

Final

Author's Note: This is an unofficial sequel to the series of canon TiTS novellas penned by Savin and Fenoxo ([read here](#)). I highly recommend that you read those first, otherwise the plot/tone of this story won't work as intended since I wrote it with the assumption that the reader is coming straight off the tail end of *Downtime*. The ideal read-order is as follows:

1. [*Talon Rogue*](#)
2. [*The Gene Stealer*](#)
3. [*The Treatment*](#) (optional)
4. [*Downtime*](#)
5. *Rain on Tavros*

Synopsis: Several months after that short-lived reunion with her childhood friend, Kaede is forced to confront her inner demons after a cargo run nearly blows up in her face. Definitely a slight departure from the usual tone of TiTS, this is more of an angsty drama/romance fic than a smut one.

Tags: TiTS, Kaede/Anno, TF/F, Plot with Porn, Gentle Femdom, French Kissing, Petplay, Handjob, Cunnilingus, Toys, P-in-V Sex, Angst, Hurt/Comfort, (Literal) Fluff, Love, Romantic Sex

Warnings: Mild Alcoholism, Mild Gore, Depictions of PTSD/Trauma



RAIN ON TAVROS

by Kitbashed

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"Tavros Control, this is Talon Rogue. Requesting departure clearance."

"Copy, Talon Rogue. You are cleared for burn on vector zero-five one-two. Releasing docking arms now. Acknowledge please."

"Acknowledged, Tavros Control. Proceeding to burn on zero-five one-two."

The docking clamps fell away with hollow thuds that reverberated through the ship's hull. Freed from her moorings, Talon Rogue began to drift aimlessly, like a leaf on the solar wind. Switching off the grav generator, I hopped out of my seat and let myself do the same. There was always something calming about being in zero-G, something special about that sensation of being completely unburdened. I never understood why it made people feel uneasy. Then again, I grew up out here in the black; they probably get spacesick the same way I get groundsick after being stuck planetside for too long.

Like all good things, the moment ultimately passed. I strapped in and reengaged the gravity, only to hear a muffled splat behind me, presumably from something in the rec room I forgot to secure. Oh well. With a couple more button-presses and switch-flips that were ingrained into my muscle memory, I spooled up the main drives and plotted a course for the system's warp gate. Outside my starboard viewport, the great durasteel rings of Tavros Station slowly danced about their central axis.

I tapped a button on my console to summon Athena as I stood up. The 12" digital goddess instantly materialized from the overhead holo-projectors, the bronze armor that she wore over her toga gleaming in the sunlight of an unseen world.

"Shall I take the helm, Captain Entara?" she asked with her usual ice-cold confidence. I could have sworn there was a slight smirk on her verdant visage.

"Oh come on! I know you're just messing with me at this point," I replied, exasperated. "It's *Kaede*."

"Ah, apologies, Captain... Kaede."

"Fine, whatever," I groaned. "Just wake me up when we get there." I walked down from the cockpit and cycled the door to the common room. Bell peppers and synth-beef (with actual synth-beef this time!) were splattered all over the central holotable with a crumpled paper takeout container acting as the centerpiece to the greasy exhibit. Ugh, that's what I get for not putting leftovers away. I'll deal with that later.

I lazily slapped the wall terminal and the door to my quarters rolled open with a mechanical thump. To be honest, it was more like a converted storage closet than a proper bedroom; there was barely enough space to fit my bunk (and the occasional lover) in there. I cut power to my legs and faceplanted onto the bed with enough force to make my pillow jump. What? I'd been awake for 22 hours straight. I thought I'd earned a little nap. Besides, I was already in my pajamas.

My mind began to wander as I prepared to shut down the rest of my weary body. These past months had been nothing but back and forth, coming and going, only stopping at port long enough to refuel, exchange cargo, and restock on instant noodles. Such was the life of a tramp-freighter captain. You can't compete with those massive Atlas-class superfreighters in the core, so you just have to take whatever contracts the big fish deem too small or too dangerous to bother with.

Sure, I probably could have let Athena do my job and snoozed the time away instead of pushing myself this hard. But I couldn't risk anyone finding out that I had an intelligent superweapon (stolen from the most powerful criminal syndicate in the galaxy no less) just casually hanging out aboard my ship. The less involved Athena was, the better. Besides, work helped me keep my mind off things. Turns out you don't get nightmares if you're so tired that your brain simply ceases to function the instant you hit the sack. That's the thing about being self-employed: I get to be my own boss, and sometimes she's a prick.

On the bright side, all that hard work meant I actually had a decent amount of spending money for once. I could treat Anno to fancy dinners and fun dates a lot more often, maybe even start looking into buying some upgrades for the ship. Those new Type-R Aegis engines did look pretty sweet....

Just as I was about to doze off, Talon Rogue's klaxon stabbed me right in my sensitive ausar ears.

"What the *fuck* Athena!?"

"Apologies, Captain Kaede," her disembodied voice responded from my holoband, the blaring alarm falling silent as she did. "I'm getting a high temperature alert coming from the portside cargo hold: 115.2 degrees and climbing rapidly."

"Give me a visual," I groaned, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Camera seven is still down after last week's incident with that loading drone. I only became aware of the issue when the hold's atmospheric control unit reported it was unable to maintain temperature."

"Probably just another coolant leak." And I just had that fixed....

Not bothering to dress myself, I staggered out of bed wearing nothing but my boxers and a weathered tank-top before making my way to the entrance of the cargo bay on the opposite side of the ship. Looking through the small viewport on the door, everything seemed fine: no superheated coolant was spewing from the ceiling, nor was anything on fire. I pulled up the room's environmental data on the nearby wall terminal. Strange, everything else was in the green, only the temperature readout was flashing red. A faulty sensor perhaps?

I fingered the 'open' button on the interface, just enough to crack the hermetic seal. Big mistake. A sudden blast of heat rushed through the crack and washed over me, instantly evaporating all of the moisture from my exposed skin and stinging my eyes. It was as if I had opened a portal to a scorching desert on Ausaril. Not wanting to become half-ausar jerky, I manually slammed the reinforced door shut.

While my head was busy pondering why the fuck my ship suddenly had a new room-sized oven, my legs were already hauling ass to grab my EVA suit from the airlock at the ship's fore. I know it's made for hard vacuum, not extreme heat in a pressurized environment, but it should be fine, right? I threw open the equipment locker and grabbed the blocky, orange spacesuit, its mottled surface riddled with scuff marks and patched-up punctures. I always hated how I had to squish my ears and tuck my tail down my right leg to fit into the skin-tight undersuit, but I guess that's just what I got for being stingy and buying second-hand gear that wasn't even made for an ausar.

"Any idea what we're dealing with?" I asked Athena as I slipped my hands into the comically-large suit gloves.

"Negative," she replied instantaneously. "If the cargo manifest is to be believed, nothing we're carrying could possibly generate that much heat, so it must be something else I'm not seeing."

Great. I finished donning my gear as I made my way back, sealing the helmet with a quarter turn and a reassuring click. Alright, let's try this again. I triple checked my suit's diagnostics before taking a deep breath and breaching the seal once more.

The cargo bay was about 20 by 30 feet, rounded into an arc that followed the contours of Talon's disk-shaped main hull. Cargo containers of various colors, shapes, and sizes were arranged in neat stacks on either side, held (relatively) secure by a mixture of magnetic clamps and good ol' ratchet straps. A small freight elevator sat flush with the floor towards the center, and the far wall was dominated by a large gull-wing door, intended to facilitate cargo transfers with ships that weren't big enough to have their own hangars. I didn't use it much.

It didn't take an infrared cam to figure out who the culprit was. The air roiled angrily around a four-foot metal cube towards the center of the hold, causing my suit's thermal control unit to sputter as it struggled to keep the heat at bay. Plastered all over the heavy-duty crate's surface were warning labels in various languages: English, Ausari, even Gabilanese. These kinds of crates were designed to safely transport all

sorts of nasties, everything from radioactive waste to xenobiological samples, hence the tank-like armor. Hell, they were supposedly safe enough that even an indie like me could hypothetically take them after signing a few papers, provided that I didn't try to open them. Or ask too many questions.

Unfortunately for me, this one didn't seem to live up to the hype. There was a massive dent on the crate's side that exposed thick layers of delaminated armor plating. I tapped my helmet's built-in camera. "You getting this?"

"Loud and clear," Athena's voice crackled over the suit's shitty commlink.

"Alright, what exactly am I looking at?"

"A Pyrite Industries hazmat container, model B2E-MO. Not sure about its contents yet. I need a second to do some more cross-referencing since it's not one of ours. Coincidentally, we're missing a RhenWorld crate of similar size. It's likely they got mixed up at the docks."

Well, sucks for whoever owned this one, because it sure as hell wasn't staying on my ship any longer. If there's one thing that I actually remembered from my academy days, it's that overheating your ship is a surefire way to die a slow, painful death out here. Contrary to popular belief, space is only cold by technicality. The real issue is that it's an incredible insulator (a bit of a problem for us spacers since fusion reactors get pretty fucking hot).

Speaking of which, the heat emanating from my new mystery box was already starting to penetrate my suit, intensifying with every step. My underdressed form was soon coated head-to-toe in a solid film of sweat, soaking into my undersuit and matting my fur. It was such an aggravating combination of hellish heat and disgusting stickiness that it probably would have turned off even the most hardcore sweat fetishist (well, at least I naively imagined it would). A cold shower sounded downright amazing right about now.

Pushing through the blistering air, I finally got close enough to activate the hover-platform underneath the crate with a tap of my boot, causing it to slowly rise into the air as the repulsor pads hummed to life. It wasn't a smooth ascent though — the mechanical beast of burden shuddered as it struggled to support the immense weight, and the repulsor pads immediately started to leak thin wisps of pale smoke, overheating from being in direct contact with the two-ton space heater.

Yeah... that's not good. I had Athena unfurl the bay's cargo door and gave the hover-platform a hard shove, sending it gliding frictionlessly across the hold towards the sea of stars beyond. Just as the platform was about to slip through the blue-tinted oxygen shield, one of the repulsor pads gave out, causing the hover-plat to lurch as the other pads attempted to compensate. A half-second later, another pad burned out, sparking a rapid cascading failure as each dead repulsor put more and more strain on the ones that remained. By the time I realized what was going on, the unbalanced thrust sent the platform and its superheated cargo careening back toward me.

Move! Move dammit! I mentally screamed at my cumbersome suit and exhausted body in a last-ditch attempt to get them to dodge out of the way faster, but my efforts were in vain. The corner of the platform clipped my waist as the last of the hover-pads died, knocking me prone before crashing down hard on my lower legs. I heard a sickening crunch followed by an ear-splitting scream as sharpened spears of pure agony raced up my nervous system to jab at my psyche. Satisfied with the damage it had inflicted, the smoldering crate skidded off the hover-plat and screeched to a halt on the opposite end of the hold.

"Kaede! Are you alright?" cried Athena's static-filled voice over the commlink.

Biting back the pain and stream of expletives, I ordered her to shut off the grav generator. After a subjective eternity, the crushing weight on my legs relented and I managed to extricate myself out from under the smoking hover-plat. When I clicked on my mag-soles and reflexively tried to stand back up, my right boot made me wince slightly as it tugged at my bruised, tail-wrapped leg till it touched down on the deck. I slowly lowered my other leg to do the sam—

"OW-FUCK-SHIT-OW-SON-OF-A—"

A torrent of curses flew out of my mouth till I got sick of repeating the same swears and started to make up new ones. Even without gravity, the gentle pull of my magboot was enough to make me feel like my tibia was about to splinter apart like rotten wood. Images of gruesome industrial accidents flashed in my mind, lingering for a few excruciating seconds before I could marshal enough willpower to swat them away. As the pain slowly stopped occupying the entirety of my cognitive bandwidth, I became increasingly aware of the fact that someone was shouting directly into my folded-up ears.

"...KAEDE? KAEDE! DO YOU COPY!?"

"OKAY OKAY! STOP YELLING DAMMIT!" I shouted back. Athena's voice instantly decreased in volume, but not in urgency.

"That crate is fucking bomb! You need to bail—"

"How long do I have?" I interrupted.

"Less than a minute!" she returned without skipping a beat.

"Can the shields take it?"

"Kaede, are you insane!? There's not enough time to push it overboard! You need to bail out now so I can put enough distance between us to get you clear of the blast radius!"

"Sorry," I grunted before severing the commlink in a flash of anger. I knew I was being rash and Athena was probably right (as usual), but abandoning the life I've worked so hard to build... I couldn't do that. Flying my own ship, seeing the stars, this has *always* been the dream for me. I wasn't ready to give Talon Rogue up, not without a fight.

As soon as a timer started ticking in the back of my head, I was already busy attaching a safety tether from my belt to an anchor point recessed into the floor and then immediately pushing off the deck with my good leg. After a few seconds of weightless flight, I managed an awkward one-legged landing on the bulkhead closest to the now glowing-red crate. After an even more awkward one-legged-and-two-handed climb down from the wall, I positioned myself behind the metal cube, magnetically locked my right boot to the deck, and pushed. Hard.

