl slowly twisting into another laugh as it echoed through the paths.

Katie collapsed onto the floor.

This... was bad.

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Thatch Aquae was fucking tired of it all. She felt like a failure, and she similarly felt that it was entirely justified. She shouldn't be out here, she shouldn't be a danger to any of the other sophonts, and she most certainly shouldn't be around that horrifically clumsy terran since she would no doubt break them too. The exact circumstances of her departure were nondescript. A failure when handling the new machine species they had tripped over on some remote planet. A mild mistake, really. But one that echoed within the confines of her mind nonstop until it collided with all of her other traumas and shattered her confidence in short order.

So she was on her personal ship, leaving the Elattarium as far behind her as possible. She'd head towards the core worlds. That'd be safest, she was sure.

Unfortunately fate didn't seem to agree with her plan to mope across the galaxy as only halfway there did she hear a sleepy groan come out of her luggage bag. The zipper moved by the hand of her uninvited passenger, and lo and behold there was Bryn poking their head out.

“Bryn what in all stardust are you doing here?” Thatch gasped. She didn’t even have the energy to be sad anymore, just confused.

Bryn blinked slowly, looking left to right as they took in the sights. “Um.. I was tired, and wanted to sleep somewhere quiet and comfy, so I crawled into this spot and took a nap?” Oh, wonderful, the terran just somehow tagged along for a ride. This was ridiculous but also unfortunately entirely on brand for them. Thatch was glad they never seemed to be in a position to wield a firearm as they would most definitely shoot themselves with it before even managing to aim it at its intended target. That was just the ‘vibe’, as Bryn put it, that they put out.

Thatch groaned. Very well. She turned her ship around and headed straight back to the Elattarium. At least Bryn was willing to listen to her idly talk about bioengineering the entire trip back, even if they didn’t understand. Enthusiastic listening counted well enough.

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Katie was running at full speed. Ever since their previous encounter she and the plant had entered a state of open warfare with each other. Every moment the air filled with their sharp words snapping back and forth, every footstep was one chasing the other through the dark halls. The little box strapped to Katie’s hip ensured that she had the plant’s sole attention, while the blue spindle hidden within the plant’s body similarly guaranteed Katie’s.

“If you’re feeling tired already you can simply lay down and I’ll come retrieve you.” The plant’s voice taunted her from afar. “It’d be quite easy for me to let you rest all the way to your new home.”

Katie didn’t want to admit that the plant’s constant taunting had started to gnaw under her skin. She wasn’t a pet, and she refused to let herself just become a victim to this terror, but the longer this fight drew on the harder it was getting for her to ignore that the ache in her body was only growing. “What’s wrong? Not able to handle one ‘little kitten’ by yourself?” She spat back with forced bravado. Deeper ahead she heard the telltale audio shimmer of vines to mark her prey’s distance, and charged on.

“I only worry that you might hurt yourself with that toy should you actually fire it again, dear pet to be.” Her voice just twisted with cruel delight at Katie’s cost. “Wouldn’t you rather rest comfortably by my side? I can have one of those doggy beds your kind have made scaled up, just so you can curl up and dream beautiful little dreams of me.”

“I’ll pass,” Katie grits out the words between clenched teeth. There was an itch in the back of her skull at those words. Half a thought, barely an idea, but still an almost tangible sensation of simulated fur stretched over cushions that she could drift off upon. She shook her head. The plant was getting to her.

"I can hear the uncertainty blooming within you." The affini's voice still echoed, growing distant once more. Katie rushed down the hall and skidded on her heels to turn after it. "In the little gaps between your words, in the breath you draw when you bite your lip, in the dreams you have at night. You're already preparing yourself to call me Mistress, it's only a matter of time." More of that itch blooming up her neck. Katie gripped at the bandages she had haphazardly strung up over the wounds her thorns had left upon her.

Katie spoke up again, but even she felt the hollowness beginning to win out in them. "I'll never surrender to you." She saw the silhouette of the plant ahead, placed just through the dark doorway. She was smiling again, jaws wide and teeth dripping with venom. She mouthed the word 'good', and stepped back into the shadows.

Katie screamed as she charged in, leveled her flamethrower, and fired blindly into the room beyond. Her vision erupted into a sea of fire on all sides, consuming the random detritus before her into a wall of suffocating smoke, and only after the heat of her weapon burned her palms did she release the trigger to scream in pain. She fell back on her ass, flamethrower clattering to her side, wincing as she pressed her palm against her body and stared into the fire before her.

There was no affini in the room she just torched.