The crate barely budged. It was weightless, not massless. Shit. Its superheated surface should have been hot enough to burn my hands at this point — I could almost smell the horrid stench of burning polymer as the outer layers of my gloves started to melt — but all I could feel was my eyelids growing heavy as heat stroke and exhaustion started to exact their toll on me. Just as my arms were about to fully extend, I threw all the strength I could muster into a final shove and propelled the crate towards the cold void... at a snail's pace. To add insult to injury, that shove also overpowered the lone magboot anchoring me to the deck, sending me into an uncontrolled zero-G backflip.

The countdown in my head grew louder as I burned precious seconds tumbling helplessly in the air. You know what? At this point I was just fucking pissed. Over these past few years, I've cheated death more times than I can count. I've had bullets, lasers, even actual nukes thrown at me and I lived to tell the tale. Like hell I was going to die because of some overgrown hot potato!

As soon as the spinning brought me back into alignment with the deck, I reactivated my magboots and thrust both of my legs downwards. The taste of copper filled my mouth as I bit my tongue stifling a scream. I sprint-limped to catch up with my slow-moving adversary, every step punctuated with a muffled cry or a colorful expletive, sometimes even a hybrid of the two. The crate was glowing bright enough to hurt my eyes by the time my damaged gloves reestablished contact, at least until my polarized visor flipped down automatically. I resumed pushing, but everything was too hot... too heavy... maybe if I closed my eyes a little....

A fresh burst of agony from my leg jolted me awake as I threw myself against the container. I was running off pure adrenaline at this point, ignoring the biological alarms blaring in my head as I felt fire tearing at my skin and sharp fragments of bone shredding my leg from the inside out. The pain howled louder and louder, threatening to tear my mind apart. But the noise also kept me on the knife's edge of consciousness, letting me keep my feet firmly planted on the deck as I continued to push. And yet, it still wasn't enough. Darkness soon began to encroach on the edges of my vision while the strength in my limbs started to run dry. Just as I was about to close my eyes and let myself succumb, a final blood-curdling scream resonated in my helmet as my shoulder slammed into the crate, sending it lazily floating past the sky-blue oxygen barrier and the orange combat shield behind it.

Then it exploded.

You know what the worst part is about having big ears? You hear *everything*. Momentarily blinded by the brilliant flash of the detonation, I could do nothing but listen in horror as everything around me went to shit. The blaring of the depressurization alarm as both of the shields collapsed, the rumble of cargo crates being ripped from the hold and thrown into the black abyss, even Athena's desperate cries of "Mayday! Mayday!" over the emergency channel — I could hear all of it in excruciating detail.

Before my eyes could recover, explosive decompression swept my legs out from under me and threw me overboard with the rest of the cargo, at least until my safety tether drew taut and swung me in a vicious arc back towards the ship. Still dazed and

half-conscious, I barely registered the pain of being slammed face-first into the portside engine nacelle, only noticing the subtle hiss of air leaking out of the freshly-bloodstained cracks in my faceplate. The stars started to dim as the air in my suit grew thinner.

It wasn't long before it all faded to black.

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I heard my name being called.

There was nothing but featureless white expanse when I opened my eyes.

They called my name again, and I could faintly make out someone snapping their fingers. My ears swiveled on auto-track, scanning the colorless void in an attempt to pinpoint the origin of the sounds. I heard it again: nine o' clock high. They were close. As soon as I started to turn my head, the illusion collapsed.

The flashlight that had been previously shining directly into my retinas clicked off. After blinking a few times to clear the bright afterimages, I saw a grey-haired kaithrit medic staring down at me. A six-pointed star of life was emblazoned on his fireproof jacket, and based on the heavy bags that lay under his experienced eyes, he was someone who had seen everything and yet was still frequently disappointed. I saw his lips move as he put the flashlight away, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. My ears worked just fine, but it felt like my brain was lagging behind, unable to process the noises into words fast enough.

I took a moment to get my bearings: I was laying down on a stretcher in one of Tavros' numerous hangar bays. Scraps of my EVA suit were strewn haphazardly on the hangar floor around me, presumably shredded by the paramedics' trauma shears. My helmet didn't fare much better; its spiderwebbed visor was spattered with small blotches of freeze-dried crimson. A motley collection of dockworkers, technicians, and fellow pilots had already gathered around the perimeter to watch, although they maintained a polite distance so that the medics had enough space to work.

"Wha-appened?" I slurred.

"Broken fibula, fractured tibia, acute hypoxia, hyperthermia, a couple lacerations, and some first degree burns. Hardly anything serious," the paramedic said in a disinterested monotone, as if I hadn't been on death's door but a few minutes prior. "Do tell me if you notice any problems with your vision though. Ocular injuries are an entirely different beast."

I responded in the negative, but I'm not entirely sure he heard me.

"Good. The nanogel should come off on its own after an hour or two," he continued, gesturing to the green, blobby cast that covered my left shin. Although the outer layers had already solidified into a hard shell, it still felt all cold and slimy on the inside, but at least it seemed to keep the pain at bay. "You're free to go, just don't engage in any strenuous activity before the cast comes off."

The kaithrit walked off before I could even reply. A younger human EMT sheepishly removed the cuff-shaped autodoc hugging my bicep and wiped off the excess medigel that remained on my palms and forehead, clearly a bit embarrassed by the curtness of her older colleague. As she helped me to my feet, I heard a couple sighs of relief from a few familiar faces in the crowd before they started to disperse, with the exception of a burly equine mechanic that was hurriedly pushing his way toward the front. The poor EMT nearly got trampled as Uncle Ivan charged forward and scooped me up into an airtight hug.

"Told eem ya be fine! It take more than zat to keep little wolf down!" he cheered as he effortlessly lifted me off the deck.

"Good to see you too," I replied — not an easy task considering the fact that his high-caliber arms were squeezing me like a plushie. "Is Dad here?"

Ivan's smile faltered, even if only for a microsecond. "Papa is off-station. 'Meet with Mr. Chow,' he say." Noticing the disappointment on my face, he gingerly set me down and rubbed my entire head with his enormous paw in a hyper-sized headpat. I almost felt like a little kid again. "Do not worry, pup! Papa be back soon. Ivan fix ship in no time!"

"Thanks. You're the best, Uncle Ivan." I returned the favor with a brief hug of my own before letting him get back to work.

Once the medics packed up and the fanfare died down, I took a seat against a large container filled with spare transponder beacons and pinged Athena on my holoband. "How bad is it?"

"You heard the doctor, you should be fine after a bit of rest." she responded.

"You know that's not what I meant."

Athena gave me a look that was approximately apologetic. "The shields absorbed the brunt of the blast, but the cargo door was protruding outside the shield envelope and got hit pretty hard. Almost all of the freight in that bay was spaced when the oxygen shield got knocked out. Estimated damages, including repair fees, liabilities for the lost cargo, and penalties for breaching our delivery contracts, totals at... 31459 credits."

God. Fucking. Dammit. I slammed my fist against the ground in frustration. Ow. So much for climbing out of the debt-hole before I turned 30. I slumped against the crate, groaning with a mixture of pain and exhaustion. Well, at least being a Tavros native meant that I wasn't about to get bitchslapped with a fat medical bill. Small victories, I guess. Just as I was about to breathe a small sigh of relief for not being exploded today, I noticed the anxious tension on Athena's face — she still had more bad news.

"You also received a new video message while you were out..." She stalled by clearing her simulated throat; I guess even she can get nervous sometimes. "...from Cassandra."

My stomach dropped. I've been dreading this moment ever since that fateful night when she showed up at my apartment and reinserted herself back into my life. For months, I've tried everything short of physically scouring the entirety of Confederate space attempting to get a hold of her. I've tried emails, dusty chat rooms, even her old game accounts. It was practically engraved into my daily routine: I'd wake up, dial Cass, and wait exactly 51.2 seconds for the call to go to voicemail before leaving the same message I've already repeated a hundred times over. She never replied. Honestly, I had almost convinced myself that night was nothing more than some weird hormone-fueled nightmare spawned from my own anxieties. That was, until today.

But why now? Why did she decide to call back today of all days? Why did she wait nearly nine months...

oh god.

I double checked my mental math, desperately hoping that I hit my head harder than I thought, or that my internal calendar was simply off. No such luck. Dammit, I could barely handle my current relationships, let alone my job and my finances. Parenthood was supposed to be a distant 'maybe' for me, something to consider long after I'd paid Talon off and settled down with Anno in some cozy little place we could call our own. It was hard to resist the temptation to curl up into a ball and cry.

Before I could death spiral any further, embedded mental failsafes forcefully derailed that train of thought and banished it to the back of my mind. Baby steps, one life-shattering development at a time. I just had to focus on getting the ship fixed. But first, I needed a drink.

As I slowly stood up, careful not to put too much weight on my left side, I glanced back at Talon Rogue. The entirety of her curvaceous portside was pockmarked with countless micro-shrapnel impacts, but those were peanuts compared to the injuries sustained by the still-unfurled cargo door. It honestly hurt to look at it; the space-grade gull-wing was horrifically perforated and mangled, sticking out like a broken limb. That makes two of us, I guess. I limped out of the hangar and caught a lift on one of the countless cyclical elevators that formed the spine of the station.

Athena filled me in on the rest of the details during the ride up. Apparently, it was some youngster's first day on the job. The kid was too busy fooling around with their new power loader to notice that they had plopped some experimental fuel cell onto the wrong ship (my ship!) with a fair bit of rough handling for good measure. She notified me that she already had a legal fusillade armed and ready, but I waved her off. Call me a softie if you want, but I wasn't about to sue some poor kid into oblivion and drag them into the debt hole, even if they did nearly blow me and Talon up in their stupidity. Don't get me wrong though, I wasn't above cussing them out; it's just that Ivan had apparently beat me to the punch. At least I could rest easy knowing that he probably scared the living daylights out of them.

I was still picking flakes of dried blood out of my hair by the time the elevator doors opened. I've cleaned worse things out of it, but still, ew. The merchant deck was strangely uncrowded today, relatively speaking. Then again, 'deserted' by Tavros standards just meant you could occasionally catch glimpses of the floor in between the gaps of bustling bodies. It wasn't always like this: back before the planet rush started, I never had to worry about inconsiderate assholes constantly butting into my personal space or stepping on my tail.

Anon's was also a bit on the empty side, but that was to be expected given that it was barely three o'clock. Still, there were more than enough people to fill the bar with the usual sounds and... distinctive aromas.

Tri'en, the four-armed bartender, waved me over with his free hand (his other three were occupied serving other customers). "Hey pup! Long time no— Oh. You look like shit. Bad run?"

Sometimes, I wish people would just mind their own business. "Is it that obvious?" I groaned.

"Well, for one thing, that big ol' tail of yours is practically mopping my floor."

I glanced behind me and sure enough, my prized ginger fur was blackened by all the bar-floor muck I had just trudged through, as if being drenched with sweat wasn't enough. Great. He set down a bottle of Windswept on the counter as I sat down on one of the few stools that didn't squeak.

"On the house..."

"Thanks, Tri," I muttered. I reached for the forest-green bottle of rum, only for him to pull it back at the last moment.

"But first, you wanna talk about it?"

"I'm fine, Tri'en," I growled, loud enough to startle the towering suula sitting a few seats down from me. "Can I get my drink now?"

The green man sighed in disappointment before he unstoppered the bottle and poured me a glass with his lower arms. I drank it all with a few quick gulps, barely acknowledging the sweet notes of cinnamon and pear before slapping the empty glass down on the counter. I immediately motioned for another round, to which he reluctantly obliged.

"Listen kiddo, I've seen that look in your eyes before," he sighed as he replenished my drink. "If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. I get it. Just... don't lie about it. There's no reward in pretending things are all fine and dandy when they're not."

"I'm not bullshitting you, Tri. I'm *fine*." I downed my drink and gestured for another refill.

He shook his head. "*I'm* not the one you're bullshitting," he scolded. Much to my irritation, he put my glass away and sealed the bottle. "Besides, your old man is going to kill me if I let you drink yourself stupid like last time, and I'm not carrying your scrawny ass back to your flat again." His upper-right hand reached up to rub two out of his three eyes as he let out another tired exhale. "Tell you what: you get yourself cleaned up and come back tomorrow, and I'll give you the rest of the bottle then. Deal?"

I was starting to get real tired of being infantilized like this. "Oh, fuck off!" is what I was about to say, if not for a familiar tap on my shoulder.

"Hey, Red," Anno purred in all of her snowy-haired glory. She wasn't wearing that skin-tight Steele Tech catsuit this time, but her undersized blouse and shrink-wrapped jeans weren't exactly any more modest. I could practically see her every curve through the thin fabric, not to mention the way her ample chest swelled with every breath. Ack! A stirring between my legs immediately reminded me that I was still wearing nothing but my undergarments.

"H-Hey Anno!" I blurted as I concealed my busted leg behind my tail and tried to make myself look less disheveled. Anno didn't seem to notice, at least as far as I could tell.

"I thought you were shipping out today?"

"Yeah uhh... there was a bit of a mixup. I'll probably be stuck here for a few more days."

"Hmm... I still have some shopping I need to do, but what do you say I swing by your place for some fun later tonight? I want to give you a *proper* sendoff." Her voice was practically dripping with sensuality.

Heh, maybe today wasn't going to be a complete shitshow after all. "You know it, babe!" I replied and gave my best attempt at a roguish wink, complete with finger guns. It totally sucked, but I knew it'd make her laugh at least.

"Well, well, aren't you just a charming little hotshot?" she giggled, giving me a quick pet between the ears before waving goodbye. I watched her go, a bit more wistfully than I'd like to admit, and her pale fur soon vanished into the ocean of bodies outside.

"Lemonade?" Tri'en offered diplomatically as he pushed a tall glass of the stuff towards me. I made sure he saw my eyes do a full barrel roll before taking a sip.

The walk back to my apartment was pleasantly unremarkable. I barely acknowledged house-Athena's greeting as I opened the front door and made a beeline for the bathroom. The shower was already warmed up by the time my inadequate clothing hit the floor. Fuck, that felt good... nothing like a nice bit of steam and suds to wash away a day's troubles. Layers of caked-on sweat and dried blood were easily whisked down the drain by the liquid massage. Even the solidified green goop on my shin crumbled and dissolved with minimal effort, revealing a pristine, slender leg beneath. Oh the wonders of modern medical technology.

I was almost presentable by the time I stepped out of the shower, if you ignored the fact that my tail had been replaced by a hairy waterlogged noodle. Ugh, as much as I loved my fur, it was a real pain in the ass sometimes (pun intended). It took nearly half an hour of blow-drying and brushing to restore it to its former fluffy glory. Whatever, gotta look my best for my girlfriend.

After drying the rest of my body off and donning a fresh set of undergarments, I flopped down on the couch and took a nap while I waited for her to arrive. For better or for worse, it was a pretty short nap; Anno had already made herself at home long before my holoband's alarm clock could go off.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she teased, setting down two glasses of water on the coffee table before plopping down on the couch next to me.

"Morning, babe," I yawned, ignoring the fact that we were already well into the evening. I was still tired as a dog, but a quick smooch from my lover was apparently all that was needed to recharge my weary body.

"Want to try something new tonight?" She tossed a small, rose-colored box my way. *Dry Heat* was written on the front of the package in large, gaudy block lettering, a sharp contrast to the various disclaimers and drug facts that were written in microscopic monochrome on the back. The rest of the packaging was decorated with neon-pink hearts and heavily-stylized... bite marks?

"What's this?"

"Basically, it's the lovechild of Sterilex and Breeder's Bliss: a few hours of intense heat-sex without any of the usual consequences," she explained. "It's a bit of a fad on Ausaril right now. Just thought it'd be fun to see what all the fuss is about."

Heat-sex... if that night with Cass was anything to go by, the pheromones from Anno's heat alone would be more than enough for my ausar breeding instincts to kick in. Combining that with my own drug-induced rut would easily override any remaining shreds of self-control — a sensation I wasn't keen on reliving. Then again, losing myself in a mindless fuck-frenzy would be a great way to take my mind off Cass.

Evidently, my hesitation was written verbatim on my face, as Anno immediately started backpedaling: "Sorry, dumb idea. We don't have to try it if you don't—"

"I'd love to," I lied. I should have said no. Void, I wanted to say no, but I wanted her more.

Anno smiled in relief. I popped out two heart-shaped pills from the packaging — one for each of us. We clinked our glasses together and washed down the two-in-one love-drugs with a dash of ice water. Everything after that point happened in a blur. We were all over each other long before the artificial estrus had a chance to kick in, grinding our hips together and grabbing each other's breasts through sheer fabric. Our tails were a furious whirlwind that slapped the walls and furniture with enough force to dent metal. We fumbled into the bedroom and all but ripped each other's clothes off in between moan-filled kisses.

There was a moment of relative calm when Anno stumbled ass-first onto my queen-sized bed. She took the fall in stride though, leaning back against the pillows, spreading her legs, and presenting her already-dripping sex to me, complete with a perfectly-trimmed tuft of white fur. Her alluring scent diffused into the air just as chemically-induced desire started to diffuse into my bloodstream. I crawled on top of her, instinctively aligning my aching-hard cock so that the tip was kissing her pink folds. Once again I felt that raging inferno, that lusty liquid fire that flowed through my veins with every pulse of my heart. It was the same searing heat I felt with Cass, only stronger, wilder. As I began to push deeper, the heat kept intensifying well past the point of being uncomfortable. It was hot, too hot.

Then it started to burn me from the inside out.

I could feel my self-control crumbling to ash. Whatever tender, romantic feelings I held for my lover were overwritten with brutal, animalistic hunger.

Why? Why did it hurt this time? Of course, the last remnants of my rational mind knew damn well why. After what Cass and her pheromones did to me — and what I did to her — I could never let that happen again with Anno. I would rather tear my own arm off before I would let myself feel like a prisoner in my own body again. Oh Anno, everything's different when I'm with you.

"Kaede? Kaede!"

"Wha..."

"Stars! Are you ok? You're crying!" Gone were those inviting bedroom eyes, her face was now awash with concern.

A bolt of clarity struck my lust-addled mind. I am? I wiped my eyes. Oh. I guess I am. I tried to answer her, tried to reassure her that everything was fine, but my voice got snagged on the barbed wire in my tightening throat. Raindrops rolled down my face before trickling onto Anno's nude form, extinguishing that carnal fire that burned so fiercely just moments before.

"N-No..." I sobbed as I collapsed face-first into her plush chest. I felt her fur-clad arms wrap around me, holding me close. When my hyperventilating lungs made me shudder and writhe in her embrace, she just held me closer. I could feel her carefully run a hand through my hair while the other caressed my back. Her touch was so soft....

"It's okay, babe. It's ok," she whispered. "Just let it all out."

The trickle turned into a downpour. All the pain I had so desperately tried to seal away burst back to the forefront of my mind, gushing forth like blood from a bullet wound. The Voiders, Tarkus, Cass... I wept into my girlfriend's chest like the pathetic mess I was. Thankfully, it wasn't long before sleep took me, sparing me from having to dwell on those memories any longer.



~12 YEARS AGO

I remember that day when I walked into JoyCo for my first dose of Estrobloom+. I especially remember those sterile-white floors with bubblegum-pink decals, mostly because I was staring at them. As my footsteps started to slow, I felt a slender, clawed hand tug at my own.

"Come on, girl! What happened to all that excitement you had yesterday?" That was Cassandra, my best friend since, well, forever. She was a lot more outgoing and confident than me, which wasn't saying much given I was basically a timid ball of awkwardness.

"I don't know... I'm just... really nervous for some reason," I stammered. My voice was so faint I could barely hear it.

Thankfully, she decided not to press any further and changed the subject. "By the way, have you decided on a name yet? No pressure or anything if you haven't, though! I know you've been thinking about it for a while now."

"Actually, I've been thinking about 'Kaede.' "

"Ooh! That's a pretty name! It suits you! Any story behind it?"

"Uh..." I stuttered. In hindsight, it was a bit silly of me to just steal the name of one of my old CRPG characters, but then again, it's not like most people got to choose their own names anyways. "It's an old human name I found online. It means 'maple.' "

Cass tilted her head at me in confusion. One of her feline ears even flicked at me of its own accord.

"Oh, right. They're a species of Terran tree with red leaves," I explained. "I remember seeing them in some old documentaries of Earth. They're also—"

"What's a tree?" she interrupted, feigning ignorance and poorly concealing a mischievous grin.

"Oh come on! You know what a tree is!" Cass just giggled as she playfully ruffled the red hair between my ears. "H-Hey!" I whined halfheartedly. She always loved messing with me like this, and even though I would never have admitted it at the time, I really liked it when she did. Meanwhile, my tail — un beholden to any sense of embarrassment — made its opinion on the matter crystal clear.

We continued our stroll through the great labyrinth of consumerism, its shelves packed to the brim with brightly colored goods. JoyCo really did have it all, everything from groceries and soap to personal energy shields and gene mods. Speaking of which, we soon found ourselves in the mod section towards the back of the store. The pricier and more uh... *adult* offerings were locked behind transparent acrylic.

I soon spotted the object of my search: a small freezer aisle with yellow and purple popsicles — Estrobloom and Estrobloom+. I glanced at the holographic price tag and winced. It was pretty cheap as far as mods go, but it still wasn't pocket change, especially since my only income sources at the time consisted of birthday money and whatever odd jobs Uncle Ivan let me help with. Grabbing one of the purple ones, I was pleasantly surprised when it wasn't uncomfortably cold to the touch, the thin wrapper somehow providing a fair amount of insulation. In a smaller font towards the bottom, the packaging read: *Bloom into the Feminine Flower You Always Deserved to Be!*

We made our way back to the front of the store. Thankfully, there wasn't much of a line today. The cashier, a bored-looking gryvain whose nametag identified her as Kerrigan, hardly looked at us as she robotically scanned and bagged the purple popsicle. Her towering height and icy demeanor reminded me of my history teacher (listen, he was really scary okay!). She didn't even bother to wear that ubiquitous corporate-issue smile.

"Sorry kid, I'm going to need to see some ID. Company policy," she said flatly, albeit with a faint hint of remorse.

Ever since the dawn of commercially-available gene mods, the minimum age requirement for their use has always been a touchy subject. There were just too many compounding variables: the specific mod being used, the user's genetic makeup, different cultural norms.... At some point, the UGC sort of gave up trying to enforce their rulings and let megacorps and independent polities set their own standards, for the most part.

Fortunately, fairly basic stuff like Estrobloom+ wasn't nearly as scrutinized, especially on a little frontier station like Tavros. Those kinds of mods were allowed right around the time when puberty (or whatever equivalent level of maturity was appropriate for your race) would typically hit. For half-ausars like me, that meant thirteen (Terran) years old.

I flashed my school-issued holo-ID at the scanner, which chirped affirmatively.

"Hmm..." Kerrigan murmured with subtle amusement. "Happy birthday, by the way."

"You too," I blurted before I could stop myself. Idiot. Ugh, Cass is never going to let me live that down.

Just as I started to apologize for my slip-up, the stern draconic woman broke into a surprisingly mirthful laugh, "Oh, don't worry about it! I used to do that all the time." I sighed in relief as I forked over a preloaded credit chit, and she handed me my purchase in a small bag decorated with the megacorp's iconic pink-and-white logo. "Thank you for shopping at JoyCo, Miss," she said candidly.

Huh. 'Miss.' I liked that. It was a bit formal for my tastes, but something about it still made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside, even if I couldn't quite articulate why. Whatever the reason, I could feel my tail start to wag behind me as we stepped out of the store.

After a quick stop at the local ice cream parlor so that Cass could grab a frozen treat of her own, we boarded one of the large central lifts and punched the floor number in. Kilometers of alloy and plexiglass raced past us as we ascended through the residential decks at breakneck speed, fine-tuned inertial dampeners completely negating the otherwise staggering acceleration. With a cheerful beep, the doors slid open to reveal a massive deck-spanning arboretum. Although most of it was cordoned off with holographic 'under construction' signs, the completed sections were already bustling with vibrant alien ferns and more familiar varieties of Terran flora.

Many years ago, Steele Tech decided to invest a fortune into building out Tavros in preparation for the upcoming planet rush. That meant fancy parks, luxury suites, and renovations for the merchant deck, but also new classrooms, medical facilities, and even housing subsidies. Bless our benevolent corporate overlords (unironically for once).

We wandered around and admired the greenery while we looked for a place to sit. If you ignored the faint hum of the station's internal machinery and the slightly unnatural way the grass swayed in the artificial breeze, you could easily pretend you were just taking a stroll through an ordinary park on some lush terrestrial world (not that I would know, I've never actually been planetside before). Although, I think I would have preferred this over the real thing regardless. Sure, the warm sunlight on my skin may have been synthetic, but at least it wasn't chock-full of cancer rays.

"No way! It's you!" Cass teased, pointing at a young Terran tree covered with pink flowers in lieu of leaves. Blush-colored petals silently departed from its branches in a constant trickle.

"That's a cherry blossom, not a maple tree, dummy."

"Ughhh. Whatever you say, tree-girl," she quipped, chuckling at her own terrible joke. I tried to think of an appropriately witty riposte, but to no avail. Oh, screw it, I was laughing too.

We sat down on a secluded synth-wood bench with a good view of the ongoing construction. Large six-legged construction bots lifted huge prefab segments into position with their powerful servo-driven limbs while smaller ones scurried around and welded them into place, all of which was carefully overseen by a handful of their more organic counterparts. The air surrounding the work site shimmered with noise-suppression fields, quarantining the terrible din inherent to such work. I pulled the popsicle out of the bag and carefully tore open the wrapper to reveal the unassuming purple dessert. I hesitated.