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Thatch felt a touch embarrassed to be back on the Elattarium so soon. Everyone was happy to see her, obviously. But when Bryn followed her out of the ship all of the welcome home smiles immediately turned into shocked gasps, then confounding cheers. "You couldn't resist taking them as your floret after all, huh?" Ined teased.

Thatch just groaned. Already a misunderstanding. "They're not—"

"Congratulations!" one Prickle Sparot cut her off enthusiastically and took to showering headpats upon her flo- ahem, her war- no, not that either, uh, her hanger-on currently gripping her vine tightly and still standing at her side. Even one of the new robots they found, cece, drifted over to wave its little grippers around and shout good words with its synthetic voice and- oh no someone put googly eyes on its shell.

Bryn gasped in delight and practically tackled the 'adorable beeperooni' in excitement, which elicited an ear-rending whirl of delight from the machine in the process. She wasn't about to get cece out of Bryn's attention range now, she just knew it. "So, I'm a floret now?" That useless terran was looking up at her with that nervous tilt and hopeful look in their eyes again. How did everything spiral out of control so fast?

"Well—" Thatch got exactly one word in before Prickle's floret ran over and gave Bryn a congratulatory hug, which her stoned pet- no, terran, no not even hers stars damn it all. "I didn't—"

“So uh... what exactly does that mean?” Bryn’s voice was quiet amidst the growing din of attention the whole lot was gathering, but unlike for Thatch all of the affini stopped to listen.

Prickle answered before Thatch could, “Well, it means you belong to Thatch now and she’ll take care of all of your needs and love you a whole lot but also in like a queer kinky kind of way.”

Bryn blinked. “So... wasn’t I basically already her floret?”

Thatch’s ‘no’ was overwhelmed by everyone else’s “Yeah, basically.” Damnit, damnit damnit damnit this was just too awkward for Thatch to handle. Now Bryn was giving her a big smiling look again and oh stars damn it all this was going to be SUCH a pain to explain later.

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Thick fog rolled through the halls of the abandoned ship, surrounding Katie on all sides. Earlier the damned weed had attempted to flood the halls with a cloying pink mist, and in an attempt to purge it out Katie stuffed a wet rag over her mouth, ran into the underbelly of the ship, and rerouted a spray of water into the atomizing air stream of the ventilation system. A terrible idea for long term good inside the wreck, but it was either that or suffer the more immediate death of being rendered down into a nameless drone working in The Mines, and Katie wasn’t willing to lose all the progress she had taken to make herself so far.

In terms of good fortune though it did finally allow her to figure out a means to corner the plant that was perpetually just out of arm’s reach for her. The touch of sabotage seemed to have been sufficient to lock Veratrix into the same walkways that Katie was bound to, and then some fiddling with the doors allowed her to lay a dead end for the plant to land in. One of the storage rooms, way off to the side, where the wide open space would offer her no room to hide and nowhere but the door Katie and her flamethrower would stand within.

“Feeling brave at last, little kitten?” That damn voice still echoed through the halls, always just around the bend. Katie gripped her weapon tighter and chased her around the bend. As expected, all she saw was the retreating shadow of vines in the distance. “You and I both know that you have no idea how to undo the damage you’ve just done to the ventilation system. You’ve purged my poison and doomed yourself. Surrender, and I can still save you from choking on your own foolishness.”

Katie grimaced. “Always ‘surrender’ with you plants. Too afraid to admit you can’t take me in a fight?”

A low chuckle was her answer. “Do not be mistaken, I offer so you can deny me, so I can remind myself of your fighting spirit as I prepare to extinguish it for good. Every rebuttal only sweetens your fate further, \*kitten\*, and I must admit my hunger is finally outgrowing my patience.”

She shivered, but pressed on anyway. Always the shadow just out of reach. She knew this path though, knew only a few more steps would lock the affini in her trap. Further rebuttals struggled to fall off her tongue, turning only into further tension along her jaw and neck. Instead she shouted once more, choosing foolhardy courage as she kicked down the door, saw the silhouette of the plant perched right before her, and pulled the trigger screaming insensate into the horror.

Nothing happened.

Katie looked down at her flamethrower. The pilot light had flicked out in the fog. She scrambled to grab the lighter in her pocket to restart it, but the affini uttered the single word, "Stop." At once the itch that had been growing along the back of her neck bloomed into a friction burn that ignited into a fresh wave of heat rolling across the inside of her body.

All of her muscles locked up in response. Only her jaw and her eyes still listened to her, and even then it was just to twitch futilely in response to her brain's screams to keep moving. Breath stuttered into a strained gasp, but as the heat in her chest intensified it evened out into a calm, even pull of air in what felt like active defiance to her blooming panic.