"Something wrong?"

"It's just..." I sighed. Of course I wanted it — mods were a magical thing for people like me. They meant we had the freedom to choose, the chance to take our lives into our own hands instead of being shackled to the one assigned to us by random rolls of genetic dice. But it was always something I could look forward to, a guiding star in the night sky that gave me direction precisely because it was so distant. Now that the moment was actually here, I don't know... what if it wasn't everything I hoped it was? Fidgeting with the microsurgeon-laced treat in my hand, I guess I was also just a tad surprised, expecting some scary-looking needle or maybe foul-tasting pills, not a cute popsicle of all things. "It's my first mod, you know? I guess I just don't know what to expect... what if something—"

"Hey," Cass gently interjected, squeezing my hand and pulling me back to reality. One of her tails even brushed reassuringly against my own. "Whatever happens, you know I'll be here for you, right? You'll always be my best friend, no matter what shape you take."

"Cass, I..." Void, I desperately wanted to tell her how I really felt. I had recently developed a bit of a crush on her, but obviously I kept that to myself out of fear of

messing up our friendship. "Thanks," was all I could manage before I had to turn away, given that my face was rapidly approaching my hair color.

"Anytime." We sat in comfortable silence for a while, holding hands and stretching that ephemeral moment long past the point it started to wear thin. "Cheers?" she offered tentatively as she raised her ice cream cone towards me. I responded in kind, albeit in lowercase, and we toasted with our respective cold treats before we dug in.

All it took was a single lick, and the final shreds of doubt that still lingered in my mind simply melted away. 'Happy' doesn't even begin to describe it; I was downright euphoric. At long last, I could just be... me, and it was better than anything I could have dreamed of. I don't even remember how it tasted. Something like blueberries? Or was it grape? Whatever, that wasn't important. All that mattered to me in that moment was the unrelenting joy that was blossoming in my chest and the comforting warmth of my best friend's hand. I carefully carved this memory into the stone of my mind with the knowledge that I would cherish it forever.

"Happy birthday, Kaede."

IV

Anno was still asleep when I woke up. After I wiped my eyes, I saw that my tears had left a soggy puddle in her cleavage. *Ewewew*. I reluctantly untangled myself from her arms and cleaned her up with a towel, taking great care not to wake her.

I checked the time on my holoband: 5:12 am. In the darkness, the unread message notification glared at me like an evil eye, mocking me for my cowardice. Well, fuck it, it's not like this day could get much worse. I needed some fresh air anyways. And maybe another drink.

As I slipped my legs into my least torn-up pair of jeans and threaded my tail through the hole in the back, I pulled out a foil pack from the undersized front pocket (seriously, why did they always make them so small?). Ever since that night with Cass, I've always carried a couple libidio suppressants with me as a precaution, something that most ausar already do on the regular.

I popped the sand-colored pill out of its blister pack and swallowed it with ease, despite its awkward size and bitter aftertaste, and the last vestiges of ausar rutting

instincts vanished in an instant. Were I in a better mood, I might have made a joke about my ability to swallow, but right now, the fact that it crossed my mind at all just skeeved me out. Maybe that was just the Chill Pill talking. I left another suppressant on the nightstand for Anno. She definitely carried her own, but a bit of redundancy never hurt.

"Hey Athena, if Anno wakes up before I'm back, just tell her I just stepped out to run some errands."

"Of course," she responded plainly.

I grabbed a few bottles of whiskey from my liquor cabinet on the way out, or at least I would have, if I hadn't already depleted my stash last week. All I had left was a six pack of Frisky Dingo. It was cheap, shitty beer (and tasted like it), but at least it had enough poison to do the job. The front door automatically slid closed behind me.

It was still dark outside, relatively speaking. Nights on the residential decks were simulated with soft mood lighting rather than actual darkness. Still, it was a nice change of pace from the usual harsh white illumination during 'daylight' hours. After riding the lift up a few floors, I strolled out onto a gloomy elevated walkway overlooking the arboretum, one of the few places on this god-forsaken station where I could actually be alone. My holoband grew heavy on my forearm as I leaned against the railing and stared down at the illuminated pathways of the park below. Above me, a photorealistic projection of a terrestrial night sky dominated the ceiling, only interrupted by the cluster of transparent lift tubes that stretched high enough to touch the digitized stars.

I scrolled through my notifications and tapped the icon of Cass — the old Cass. A small rectangle of light popped into existence from my holoband's projectors as the 2D video loaded in. My old friend was sitting in a medical bed with a petite pair of horns poking out of her Brunette curls (were those there before?). She was wearing a hospital gown that seemed a bit small given her new feminine endowments, but without that cloud of pheromones screwing with my head, her hypersexual body no longer got the better of me. In fact, it was a bit off-putting; just looking at her massive bust gave me second-hand back pain.

Cass greeted me with a stupid-happy smile. "Heya Kaede! Guess your little swimmers were, like, pretty potent! I thought my friend Shelly here would've been the one to knock me up, but I guess your cummies were *extra* special. You wouldn't happen to know any pretty girl names would you? Anyways, you oughta come down to New Texas

sometime. I'll be sure to make it worth your while," she said that last part with a flirtatious grin and hooded eyes. "Who knows, maybe our baby girl will get a sibling."

Void, was she even the same person? The Cass I knew was brilliant and fiercely independent. Now, all I saw was an airheaded bimbo — a pornographic parody of my childhood friend. Unable to watch any further, I killed the playback with an angry swipe.

I was feeling a lot of things at that moment. Most of it was rage. Gah! What the hell was she thinking that night, showing up out of the blue like that? Did she know that my ausar half would react that way, that I would be too overwhelmed by her pheromones to say no to her? Or was she too deep in heat to care? You know what? I think I was better off not knowing. The last thing I needed was more reasons to be upset with her.

Then again, it wasn't entirely her fault. I should have been stronger. I should have rushed her to the hospital the moment she showed up at my doorstep looking like a mod junkie and acting nothing like the girl I knew. At the very least, I should have worn a damn condom, but instead, I was too busy thinking with my other head. Hell, even now, her new body still turned me on a bit in spite of all my feelings of guilt, betrayal, and revulsion. Maybe I deserved this.

I cracked open a can of the cheap piss-beer and chugged half of it in one go. This past year, my sex life has been... complicated. All those lonely, long-haul cargo runs gave me plenty of time to stew in my own thoughts, which wasn't very healthy in hindsight. Kiro, the wax man... even that time with Cass could technically be considered sexual assault under UGC law.

Of course, I was furious about all those times my body was violated like that, but the devil on my shoulder was eager to point out that a part of me always ended up enjoying it. More than anything, I hated myself for always going along with it like some mindless sex addict. I used to tell myself that it wasn't my fault, blaming whatever aphrodisiacs or pheromones that the cosmos seemed to keep throwing at me, but the more I thought about it, the less convincing that sounded. The way that those poisons twisted my mind, tricked me into thinking that it was my idea all along... I don't even know where my own desires ended and the drug-coerced ones began.

Now, just the thought of sex was so irresistibly intoxicating. It hurt and it felt good. I wanted it when I didn't. It reminded me all too much of that night after I found out

she had cut and run: I drank till my liver nearly gave out. I wanted to stop, believe me, but I also knew that every sip meant another minute I wouldn't have to live with my fuck-ups. And of course, one of the precious few times I was with someone I trusted and was actually okay with letting go of the reins for a bit, my traitorous body decided to go ahead and ruin that too.

I leaned over the railing and took another swig of the foul-tasting liquid, wincing as it scorched my throat on the way down. Void, I was just so tired of it all. The nightmares, the self-loathing, the fact that I couldn't even control my own body... and the worst part was that I didn't even have any decent booze to drown my sorrows in.

What the hell was wrong with me? I was raped and I fucking *liked it*.

My temper got the better of me as I crushed the empty can in my fist and hurled it over the railing, watching as it arced through the air before falling back down towards the grass far below. I grabbed another.

I was so busy wallowing in my own self-pity that I didn't even notice Anno had walked up behind me.

"There you are, Red! Your V.I. told me you were running errands, but we both know that you hate waking up early." She placed her soft hand on my shoulder and leaned against the railing with me. "Kaede... can we talk about last night?" she asked tenderly.

"Anno..." I started, unable to even face her. "I'm really sorry about that, it's just... I'd rather be alone right now." I gently removed her hand from my shoulder and turned to walk away, only for her to grab my arm the same way that Kir—

I refused to let my mind finish drawing that subconscious comparison.

"Kaede, wait! Please, just talk to me. Something's clearly hurting you. Trust me, I've been there too."

I was already regretting the words long before they left my lips, but I said them anyway, blindly lashing out like a wounded animal. It was so tempting to just blame the alcohol and sleep deprivation, but it's not like those things happen on their own. The ugly truth was that this one was on me.

"No you haven't!" I shouted as I tore my arm away from her. *Stop it*, I thought to myself, but like so many times before, I didn't listen. "What the hell do you have to worry about!? You're a Ph.D with a cushy desk job and literal billionaires for parents! You don't know what it's like; I nearly got killed today because some idiot mixed up a couple boxes! **The only thing you have to worry about is deciding who your next lay is!**"

The silence lingered in the air, ringing in my ears like a gunshot.

It took hearing Anno cry to finally bring me back to my senses. What kind of monster does that make me? "Anno I'm sorry I didn't mean it," I babbled semi-coherently as I wrapped my arms around her slender shoulders, clinging on for dear life.

"Kaede..." she whispered between tears, voice wavering despite her best efforts. Her fluffy arms weakly returned the hug.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you it's just been a really really shitty day for me but I was being a jerk and I took it out on you and that's not okay at all and I want to make it up to you because I love you and I—" I continued rambling as my own eyes began to water.

"It's okay... I know you didn't mean to hurt me," she sniffled. "I'm sorry if I was too pushy. I'm just really worried about you. I can tell you've been overworking yourself recently, and sometimes I can feel you thrashing in your sleep. At first I didn't want to pry, but after watching you fall apart in my arms last night...."

Geez, now we were both bawling our eyes out. Then again, I couldn't deny that I needed this. There was a kind of bliss in just letting the world beneath my feet fall away, lost in a nice long ugly-cry session. We held onto each other for a while, keeping each other afloat even as our shaking bodies were battered by waves of anguish. Eventually, we made landfall on a small bench by the railing, still clinging to each other as if we were anticipating some terrible force was about to sweep us apart.

"I know I'm not always the best at showing it, but... I love you too, Kaede," she confessed with bashful sincerity. "Stars, I just wish we could see more of each other

sometimes. I want you to share more of your life with me... even the painful parts. I want to be with you till our fur turns white."

"Um, your fur's kinda white already," I half-teased through the tears.

"Oh you know what I meant!" she whined as she playfully socked me on the shoulder. I grasped the impact area in mock pain before embracing her once more as we laughed and cried in equal measure. As the emotional rollercoaster started to wind down, I took her hand in mine and sat with her in compassionate silence as we watched the twinkling lights of elevator cabs travel up and down the central lift tubes.

"Anno... when you said you've been hurt before... do you want to talk about it?" I asked.

"You sure? I don't want to be a burden."

"Sharing goes both ways. I want to be there for you, too."

She flashed me a hint of a smile, probably a bit amused at being caught in her own trap. "Okay," she began with a sigh. "Did I ever tell you about why I quit Akkadi?"

"Something about 'botched experiments?' "

"Yeah, I said that, didn't I?" She gazed off into the distance, as if watching a replay of her past on some faraway screen. "Remember when the Princess of Ausaril got kidnapped a couple years back?"

I shook my head. I usually try to keep up-to-date with the news, but it all just moves so fast sometimes.

"My team was working on miniaturizing gate tech, small enough to warp individual people. Of course, the military was bankrolling the project, so when a bunch of zealots took the Princess hostage, some genius in the admiralty thought that this was the perfect time for a little field test," she spat, letting long-simmering rage finally come to a boil. "Just warp in a bunch of *our own people* directly into a delicate hostage situation using an *unfinished prototype*. **What could possibly go wrong!?**"

She took a breath and steadied herself, her anger transmuting itself into anguish as tears once again streamed down her face. "We weren't ready... not even close... but they forced our hand," she continued. "We sent in six: Roy, Millar, Kaemal, and

Drummar just never showed up at the other end. As for Halden and Berton... void, I wonder if it would've been better if they hadn't."

"That... wasn't your fault, babe. You didn't have a choice."

"But I did! I should've walked out then and there! I knew there was no way they could have continued the project without me, but I was naive and just went along with it, thinking that they actually gave a single *shit* about us. I only quit when they put my own sister through and she nearly..." Anno trailed off as grief overwhelmed her, furry ears and tail drooping as she buried her face in her hands.

I was at a loss on how to comfort her. Hell, I was probably the least qualified person for this sort of thing. I tried to bury my demons with work and alcohol and look how that panned out. Then again, I owed it to her to try. Hooking an arm around her, I pulled her in close and let her cry into my shoulder while her deflated ears flopped onto my face.