"Put down that toy." The affini commanded in a cold tone, and Katie's body obeyed. Her hand limply dropped to the side and let the flamethrower fall down between her numbing fingers. "Stand up straight." Her back straightened out, legs rising to a neutral pose. "Arms out." Her arms rose to her side, leaving her fully exposed to the plant's whims.

Katie wanted to scream. She wanted to flail and run. She wanted anything but this nightmarish moment of being stuck within her own body.

Veratrix chuckled once more as she closed in around the paralyzed terran. "Oh dear, oh dear, all that struggle and no body to express it with. How \*dreadful\*," The last word rolled off her many leafy tongues with a shivering sense of satisfaction. "As fun as our game has been, your time is up. The little gift I implanted into the back of your neck in our first little fight has finally grown large enough to control you, as such you've crossed the line from 'doomed' to 'actively defeated'. Your body is mine, and your mind shall soon follow."

Katie tried to scream but only managed a small twitch on the lips.

"Now, speak your mind before I shatter you."

The lock on her muscles finally released, and the words were thrust out of Katie's chest. "I don't want this." The words rose unbidden.

"And I don't care. Now, kitten, do you know how cats talk?" All six eyes were focused on hers, wide open with gleeful delight.

Katie's mind tried to spit, her body however just mewled pathetically in response.

"Good kitten," Veratrix gave her a little scritch on the top of her head. "If you want to talk, it will be like that and that only until I say otherwise. Meow if you understand."

Katie's body mewled a second time. Fuck. She wasn't even allowed to succumb to blind panic to escape this, the heat was too busy broiling through the back of her skull and spilling into her brain- her brain! She'd been infected this whole damn time and now this plant was hollowing her out from within and she couldn't DO anything about- another ruffle of vines through her hair scattered that thought with a wave of intense magma roiling across her skin.

With only a small shift in pressure Veratrix pushed the pliant-to-her body down to her knees, then bent Katie's flesh forward until she rested upon her elbows. From her position Katie could see another vine slither down and loop around the near-finished communicator on her hip, unclip it, and pointedly drag it across her vision and into Veratrix's hands. With just a little 'click' Veratrix slotted the spindle into place, flicked a switch, and nary a moment Katie felt the all too familiar sensation of a hypermetric kick in her lungs as an affini vessel dropped in on their location.

At that point Katie didn't even have the will to try to scream against her prison of flesh.

The vines continued working at her body, binding her wrists up near her shoulders and her ankles to her hips, locking her to crawl on elbows and knees. Merciful vines wrapped around her joints to pad them out, at least. Though the mercy was short lived as another one then curled around her neck and tightened into a near-choking collar to leash her to Veratrix's side. "Come along, little kitten."

She couldn't be serious. Katie couldn't-

"And I do mean to have you crawl. I know you'll fail to do so, and you will fall, and I am going to relish watching you squirm every time, knowing each step along the way that your failure only serves to grant you a short moment of reprieve before I bring you to your inevitable fate as a pet under my heel."

She was serious. Katie mewled weakly as her body obeyed despite her thrashing mind's attempt to escape.

—

Thatch didn't have the anatomy to acquire what humans termed a 'headache', but she was feeling something similar enough that she nearly wanted to reconsider it. "I'm serious," She said for what felt like the twentieth time. "Bryn, dear, I really can't take you as my pet. I'm sorry, but..."

Bryn was seated upon a recently-compiled and wonderfully comfortable chair, and in Bryn's lap was perched the darling cece that they refused to be parted with. cece didn't seem to mind, and in fact was rather enjoying discussing matters of its spaceship scale girlfriend up until Thatch asked to discuss an 'important matter'. Which was to say, the fact that she absolutely positively could not possibly take this adorable mess as her floret.

"I'm really not the right affini for this."

"Because of your kinks?"

Thatch sighed. It was a succinct enough recitation, she supposed. "But also the matters with my previous floret."

"So, kinks and trauma?" Bryn asked innocently.

Again, succinct enough she guessed. It was either that or spend about five chapters going over the problems in fine detail, and frankly if someone wanted to do that they should go reread Divaricated instead it's very good.

"Bryn, I've been trying to explain. So far I have been caring for you but our relationship has not been one of a floret and owner. If you were my floret I would pick you apart to the smallest pieces to study you and put you back together to fit my whims."

"I think I've read a kink fic like that." Bryn answered completely unperturbed. "Other florets linked me to this fic site-"

"Bryn, I could break you! I might even want to! You could end up another mindless nothing and it would all be my fault!"

Bryn gave another languid blink as they mulled that over, then shrugged. "Okay."

"...okay?"