How did she always do it? I tried to recall all the times I've been on the receiving end of a good petting, letting my memories guide my hands as I stroked her hair and caressed her furred ears. Stars, I had no idea it also felt amazing to be on the other end. Her hair was finer than any synth-silk and soft as a cloud; it was like I was petting an incarnation of pure fluffy bliss. I made a mental note to ask if I could try her shampoo later. Judging by the way her ears and tail started to perk up, that seemed to do the trick.

"Did you know them well?" I asked.

She nodded sullenly. "Some of them. Roy was dating one of my coworkers. Cute little ausar guy with big ol' ears... he always seemed like such a sweetheart. I wish I got to know him better."

I never knew the names of the people I killed. I remember the punch of my gun's recoil as the pirate's body crumpled to the deck, but I never saw the face behind that polarized visor. I remember the violent drumbeat of Talon Rogue's cannons as they ripped apart that Black Void frigate, but I never heard the crew's screams as the burning carcass of their ship sank beneath the clouds, slowly being crushed by the gas giant's immense pressure. Sure, they were faceless monsters that were about to gun me down without a second thought, but their blood stained my hands all the same. To imagine them as actual people, ones with innocent lovers or estranged daughters... I winced at the thought.

It took me a moment to realize that I'd been so absorbed in my own thoughts that I forgot I was supposed to be comforting my girlfriend. Shit, what do I say?

"Thanks for that, Kaede," she whispered, planting a quick kiss on my cheek. "Been carrying that weight for a while now. Feels nice to finally let it go."

Still a bit unsure on how to respond, I simply gave her a peck on the cheek in return. As her tail started to swish faster, I saw my opening. With a well-timed thrust, I caught the root of her tail with my own, letting her fluffy momentum do the hard work of intertwining our bushy appendages and pulling our hips together. Anno smiled as she wordlessly snuggled closer, and we gazed at the stars together until our braided tails started to get antsy.

"Well, I guess it's my turn now." I said reluctantly.

"Only if you want to, babe." Seeing my timid nod, she scooped over and patted her plush thighs in invitation. I laid down on my side and rested my head on her lap while she brushed messy ginger strands out of my eyes. "Whenever you're ready."

I told her everything. The Black Void, Cass's message, all of it.

It's a strange feeling, letting yourself be truly vulnerable. It's almost like being naked, but at least that could be a little bit exciting; there was nothing sexy about this. I slowly stripped off my metaphorical armor piece by piece, guiding her fingers as she traced all those invisible scars that marked my flesh. I tore down walls I didn't even know I had put up. I unsealed high-pressure containers full of compartmentalized trauma. I let all of it just spill out until the floor ran red.

As I continued to confide in my lover, deep-seated survival instincts started screaming at me, demanding I raise my guard or deflect with some self-deprecating joke, fearing that she would recoil in disgust if she ever saw just how damaged I was inside. Perhaps it was because I grew up on stories of stoic space captains and self-sufficient mavericks, the kind of people who would rather stare down the barrel of a battlecruiser's coilgun long before they would ever consider talking about their feelings. Regardless, I told those instincts to go fuck themselves.

Blessed relief. It felt like exhaling a breath I've been holding in for far too long. Turns out there was nothing more intimate and comforting than being able to truly trust

someone, to put your life in their hands with the knowledge that they would do anything to protect you.

"Kaede, I'm so sorry... I had no idea." She pulled me up and hugged me tighter than anyone ever has before. "I know you like to put on your brave face for me. Just remember that you don't *have* to, and I'll never think any less of you if it ever becomes too much."

Words failed me. I mumbled something between a 'thank you' and an 'I love you,' but it probably got lost in the stream of my emotional blubbing. All I could do was squeeze her in return and wait patiently for my body to stop shaking.

"Kaede?"

"...yeah?"

"Would you feel better if I watched that holovid with you?" she asked delicately.

"Maybe? I don't know... I only got a few seconds in before I had to stop. It's just hard to see her... like that."

"I get that. It's just... I don't want you to have something like this hanging over you, y'know?"

"No, you're right. I should watch it, for the kid's sake if nothing else." I pulled up the video message again, expanding the holographic display slightly so that both of us could view it comfortably. With a deep exhale, I hit 'play'.

"Heya Kaede! Guess your little swimmers were, like, pretty potent! I thought my friend Shelly here would've been the one to knock me up, but I guess your cummies were *extra* special. You wouldn't happen to know any pretty girl names would you? Anyways, you oughta come down to New Texas sometime. I'll be sure to make it worth your while," she said that last part with a flirtatious grin and hooded eyes. "Who knows, maybe our baby girl will get a sibling."

"Babe, you forgot your uh... medicine " chimed in a woman's voice from off-screen, presumably Shelly's. The camera jittered as a copper-hued arm handed Cass a small metal flask, from which my friend drank ravenously. Her irises immediately sharpened, refocusing with renewed acuity and snubbing out those 'fuck-me' eyes with

a single blink. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but I finally saw my best friend looking back at me.

"Whoa! Let me try that again," she said as she wiped the remaining ivory fluid from her lips. "Hey Kaede, I'm sorry I haven't been returning your calls. Everything's been kinda busy lately, as you can probably tell. I know that I sorta messed up, dumping all of this on you so suddenly, but it would mean a lot to me if you could come and visit sometime."

Somewhere below, out of frame, an infant's cry captured everyone's attention. The view dipped suddenly as the (dzaan?) woman who was previously holding the camera set it down on a nearby table in order to pass a bundle of cloth to my friend with both hands. Two floppy little auburn ears poked out of the fabric burrito at one end and a half-canine, half-feline tail out the other. Cass soothed the little girl's cries with a paragraph of gibberish and a lullaby I didn't recognize before cradling her into her bosom. With the baby as calm as she was going to get, I finally got a good look at her adorable little face: I couldn't see her eyes, scrunched up as they were, but somehow I knew that they were the same shade of blue as my own.

"Look! it's your mommy!" Cass pointed at me through the screen and held up our daughter to face the camera, tugging at my heartstrings from hundreds of lightyears away. For a moment, whatever animosity I still held towards my old friend all but evaporated. That's *my daughter*. Stars above... I let maternal instincts I didn't even know I had take the wheel as bubbles of joyous pride welled up in my chest. I was going to be—

"My little Kaedeypoo is going to be a mom!" Anno squealed with delight and shook me by the shoulders, as if we had just won some grand cosmic lottery. "Err... dad? Sorry, I wasn't sure which one you'd prefer."

" 'Mom' is fine," I reassured her.

"Good." She leaned in to whisper into my pointed ear, "Now I get to say I'm dating the cutest MILF in the universe."

"A-Anno!" I yelped in embarrassment, practically jumping out of my seat as blood saturated my cheeks.

"Sorry! Just teasing," Anno chuckled. "Not your cup of tea then?" she asked more sincerely.

"It's not that. It's just... I'm not ready to be a mom yet," I sighed. Goddammit Cass, why did you have to make everything so difficult? "I'm flying blind here. My mom wasn't around for, well, anything really, and as much as I appreciate my dad, he still had a business to run. There was only so much time left for me. I guess I just don't want to be a deadbeat like her, but my job means that I can only visit so often, and I can barely stay above water as-is."

"Oh, Kaede, the fact that you're already so worried about your daughter... I think that speaks for itself," she reassured before nuzzling her cheek against my own. "Besides, you'll have me, you know!"

"Wait, I thought you didn't want pups?"

"I mean, I guess not. Not right now, at least. But I meant it when I said I wanted to be there for you. Besides, how could I say no to such an adorable little pup-kitten?" she said as she gestured to the little bundle of red fur on the holo-display. By the time the holo-vid ended, rays of magenta-orange light had already started to crest over the high-resolution horizon.

"As for... this..." Anno said as she placed a hand on my thigh, low enough to not be overtly sexual, but high enough to make her intention clear. "How do you feel about me giving you some... training?"

"Training?"

"Remember that time you sent me the wrong 'homework' folder?"

Oh, *that* one. I blushed at the memory. We went over the details on the walk back to my apartment. I could hardly wait.

V

I knelt down on my bed, clothes having long been discarded. Stars, was it always this soft?

Anno took a moment to fiddle with the lights till they were the color of a soft Terran sunrise before bending over to rifle through her bag. Naturally, I enjoyed the

wonderful view. She pulled out a flat velvet package that resembled an oversized wedding-ring box before turning her attention to my exposed body. After a short, dramatic pause, she lifted the lid off to reveal a bright red collar with a silver buckle, my name already engraved on the heart-shaped tag.

"You know, this was supposed to be your birthday gift, but I think you deserve your present early this time," she said as she looped the collar around my neck. The soft clinking of the tag was strangely pleasant, almost chime-like. As she finished adjusting the latch, I expected to feel a bit restrained, but paradoxically I felt freer than ever, the weight off my chest compensating for the more literal one on my neck.

A part of me still had mixed feelings about letting go of the wheel again, but deep down I knew this was different. I wasn't surrendering control to my feral libido or some oversexed stranger, but to Anno, and if there was anyone I trusted more than myself, it was her.

She kneeled down across from me on the mattress. "Remember, I want *you* to feel good, not just your body," she said as her furred hand brushed my own. "If anything's wrong, I want you to say so. Okay?"

I nodded eagerly.

"Now, tell me the safeword we agreed on. I need to be sure that you remembered it."

I whined affirmatively and nodded again, forgetting that I was supposed to speak.

"Come on, babe. I know I'm an ausar and all, but I don't actually speak puppy. Use your words."

"Avocado," I squeaked, barely suppressing the urge to laugh.

"Good gir—" was all Anno could manage before she burst into laughter. Oh well, I might as well join in. On any other day that might have spoiled the mood, but today, I think we both needed that. After taking a moment to flush the last of the giggles out of our systems, she planted her hands on my head and let her fluffy digits dance idly through my short hair as she began to pet me at leisurely pace. "Sorry babe, probably should have picked something more serious. Anyways, who's my good girl?" She switched targets and scritchd at the weak spots behind my ears, throwing me headfirst into subby bliss.

"Ahh," I whimpered. "I a-am." My tail swished in agreement, rapidly thumping against the sheets.

"You're what?"

"I'm..." I struggled to form the words as the scritch intensified, obedient puppy-feelings starting to crowd out higher-level thoughts. "I'm a good girl."

"Oh, silly pup." One of her hands wandered down my spine as she straddled my thighs. The other grabbed me by the collar and tugged, pulling me face-first into her generous cleavage. "You're not *just* a good girl, Kaede." She brought her lips to my ear and growled softly, "You're my good girl," before gently sinking her teeth into it and officializing her claim.

At that point, my vocabulary consisted of nothing but meek whimpers and submissive moans. I was a cuddly, Kaede-shaped instrument that eagerly sang for her owner at the slightest touch, and I *loved* it. My heart fluttered as I practically swooned from the slightly demeaning, yet adoring praises she placed in my ears. I felt that heat again, only it was not the instant conflagration of lust I was used to but something calmer, softer. It was more like the gentle warmth of an ancient fireplace or, well, a lover's embrace.

"Time for your medicine, pup." Anno teased before leaning over to grab a pair of Sterilex packets from the nightstand, skillfully puncturing both the wrappers in one go with one of her canines before presenting the grey pills to me in her open palm. I tucked my ears back and leaned in to take my share, only for her to pull me back by the collar and coax a sad whine out of me. "Nuh-uh. Stay." She smirked, wagging a finger at me before knocking back both pills.

Before I could object to her blatant thievery, she shoved me onto my back and grabbed my wrists, pinning them down on either side of my head. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't help but instinctively wriggle in an attempt to free my trapped limbs. Thankfully, my lover's taller frame and better leverage let her effortlessly quell my half-hearted revolt; a spark of wolfish glee even shimmered in her eyes. Still a bit stunned by her sudden aggression, I didn't even have a chance to protest before she pressed the rest of her body against me and sealed my lips with her own. I've never felt so vulnerable yet so... safe.

Meanwhile, my now rapidly-stiffening length was sandwiched between our stomachs, caught in the crossfire of our passionate makeout. Stars, was my dick always this

warm? Never mind the pleasurable friction I was experiencing as she began to grind herself against me; just the heat of it against my bare skin felt heavenly.

What started as intimate saliva sharing rapidly evolved into a rough liplock that teetered on the brink of primal ferociousness. Her tongue repeatedly penetrated my lips, wrestling my own into submission before abruptly retreating in a series of devastating hit-and-run attacks. All the while, her fangs hungrily nipped at my lower lip and occasionally at the exposed parts of my neck. She was careful to not break the skin, but aggressive enough to thoroughly mark me as *hers*. I felt so small beneath her, but in a good way, like she was sheltering me from a rainstorm. Worn down by her oral affection, I was too spent to resist as her practiced tongue battered my mouth open once more and pushed the contraceptive she previously stole down my throat. I swallowed it eagerly.

Just as I was starting to feel a bit lightheaded, my lover finally pulled away, ending the passionate tonguefucking and leaving us both panting heavily, even as shiny bridges of fluid still connected our lips. My senses started to return to me following the injection of fresh oxygen into my lungs, and I found myself lost in those fiercely intelligent, cobalt eyes of hers before I realized they were subtly checking me over for any signs of discomfort. A few heartbeats later, I also registered that my ass half had been busy: I could feel my erection throbbing in sync to my quickening pulse, not to mention the slick pre that was lathered all over our abdomens.

"Gooooood girl. Time for your treat," she cooed as she rose to her knees and wrapped a hand around my shaft, her fingers just the right length to fully encircle it. Warm, adoring touches started at my tapered tip before gliding down to the oh-so-sensitive bulbous base and then doubling back, again and again. Embarrassingly high-pitched whimpers escaped my lips as she slowly began to stroke me off, using my own copious pre-seed as lubricant even as it stained her snowy digits.

Possessed by wanton desire, my hands unconsciously reached for my heaving chest, eager to elevate my own pleasure. When my hips started to thrust on their own, a soft hand pushed down on my midriff, gently arresting my overeager bucking. "Stay still, babe," she whispered lovingly as she leaned in to nibble on my ear again. "Let me take care of you." It wasn't exactly a command, but I was so deep in that submissive headspace that it may as well have been. When she resumed stroking me, I could do nothing but dig my nails into the bedsheets and squirm in ecstasy as every square inch of my pride was subjected to her careful ministrations. In just a few seconds, I was already so close to the edge....

"Anno, slow dow— Ah!" All it took was a single squeeze on my swollen knot, and I was immediately busy painting my upper torso pearl-white, back arching and muscles spasming. I was lucky I didn't have claws, otherwise my death grip on the sheets would have torn them to ribbons as repeated pulses of concentrated bliss battered my nerves and overwhelmed whatever motor control I had left.

"Oh wow!" Anno giggled, slightly breaking character. She didn't stop though. Instead, she merely adjusted the timing of her strokes to better synchronize with the orgasmic pulses that were racing up my length, milking out every drop my body had to offer until I was howling like a bitch in heat. *Fuck, I didn't know my voice could go that high.* I collapsed as soon as the final shots struck my sternum, the mess quickly pooling between my tits with just the right combination of warmth and stickiness to feel strangely pleasurable on my skin.

"S-sorry," I managed to eke out between ragged breaths.

"Awww, don't worry. I'm just happy my little pet is enjoying herself. Now, come here." She hoisted me up by the collar into a tight hug, ravaging my lips once more. It didn't seem to bother her that she was now smearing my cum all over our upper bodies like some lewd imitation of a sandwich cookie. Then again, neither did I.

"Does my good girl want more?" she asked as she cupped my chin. The question was, of course, rhetorical. There was no denying how much we wanted each other.

"Anno, please..." I begged, letting my baser instincts begin to seep into my words.

"Tsk, such a needy girl," she chastised. "Roll over."

My body obeyed her automatically. I was on my hands and knees before I even fully registered her instruction. She told me to turn around, and I turned around, simple as that. I even lifted my tail out of the way as I presented myself to my owner, almost wishing she brought her strapon so she could mount me properly.

As if she could read my mind, my lover climbed atop me, pressing her heavy melons into my shoulder blades and her soft cheek against my own. I felt a warm wetness as a cum-slathered finger prodded at my hole before slowly sliding in with a thrust of her hips. Her supple lips caught mine over my shoulder, and she gradually added one finger after another between every faux-doggystyle thrust, stretching me out and making me shiver whenever she brushed against my cum-button.

Just before I was about to hit my limit, she pulled out and gave me a slap on the ass as a parting gift. Before I could get used to the sensation of emptiness, she jammed a tapered plug up my lubed-up tailhole, causing me to yelp as my softening boner instantly bounced back to full strength. Holy fuck. It felt like it was the size of my fully-inflated knot, maybe even a bit bigger. I was going to be soooo sore later, but for now, I could just revel in the feeling of being pleasantly stuffed.

"Good girl! Now, sit," she ordered, pointing at the floor beside the bed. It was a bit tricky, given that the thick toy rearranged my guts each time I moved, but I was already sitting on my knees by the time my owner swung her feet over the edge of the mattress. When she started to splay her furry legs, I couldn't help but inch my mouth closer to her exposed slit.

"Stay!" she barked in disapproval. Agh! No fair! Pets are supposed to please their owners, right? "Stay..." As I impatiently slapped my tail against the ground, I finally noticed that there was now a leather leash connecting my collar to my owner's hand. When did she put that on?

"Go!" she relented, even tugging on my leash to pull me in, but it was wholly unnecessary given how eager I was to please her. My upper lips met her lower ones in a sloppy kiss before I began to eat her out. Her fluffy hands played with my fluffier ears, rewarding my subby devotion with vigorous petting. I glanced up at my lover, trying to meet her eyes in spite of the prodigious underboob that obscured her lovely visage. Still, I was able to catch a sly grin on her face as well as a small remote in her other hand. "So eager!" she said as her mischievous smile grew wider. "I think you deserve another treat for that."

"Oh fuuuck..." The plug started vibrating! Even on all fours, it was a struggle to keep myself from collapsing as the rhythmic buzzing milked out sweet little mini-orgasms and ribbons of thin precum straight from the source. The best part was that I didn't even need to touch my turgid canine endowment as it twitched and drooled, on the verge of orgasm from the overwhelming anal pleasure alone. I just had to stay still and take it. "Mmm!" Easier said than done....

The leather around my neck tightened, reminding me that I still had a job to do. Pushed into a lusty overdrive by the mechanical prostate massage, I all but threw myself at her sex, forgoing technique in favor of simply mashing my face into her muff and lapping up her tangy juices like I was dying of thirst. My tongue ran wild as I desperately feasted on her gushing sex, especially when the anal vibrations made me moan inside her and dribble more pre onto the floor.

I could hear my name being called in between her pleasure-filled vocalizations, but it was as if I was underwater, submerged so deep that any words from the surface decayed into garbled noise by the time they reached me. My lungs started to ache as they demanded that I come up for air, but I was too lost in my own lust to care. Instead, I just continued to drink deeply from her sodden cunt as if her nectar could substitute for oxygen. The vibrations from the plug only added more fuel to the fire. I was so close... just one more lick....

A firm backwards tug on my leash pulled me out of that carnal haze, like a splash of ice-cold water to the face. "Running a bit too hot there, babe," she said oh-so-tenderly, ruffling my hair and bringing me back down (or was it up?) to reality. After the vibrator clicked off, all it took was a few rapid heartbeats for me to sober up. I was about to feel a bit dejected for losing control again, but with the way she lathered me with praises and ear-stitches, it was impossible to feel ashamed of myself when I was being pampered like that. Her eyes silently asked me if I still wanted to continue. I answered with my lips, in more ways than one.

I took things a bit slower the second time around, starting with a string of kisses along her inner thighs on an approach vector towards her winking sex. My tongue drew circles around her labia, making her gasp and squirm every time I brushed her clit with each circuit I completed. Instead of thrusting inside, I just danced around her honeypot and continued to savor all the cute noises she made, at least until her heels pressed into my back to force me deeper.

Turning up the heat, I let my tongue slip inside to explore her quim and search for all of her sensitive spots. "Mhh... right there! " she gasped, her voice shifting up an octave when I brushed the roof of her tunnel again. Heh. Found one. Using my tongue as a stylus, I wrote out a love poem as I continued to caress her innermost reaches, paying close attention to the pressure of her thighs on my head and the cadence of her breathing. Each of her moans pulled me close to my own, sympathetic orgasm, or maybe that was just the vibe kicking back in. Regardless, it wasn't much longer until we were both tumbling over the edge.

Anno came first, screaming my name as her body was racked with blissful spasms while her thighs clamped down hard on my head, almost as hard as her pussy clamped down on my tongue. I lightly suckled her clit to amplify her orgasm, careful to not push her too far into oversensitivity, and was rewarded with a sudden gush of girlcum that flooded my mouth to overflowing. The sticky excess dribbled down my chin in

spite of my efforts to swallow it all, leaving me utterly soaked with her love-juices — as if my own weren't enough.

It was my turn to lose my composure when she cranked the vibe-plug up to full power. Earth-shaking tremors pounded my ass before resonating throughout my lower body, instantly making my cock jump to full mast. Sublime hands-free orgasm hit me with all the subtlety of a New-Texan amazon, forcing my cum out in powerful jets that left my arms and legs shaking. Still stuck in a leg-lock with my mouth buried inside her, I could do nothing but let out pussy-muffled moans while continuing to dump my seed onto the floor in heavy, messy spurts.

We came down from our sexual high after a few minutes that felt like a few hours. Before I knew it, I was pinned down on the bed again and being showered with more positive reinforcement. Turns out, if you're called a good girl a few dozen times, you might just start to believe it.

"Think you can go one more round?" she asked, chuckling softly as she watched my eyes go wide. "If you want to, of course."

"I didn't say no..." I replied.

"That's my good girl." She kissed me on the lips, sampling her own flavor before trailing down to my cum-covered midriff to sample mine. A quick kiss on my glans rekindled my inner flame, making me hard as diamonds as she straddled my hips. Not bothering to wipe off the multiple layers of spermy paint that coated my sloppy prick, she cupped my knot to align my cockhead with her netherlips and let gravity do the work of slowly wedging herself open, millimeter by millimeter. Ironically, the same traits that make ausar cocks so well-suited for rough breeding sessions also makes them perfect tender lovemaking. The narrow, tapered tip adds an unrivaled gentleness to the initial penetration, starting off nice and easy before slowly ramping up to stretch a lover's hole open with the full girth. I was tempted to buck up into her to hasten our inevitable union, but I managed to keep my desires in check in favor of letting my girlfriend have her way with me.

By the time her folds kissed the top of my bulbous base, I was already shaking with pleasure and battering the sheets with my tail. My turgid rod was shrouded in the most intimate version of a hug: surrounded on all sides by affectionate warmth. Then she started to gyrate her hips, doing wonderful things to her internal passage and forcing me to close my eyes in an attempt to delay the inevitable. I felt her shift her

weight forward to smother my comparatively smaller bust with her own, making me squeal when my sensitive buds brushed against hers.

Suddenly, she paused. I opened my eyes again.

"Sorry pet, I just wanted to look into those pretty eyes of yours when you cum," she whispered in a gentle voice that concealed an undercurrent of wolfish desire. Without warning, she started to bounce her hips on my lap, filling the room with deliciously moist schlicking sounds as fresh shots of pre and girlcum soaked our crotches. My length was subjected to the most exquisite friction as it repeatedly slid in and out of warm, wet heaven. At this rate, there was no way I could hold out.

Sensing my rapidly approaching climax, she slowed her frantic riding to a crawl, keeping me twitching and hard for her, but just below the euphoric threshold. "Come on, use those cute little hips of yours, babe," she ordered playfully as she tugged on the soft leather around my neck.

She didn't need to tell me twice. I answered with a fierce tip-to-knot thrust that left us both reeling with carnal delight. The rapid bucking left us speechless as I let loose all of the lustful urges I'd been holding back. Still, I was not some simple beast, mindlessly rutting the nearest hole in sight, but a tamed, well-trained animal. Bestial mating instincts were reforged into tools dedicated solely for maximizing my partner's pleasure — the perfect mix of animalistic passion and expert technique of a born sub. If the way Anno started to howl and desperately meet my thrusts with her own was any indication, I was doing a *very* good job.

Still, it didn't take more than a few seconds before she was the one fucking me into the mattress, not that I had any intention of stopping her. Eager to reassert her doting dominance, her white tail coiled around mine and wrestled it into submission while her fingers interlaced with my own. Fast, slow, gentle, rough... all those words ceased to have meaning. The only thing that mattered was following the melody of our conjoined bodies and blissful vocalizations. The tempo ebbed and flowed like the tide, meaty breeding strokes one moment, gentle cuddlefucking the next. Stars, her skin was so warm against mine, her breath so heavy on my shoulder. I could hear, no, **feel** my heart pounding in my chest, overtaxed from its double-duty as both a circulatory organ and a reservoir for my overflowing ardor. We were lost in our own little universe, dancing to the twinned metronomes of our beating hearts.

"I love you," we didn't say. What need have we for words?

We could both feel our respective climaxes coming a mile away, having listened to this song together so many times before. I angled my thrusts to hit all of those sweet spots I found earlier, making sure to grind my rapidly growing breeding-bulb against her pink pearl at the apex of every thrust. She did the same to me, clamping down on my shaft in ways that made me twitch inside her and scream her name. With a final declaration of our sapphic desire, we slammed our hips together and forced my knot to spread her open before slipping in with a lewd pop and a spray of our mixed fluids. We clung to each other tightly, as intertwined and connected as two lovers could physically be. A single heartfelt kiss was all that we needed to push us both over the threshold and into paradise.