"Well I mean like I would have been scared of that kind of talk but like I used to have a lot of erroneous preconceptions that you helped with me and you're like, super smart and pretty, so...? Yeah." Bryn shrugged.

Thatch facepalmed. "And what of your body!? I could tear it apart if I wanted! Replace all of your flesh with machinery of my design!"

"Hot."

"I'll enjoy doing so in a highly erotic and emotionally cathartic and queer fashion????"

“Gay.”

Thatch huffed and rose to her full height. “Gah!” She shouted. “You dim-witted fool, I’m trying to warn you that if you stay with me I’ll turn you into a hot robot cat girl drone as an expression of both me and the author confronting matters of trauma, identity, sexuality, gender, and kink through the medium of extremely well written erotica!”

Bryn just shot her a lazy thumbs up in response.

“FINE!” Thatch shouted. “Fine! I’ll go file the paperwork and once I’m back you!” She pointed to Bryn, “\*Are mine.\*”

She turned and left as Bryn cheered and cece made little clapping noises.

—

Only once Katie had crawled humiliating across the length of a spaceship and clambered atop an absurdly elaborate supervillain torture chair did Veratrix allow her the ability to move her own body again. Of course it didn’t matter at that point as the affini had strapped her into restraints tight enough to ensure she wasn’t actually capable of meaningful movement, just entertaining struggles. Even her voice still failed to obey her, locked into whimpering meows as the order had yet to be lifted.

Not that either of those facts stopped Katie from attempting to flail and scream until exhaustion beat her to the chase. Veratrix meanwhile was positively ecstatic, practically twirling like a ballerina around the lab and brimming with her horrid song as she prepared for... whatever was about to happen. Finally she was satisfied, and practically leapt to land before Katie with that fucking menacing grin of hers.

“Dear, sweet, precious little kitten, it’s time that I vivisect your cute little mind and get to piecing you back together without all that...” She made a circulatory gesture towards Katie’s head. “Detritus clogging up your skull. All that space would be put to so much better use with unmitigated devotion to me, wouldn’t it? Oh, you can talk like people now, by the way. I know it may be hard since you’re not one, but, you can pretend for a few last minutes, can’t you?”

Thus released Katie finally was able to turn her into action and shout, “HELP!” Veratrix’s cruel smile didn’t falter. If anything, it broadened. Katie shouted again and again but nobody came to help her, and in only moments her voice was hoarse with effort.

“Aww, dear, sweet kitten,” Veratrix lowered herself to Katie’s height. “Nobody is going to help you now. Why would they? What I’m doing to you not only has the full support of my peers but their eager attention. Every life that brims aboard this vessel is anticipating your final defeat, positively wet at the lips for the moment I drag you out beaten, broken, and an utter failure of an

independent soul. If anyone were to come here, they would not save you..." She leaned into Katie's ear sharply, voice twisting into a wretched whisper, "They would cheer me on."

Katie's voice broke apart into a pained wail, then shameful sobbing. Her body couldn't escape, her mind was compromised, her hopes shattered. What else was there to call this but the fullest defeat one terran could possibly suffer at the hand of these FUCKING weeds?

Veratrix's laugh filled the air once more as she kicked a dramatic leg out to her side, swept into a twirling curve that landed her next to a large heavy switch and rested her hand atop it- wait hold on. Katie shook the tears out of her eyes. That switch was literally the emblematic type of big heavy metal switch she'd see on cartoons. She looked around the room again. This whole place had supervillain energy yes but it was cartoon supervillain energy. The kind of absurd scientific nonsense that had knobs and dials and those pointy metal bits that had electricity arcing between them that couldn't possibly be doing anything useful.

Veratrix mock cleared her throat, whipped back her head into a victorious and dramatic pose that Katie now realizes was literally the kind of thing she saw on tv, and said "Goodbye, dear sweet Katie Sahas, I do look forward to crafting you into my perfect-"

"Is this a kink thing?" Katie interrupted.

Veratrix blinked, her posture immediately flattening out into something more neutral. She glanced awkwardly to the side, then back to the lever, then down to Katie. "Uh... yes?" Her voice sounded different without the haughty air Vera had been layering over it before. "Obviously? I think the whole supervillain angle is like, super hot."

Katie stared at her blankly.

Veratrix stared back at her blankly.

"Have you been getting off \*this whole time\*!?"

"Yeap!" Veratrix beamed. "This has been the most exciting week or so of my life, sweet kitten! I really must thank you, and I will be sure to do so after this as I've already penned in a good few days of nothing but aftercare, cuddling, and snacks for both of us. It'll be quite sweet."

Katie awkwardly shifted in place within her bonds. "So... you're just playing at brainwashing me and not \*actually\* going to do it, right?"