Climax hit both of us in full force as soon as our lips touched, an electrical arc that made both of us writhe with pleasure while our muscles ran on autopilot. We were stuck in an incredible feedback loop of pure bliss: she'd squeeze me tightly with her inner walls in ways that made me throb and twitch, which just made her squeeze harder in turn. Another gush of her juices flooded the space between us, dowsing our crotches with another wave of slick warmth. My pearlescent offering erupted inside of her while her orgasmic contractions milked me with masterful finesse, extending my own orgasm into a minutes-long affair and coaxing my overtaxed balls to pump out more and more ivory seed. It wasn't long before her slim midriff started to swell out into the most adorable little cum-paunch.

"Wow, Red," she murmured as she leaned back and glanced down at her abdominals, caressing the faint bulge. Her eyes were half-focused and dreamy, probably not too dissimilar to my own. "Guess the pills haven't fully worn off. I don't remember you ever being this... productive."

My reply was cut short by a loud whimper as the dormant plug still embedded in my backdoor suddenly sprang to life, vibrating right against my overworked prostate and making my legs quiver at the same frequency. Coupled with her walls clenching down on my hypersensitive knot, I was immediately pulled over the edge and into another toe-curling orgasm, refractory period be damned.

"I didn't say you could stop though, pet," she mumbled between breathy moans as I continued to overfill her channel. "I want all of you. Every. Last. Drop."

I cried out in ecstasy as I gave her my all, melting into a little half-aural puddle beneath her.

After riding out the last aftershocks of our intense finale, we snuggled into each other's arms, our rapid heartbeats slowing and synchronizing as our eyelids started to leaden. It didn't matter that we were utterly filthy, covered nearly head-to-toe in multiple layers of each other's orgasmic fluids, cleanliness could come later. Right now, nothing was more important than savoring the magical afterglow that came with knot-mandated cuddles. We basked in the subdued lusty ambience and whispered sweet nothings until we lulled each other to sleep.

The rest of the day disappeared in a dream-like blur. After we awoke from our post-coital nap, we washed up and took turns drying and brushing each other's fur. We split a bowl of instant ramen for brunch (Anno somehow managed to burn hers) and spent the afternoon watching some old holos together. One thing led to another, and we ended up in a mating press on the couch before making out for another couple hours. We went to get cleaned up again, only to end up fucking in the shower. Twice. It almost felt like we were back in college, carefree and still discovering ourselves, making the most of my cramped little dorm room and getting teased by my neighbors for all the noise we made. After a picturesque dinner date straight out of a cheesy romance novel, we made love for the seventh time that day before passing out in each other's arms again.

I've never slept better.

EPILOGUE

Desire is a funny thing. It's fickle, confusing, even contradictory at times. I've never been much of a planner, but I always had at least a vague idea of what I wanted to do with my life. Thing is, life's a fucking bitch sometimes, throwing wrenches into your plans and sending you careening down a path you never saw coming.

Inhale.

Exhale.

The soothing pitter-patter of raindrops hitting the virtual windows slowly brought me back to the material world. I opened my eyes to see the fox-eared therapist sitting across from me. His nine purple tails wriggled idly behind his warm smile.

"Ok, that's good enough for today," he said, his voice somehow comfy, like a pillowy bed you could just sink into. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. A lot better, actually. Thanks for this, Mitch," I replied.

"No need! You did all of the hard work. I merely guided you."

"Still, thank you."

"My pleasure."

After exchanging goodbyes, I walked out of Mitch's little office and onto the cozy wood-paneled corridors of Canadia Station. My lover was waiting on a bench recessed into a small alcove outside, reading something physics-y on her holopad.

"How'd it go?" she asked as she put her device away and took my hand.

"Pretty good! I was a bit skeptical at first, but it certainly helped me feel a bit more 'in control' of things."

"Bold words for a subby little fluffbutt," she said as her naughty hand squeezed my ass.

"H-Hey!" I yelped.

A short walk later, we arrived at one of the numerous circular landing platforms that ringed the lower levels of the station. Automatic flood lights illuminated Talon Rogue in all of her beat-up glory while a translucent shield bubble held back the cold vacuum, leaving us with an unimpeded view of the stellar ocean. Her new cargo door was as pristine as can be, and her name was now stenciled in sharp white letters along her slender neck. There were still a couple of new scars on her portside that evidently didn't buff out, but she wore them with pride, like medals of honor.

Athena lowered the boarding ramp as we approached, and we reminisced about our first date back at the academy as we climbed up. I let Anno get comfy in my quarters while I made my way up to the cockpit. Athena's diminutive avatar popped into existence out of thin air as I cycled the hatch.

"Hey, I probably should have said this sooner, but thanks for... you know... for saving my life earlier," I told her.

A cheery laugh slipped through a crack in her armor. "Oh, don't worry about it! It's practically my job, you know. Now, shoo! Don't make your girlfriend wait for you, Captain *Kaedeypoo*," she snickered. Down the hall, I could hear my girlfriend start laughing uproariously.

"ANNOOO!" I whined as my face started to redden. Geez, you two....

I let Athena handle the lift-off sequence as I joined my lover on my little bunk. It was barely long enough to fit six feet of snowy-haired ausar beauty, but it's not like we needed an excuse to snuggle in close.

The ship's main engines hummed to life as we cleared the station. I quickly pulled up a starmap on my holoband, charting a course for the system's warp gate and then Tarkus beyond. For a moment, I thought about all of the things I've done up until now, superimposing the trajectory of my life onto the holographic projection. Infinite possible pathways branched out like the arms of a fractal, every happy memory and every misadventure a fork in the road. And yet, there was still so much ahead of me... more trials to overcome and more life to live.

Of course I still had hell of a libido, but for once, I felt like I was the one in the captain's seat. Gone was that uncontrolled wildfire, in its place the brilliant glow of a starship's drive plume. It was still hot enough to burn straight through metal, sure, but only when I wanted it to (which to be fair, was pretty fucking often).

I uncorked the half-full bottle of Windswept and poured two glasses for me and my lover, taking time to savor the sweet notes of cinnamon and pear as I held her close. The lightdrive kicked in with a mechanical whine and we shot off at relativistic speed, a single streak of light in the infinite night sky.

Author's Note: This is an unofficial sequel to the series of canon TiTS novellas penned by Savin and Fenoxo ([Read here](#)). I highly recommend that you read those first, otherwise the plot/tone of this story won't work as intended since I wrote it with the assumption that the reader is coming straight off the tail end of *Downtime*. The ideal read-order is as follows:

1. *Talon Rogue*
2. *The Gene Stealer*
3. *The Treatment* (mostly optional)
4. *Downtime*
5. *Rain on Tavros*

Synopsis: Several months after that short-lived reunion with her childhood friend, Kaede is forced to confront her inner demons after a cargo run nearly blows up in her face. Definitely a slight departure from the usual tone of TiTS, this is more of an angsty drama/romance fic than a smut one.

Tags: TiTS, Kaede/Anno, TF/F, Plot with Porn, Gentle Femdom, French Kissing, Petplay, Handjob, Cunnilingus, Toys, P-in-V Sex, Hurt/Comfort, (Literal) Fluff, Love, Romantic Sex

Warnings: Lots of Angst, Mild Alcoholism, Mild Gore, Depictions of PTSD/Mental Trauma

Changelog 9/22/25:

- Lots of typos fixed (thanks to Taeio, Rinoerino, and TheShepard256)
- No story changes (yet)
- Other small tweaks

RAIN ON TAVROS

by Kitbashed

|

"Tavros Control, this is Talon Rogue. Requesting departure clearance."

"Copy, Talon Rogue. You are cleared for burn on vector zero-five one-two. Releasing docking arms now. Acknowledge please."

"Acknowledged, Tavros Control. Proceeding to burn on zero-five one-two."

The docking clamps fell away with hollow thuds that reverberated through the ship's hull. Freed from her moorings, Talon Rogue began to drift aimlessly, like a leaf on the solar wind. Switching off the grav generator, I hopped out of my seat and let myself do the same. There was always something calming about being in zero-G, something special about that sensation of being completely unburdened. I never understood why it made people feel uneasy. Then again, I grew up out here in the black; they probably get spacesick the same way I get groundsick after being stuck planetside for too long.

Like all good things, the moment ultimately passed. I strapped in and reengaged the gravity, only to hear a muffled splat behind me, presumably from something in the rec room I forgot to secure. Oh well. With a couple more button-presses and switch-flips that were ingrained into my muscle memory, I spooled up the main drives and plotted a course for the system's warp gate. Outside my starboard viewport, the great nanosteel rings of Tavros Station slowly danced about their central axis.

I tapped a button on my console to summon Athena as I stood up. The 12" digital goddess instantly materialized from the overhead holo-projectors, the bronze armor that she wore over her toga gleaming in the sunlight of an unseen world.

"Shall I take the helm, Captain Entara?" she asked with her usual ice-cold confidence. I could have sworn there was a slight smirk on her verdant visage.

"Oh come on! I know you're just messing with me at this point," I replied, exasperated. "It's *Kaede*."

"Ah, apologies, Captain... Kaede."

"Fine, whatever," I groaned. "Just wake me up when we get there." I walked down from the cockpit and cycled the door to the common room. Bell peppers and synth-beef (with actual synth-beef this time!) were splattered all over the central holotable with a crumpled paper takeout container acting as the centerpiece to the greasy exhibit. Ugh, that's what I get for not putting leftovers away. I'll deal with that later.

I lazily slapped the wall terminal and the door to my quarters rolled open with a mechanical thump. To be honest, it was more like a converted storage closet than a

proper bedroom; there was barely enough space to fit my bunk (and the occasional lover) in there. I cut power to my legs and faceplanted onto the bed with enough force to make my pillow jump. What? I've been awake for 22 hours straight; I think I've earned a little nap. Besides, I was already in my pajamas.

My mind began to wander as I prepared to shut down the rest of my weary body. These past months have been nothing but back and forth, coming and going, only stopping at port long enough to refuel, exchange cargo, and restock on instant noodles. Such is the life of a tramp-freighter captain. You can't compete with those massive Atlas-class superfreighters in the core, so you just have to take whatever contracts the big fish deem too small or too dangerous to bother with.

Sure, I probably could have let Athena do my job and snoozed the time away instead of pushing myself this hard. But I couldn't risk anyone finding out that I had an intelligent superweapon (stolen from the most powerful criminal syndicate in the galaxy no less) just casually hanging out aboard my ship. The less involved Athena was, the better. Besides, work helped me keep my mind off things; turns out you don't get nightmares if you're so tired that your brain simply ceases to function the instant you hit the sack. That's the thing about being self-employed: I get to be my own boss, and sometimes she's a prick.

On the bright side, all that hard work meant I actually had a decent amount of spending money for once. I could treat Anno to fancy dinners and fun dates a lot more often, maybe even start looking into buying some upgrades for the ship. Those new Type-R Aegis engines did look pretty sweet....

Just as I was about to doze off, Talon Rogue's klaxon stabbed me right in my sensitive ausar ears.

"What the *fuck* Athena!?"

"Apologies, Captain Kaede," her disembodied voice responded from my holoband, the blaring alarm falling silent as she did. "I'm getting an excessive temperature alert coming from the portside cargo hold: 115.2 degrees and climbing rapidly."

"Give me a visual," I groaned, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Camera seven is still down after last week's incident with that loading drone. I only became aware of the issue when the hold's atmospheric control unit reported it was unable to maintain temperature."

"Probably just another coolant leak." And I just had that fixed....

Not bothering to dress myself, I staggered out of bed wearing nothing but my boxers and a weathered tank-top before making my way to the entrance of the cargo bay on the opposite side of the ship. Looking through the small viewport on the door, everything seemed fine: no superheated coolant was spewing from the ceiling, nor was anything on fire. I pulled up the room's environmental data on the nearby wall terminal. Strange, everything else was in the green, only the temperature readout was flashing red. A faulty sensor perhaps?

I fingered the 'open' button on the interface, just enough to crack the hermetic seal. Big mistake. A sudden blast of heat rushed through the crack and washed over me, instantly evaporating all of the moisture from my exposed skin and stinging my eyes. It was as if I had opened a portal to a scorching desert on Ausaril. Not wanting to become half-ausar jerky, I manually slammed the reinforced door shut.

While my head was busy pondering why the fuck my ship suddenly had a new room-sized oven, my legs were already hauling ass to grab my EVA suit from the airlock at the ship's fore. I know it's made for hard vacuum, not extreme heat in a pressurized environment, but it should be fine, right? I threw open the equipment locker and grabbed a blocky, orange space suit, its mottled surface riddled with scuff marks and patched-up punctures. I always hated how I had to squish my ears and tuck my tail down my right leg to fit into the skin-tight undersuit, but I guess that's just what I get for being stingy and buying second-hand gear that wasn't even made for an ausar.

"Hey Athena, go through the cargo manifest and see if you can find anything. Oh, and add that camera to the maintenance schedule."