"No ♥." Veratrix pulled the lever, and Katie's mind was swiftly overwhelmed with brilliant light.

—

In hindsight Thatch was rather loathe to admit that all of her peers who kept pressuring her to get a floret might have had a point. There really wasn't anything that cleared her head quite like having a good project to focus on, and her specialties were *\*very\** well fit for her latest work. The process of designing a remote control medium that she could operate purely off of integrated systems into her vine works was a challenge she overcame with simple ease and only some mild distractions for giving Bryn tummy rubs. The challenge of how to make a haustoric implant not only integrate into the spine but extend from it, joining with a tail augment also of her design to become a seamless extremity was just as difficult, and therefore easy. The pride she felt for both of them? Wonderful.

That same pride continued to resonate within her as she operated the needle through the delicate folds of Bryn's muscles and pierce into her spine. A process horrifically dangerous for an unprepared terran, now rendered something as simple as a mild checkup for her dear pet. The synaptic feedback between the control node, the metal mask covering Bryn's face and mediating their every sensation through her whims, was just a touch too slow for her standards and had to be fixed.

That said process of fixing the error meant her pet was twitching and squirming in her lap, mewling every so sweetly in pathetic overwhelming want, was a nice bonus.

She twisted a coil, pulled it taut, and smoothed it back into the delicate weave of her pet's spine. The error in synaptic timing vanished. Perfect. Next was a matter of aesthetics. She'd already primed dear Bryn's skull for the augments she prepared, so she could avoid any nasty cutting in this moment in favor of untwining the nets of flowers that wrapped around the sides of Bryn's head, and slotting the twin pieces that gave them the appearance of twin mechanical cat ears instead. They even flashed pink lights whenever Bryn was happy!

Thatch brimmed with another wave of pride as she flipped on the additions to Bryn's head, and was rewarded with pink lights signifying the overwhelming joy her pet was currently wrapped up in as they squirmed in the palm of her hand. Simply wonderful.

—

katie fiddled with the hem of her skirt. She was in something that looked like it was, at one point, a french maid uniform turned supervillain themed hench outfit turned kinkwear with D-rings hanging off her waist, thighs, and arms. She knew in objective terms that if she was wearing this thing before having been helped by her loving Mistress she would have been embarrassed or possibly even angry about it, but that fact felt as hollow and meaningless in her mind as any of her previous beliefs in the terran accord did.

Though the outfit still did feel a bit extra when taken with the fact that she had similarly been adjusted, augmented, cut apart, and remade into a robot cat girl drone. Apparently that specific aesthetic was in vogue after the publication of a story called *Divaricated* written by a particularly wonderful and cute and lovely cat. Veratrix however insisted it was important for villainous

lackeys to have some kind of aesthetic resonance with their owner, and what better symbol of servitude than a kink maid uniform?

Veratrix smashed through the front door, twirled around to perch atop a table, and flourished into an overly dramatic pose that she was so fond of. “kitten!” She shouted imperiously. “I have concocted another nefarious plot!”

“Is it to cuddle on the couch, order pizza, and watch some low quality romcoms together again, Mistress?”

“It is to cuddle on the couch, order pizza, and watch some low quality romcoms together again!” She shouted triumphantly before breaking into another of her wicked villainous laughs that echoed across the many winding paths of their home. Once she calmed down she leaned over and added in a quieter tone as she got to petting katie between her cute cat ears and scratching under her chin, and act that katie naturally mewled and leaned into the touch of as her brain was doused in a fresh wave of tasty neurochemicals from nice touch. “By the way dear, I looked into that whole, teleporting thing you claimed was the reason you were on the wreckage because of in the first place.”

katie’s response was less words and more sweet nyaas and meowwwssss from all the cuddling attention she was getting.

“Apparently there was a noted chronospatial error caused by your nasty little tampering, causing you to swap places with another particularly useless little individual. Fortunately they were rescued by their now owner and are also very very beloved as a wonderful pet. I’ve seen the pictures, they’re adorable, I’m thinking of scheduling a playdate for you and them by the way.” Satisfaction brimmed over Veratrix’s voice as she spoke, but it trailed off into uncertainty as her thought trailed off into silence, then after a beat she added, “I do hope nobody else got caught in that disruption, though.”

—

Far across the gap of space Solanum was sitting in her own home, head in hand, utterly baffled about what to do in this situation. “So you said your name is...?”

“Baaa.”

“Snuggly, yes, and... dear, where did Autumn go?”

The chimera perched upon Solanum’s bed just shrugged in response, then proceeded to scamper over and knock a glass of water off of her nightstand.

Right.

This was going to be a hassle to sort out.