"Done," she replied instantaneously. "If the manifest is to be believed, nothing we're carrying could possibly generate that much heat, so it must be something else I'm not seeing."

Great. I finished donning my gear as I made my way back, sealing the helmet with a quarter turn and a reassuring click. Alright, let's try this again. I triple checked my suit's diagnostics before taking a deep breath and breaching the seal once more.

The cargo bay was about 20 by 30 feet, rounded into an arc that followed the contours of Talon's disk-shaped main hull. Cargo containers of various colors, shapes,

and sizes were arranged in neat stacks on either side, held (relatively) secure by a mixture of magnetic clamps and good ol' ratchet straps. A small freight elevator sat flush with the floor towards the center, and the far wall was dominated by a large gull-wing door, intended to facilitate cargo transfers with ships that weren't big enough to have their own hangars. I don't use it much.

It didn't take an infrared cam to figure out who the culprit was. The air roiled angrily around a four-foot metal cube towards the center of the hold, causing my suit's thermal control unit to sputter as it struggled to keep the heat at bay. Plastered all over the heavy-duty crate's surface were warning labels in various languages: English, Ausari, even Gabilanese. These kinds of crates were designed to safely transport all sorts of nasties, everything from radioactive waste to xenobiological samples, hence the tank-like armor. Hell, they were supposedly safe enough that even an indie like me could hypothetically take them after signing a few papers, provided that I didn't try to open them. Or ask too many questions.

Unfortunately for me, this one didn't seem to live up to the hype. There was a massive dent on the crate's side that exposed thick layers of delaminated armor plating.

"You getting this?" I asked as I tapped my helmet's built-in camera.

"Loud and clear," Athena's voice crackled over the suit's shitty commlink.

"Alright, what exactly am I looking at?"

"A Pyrite Industries hazmat container, model B2E-MO. Not sure about its contents yet; I need a second to do some more cross-referencing since it's not one of ours. Coincidentally, we're missing a RhenWorld crate of similar size. It's likely they got mixed up at the docks."

Well, sucks for whoever owned this one, because it sure as hell wasn't staying on my ship any longer. If there's one thing that I actually remembered from my academy days, it's that overheating your ship is a surefire way to die a slow, painful death out here. Contrary to popular belief, space is only cold by technicality. The real issue is that it's an incredible insulator (a bit of a problem for us spacers since fusion reactors get pretty fucking hot).

Speaking of which, the heat emanating from my new mystery box was already starting to penetrate my suit, intensifying with every step. My underdressed form was soon

coated head-to-toe in a solid film of sweat, soaking into my undersuit and matting my fur. It was such an aggravating combination of hellish heat and disgusting stickiness that it probably would have turned off even the most hardcore sweat fetishist (well, at least I naively imagined it would). A cold shower sounded downright amazing right about now.

Pushing through the blistering air, I finally got close enough to activate the hover-platform underneath the crate with a tap of my boot, causing it to slowly rise into the air as the repulsor pads hummed to life. It wasn't a smooth ascent though – the mechanical beast of burden shuddered as it struggled to support the immense weight, and the repulsor pads immediately started to leak thin wisps of pale smoke, overheating from being in direct contact with the two-ton space heater.

Yeah... that's not good. I had Athena unfurl the bay's cargo door and gave the hover-platform a hard shove, sending it gliding frictionlessly across the hold towards the sea of stars beyond. Just as the platform was about to slip through the blue-tinted oxygen shield, one of the repulsor pads gave out, causing the hover-plat to lurch as the other pads attempted to compensate. A half-second later, another pad burned out, sparking a rapid cascading failure as each dead repulsor put more and more strain on the ones that remained. By the time I realized what was going on, the unbalanced thrust sent the platform and its superheated cargo careening back toward me.

Move! Move dammit! I mentally screamed at my cumbersome suit and exhausted body in a last-ditch attempt to get them to dodge out of the way faster, but my efforts were in vain. The corner of the platform clipped my waist as the last of the hover-pads died, knocking me prone before crashing down hard on my lower legs. I heard a sickening crunch followed by an ear-splitting scream as sharpened spears of pure agony raced up my nervous system to jab at my psyche. Satisfied with the damage it had inflicted, the smoldering crate skidded off the hover-plat and screeched to a halt on the opposite end of the hold.

"Kaede? Are you alright!?" cried Athena's static-filled voice over the commlink.

Biting back the pain and stream of expletives, I ordered her to shut off the grav generator. After a subjective eternity, the crushing weight on my legs relented and I managed to extricate myself out from under the smoking hover-plat. When I clicked on my mag-soles and reflexively tried to stand back up, my right boot made me wince slightly as it tugged at my bruised, tail-wrapped leg till it touched down on the deck. I slowly lowered my other leg to do the sam—

"OW-FUCK-SHIT-OW-SON-OF-A—"

A torrent of curses flew out of my mouth till I got sick of repeating the same swears and started to make up new ones. Even without gravity, the gentle pull of my magboot was enough to make me feel like my tibia was about to splinter apart like rotten wood. Images of gruesome industrial accidents flashed in my mind, lingering for a few excruciating seconds before I could marshal enough willpower to swat them away. As the pain slowly stopped occupying the entirety of my cognitive bandwidth, I became increasingly aware of the fact that someone was shouting directly into my folded-up ears.

"...KAEDE? KAEDE!? DO YOU COPY!?"

"OKAY OKAY! STOP YELLING DAMMIT!" I shouted back. Athena's voice instantly decreased in volume, but not in urgency.

"That crate is fucking bomb! You need to bail—"

"How long do I have?" I interrupted.

"Less than a minute!" she returned without skipping a beat.

"Can the shields take it?"

"Kaede, are you insane!? There's not enough time to push it overboard! You need to bail out now so I can put enough distance between us to get you clear of the blast radius."

"Sorry," I grunted before severing the commlink in a flash of anger. I knew I was being rash and Athena was probably right (as usual), but abandoning the life I've worked so hard to build... I couldn't do that. Flying my own ship, seeing the stars, this has *always* been the dream for me. I wasn't ready to give Talon Rogue up, not without a fight.

As soon as a timer started ticking in the back of my head, I was already busy attaching a safety tether from my belt to an anchor point recessed into the floor and then immediately pushing off the deck with my good leg. After a few seconds of weightless flight, I managed an awkward one-legged landing on the bulkhead closest to the now glowing-red crate. After an even more awkward one-legged-and-two-handed climb

down from the wall, I positioned myself behind the metal cube, magnetically locked my right boot to the deck, and pushed. Hard.

The crate barely budged. It was weightless, not massless. Shit. Its superheated surface should have been hot enough to burn my hands at this point — I could almost smell the horrid stench of burning polymer as the outer layers of my gloves started to melt — but all I could feel was my eyelids growing heavy as heat stroke and exhaustion started to exact their toll on me. Just as my arms were about to fully extend, I threw all the strength I could muster into a final shove and propelled the crate towards the cold void... at a snail's pace. To add insult to injury, that shove also overpowered the lone magboot anchoring me to the deck, sending me into an uncontrolled zero-G backflip.

The countdown in my head grew louder as I burned precious seconds tumbling helplessly in the air. You know what? At this point I was just fucking pissed. Over these past few years, I've cheated death more times than I can count; I've had bullets, lasers, even actual nukes thrown at me and I lived to tell the tale, like hell I was going to die because of some overgrown hot potato!

As soon as the spinning brought me back into alignment with the deck, I reactivated my magboots and thrust both of my legs downwards. The taste of copper filled my mouth as I bit my tongue stifling a scream. I sprint-limped to catch up with my slow-moving adversary, every step punctuated with a muffled cry or a colorful expletive, sometimes even a hybrid of the two. The crate was glowing bright enough to hurt my eyes by the time my damaged gloves reestablished contact, at least until my polarized visor flipped down automatically. I resumed pushing, but everything was too hot... too heavy... maybe if I closed my eyes a little...

A fresh burst of agony from my leg jolted me awake as I threw myself against the container. I was running off pure adrenaline at this point, ignoring the biological alarms blaring in my head as I felt fire tearing at my skin and sharp fragments of bone shredding my leg from the inside out. The pain howled louder and louder, threatening to tear my mind apart. But the noise also kept me on the knife's edge of consciousness, letting me keep my feet firmly planted on the deck as I continued to push. And yet, it still wasn't enough. Darkness soon began to encroach on the edges of my vision while the strength in my limbs started to run dry. Just as I was about to close my eyes and let myself succumb, a final blood-curdling scream resonated in my helmet as my shoulder slammed into the crate, sending it lazily floating past the sky-blue oxygen barrier and the orange combat shield behind it.

Then it exploded.

You know what the worst part is about having big ears? You hear *everything*. Momentarily blinded by the brilliant flash of the detonation, I could do nothing but listen in horror as everything around me went to shit. The blaring of the depressurization alarm as both of the shields collapsed, the rumble of cargo crates being ripped from the hold and thrown into the black abyss, even Athena's desperate cries of "Mayday! Mayday!" over the emergency channel — I could hear all of it in excruciating detail.

Before my eyes could recover, explosive decompression swept my legs out from under me and threw me overboard with the rest of the cargo, at least until my safety tether drew taut and swung me in a vicious arc back towards the ship. Still dazed and half-conscious, I barely registered the pain of being slammed face-first into the portside engine nacelle, only noticing the subtle hiss of air leaking out of the freshly-bloodstained cracks in my faceplate. The stars started to dim as the air in my suit grew thinner.

It wasn't long before it all faded to black.

||

I heard my name being called.

There was nothing but featureless white expanse when I opened my eyes.

They called my name again, and I could faintly make out someone snapping their fingers. My ears swiveled on auto-track, scanning the colorless void in an attempt to pinpoint the origin of the sounds. I heard it again: nine o' clock high. They were close. As soon as I started to turn my head, the illusion collapsed.

The flashlight that had been previously shining directly into my retinas clicked off. After blinking a few times to clear the bright afterimages, I saw a grey-haired kaithrit medic staring down at me. A six-pointed star of life was emblazoned on his fireproof jacket, and based on the heavy bags that lay under his experienced eyes, he was someone who had seen everything and yet was still frequently disappointed. I saw his lips move as he put the flashlight away, but I couldn't understand what he was saying.

My ears worked just fine, but it felt like my brain was lagging behind, unable to process the noises into words fast enough.

I took a moment to get my bearings: I was laying down on a stretcher in one of Tavros' numerous hangar bays. Scraps of my EVA suit were strewn haphazardly on the hangar floor around me, presumably shredded by the paramedics' trauma shears. My helmet didn't fare much better; its spiderwebbed visor was spattered with small blotches of freeze-dried crimson. A motley collection of dockworkers, technicians, and fellow pilots had already gathered around the perimeter to watch, although they maintained a polite distance so that the medics had enough space to work.

"Wha-appened?" I slurred.

"Broken fibula, fractured tibia, acute hypoxia, hyperthermia, a couple lacerations, and some first degree burns. Hardly anything serious," the paramedic said in a disinterested monotone, as if I hadn't been on death's door but a few minutes prior. "Do tell me if you notice any problems with your vision though. Ocular injuries are an entirely different beast."

I responded in the negative, but I'm not entirely sure he heard me.

"Good. The nanogel should come off on its own after an hour or two," he continued, gesturing to the green, blobby cast that covered my left shin. Although the outer layers had already solidified into a hard shell, it still felt all cold and slimy on the inside, but at least it seemed to keep the pain at bay. "You're free to go, just don't engage in any strenuous activity before the cast comes off."

The kaithrit walked off before I could even reply. A younger human EMT sheepishly removed the autodoc hugging my bicep and wiped off the excess medigel that remained on my palms and forehead, clearly a bit embarrassed by the curtness of her older colleague. As she helped me to my feet, I heard a couple sighs of relief from a few familiar faces in the crowd before they started to disperse, with the exception of a burly equine mechanic that was hurriedly pushing his way toward the front. The poor EMT nearly got trampled as Uncle Ivan charged forward and scooped me up into an airtight hug.

"Told eem ya be fine! It take more than zat to keep little wolf down!" he cheered as he effortlessly lifted me off the deck.

"Good to see you too," I replied — not an easy task considering the fact that his high-caliber arms were squeezing me like a plushie. "Is Dad here?"

Ivan's smile faltered, even if only for a microsecond. "Papa is off-station. 'Meet with Mr. Chow,' he say." Noticing the disappointment on my face, he gingerly set me down and rubbed my entire head with his enormous paw in a hyper-sized headpat. I almost felt like a little kid again. "Do not worry, pup! Papa be back soon. Ivan fix ship in no time!"

"Thanks. You're the best, Uncle Ivan." I returned the favor with a brief hug of my own before letting him get back to work. Once the medics packed up and the fanfare died down, I took a seat against a large container filled with spare transponder beacons and pinged Athena on my holoband. "How bad is it?"

"You heard the doctor, you should be fine after a bit of rest." she responded.

"You know that's not what I meant."

Athena gave me a look that was approximately apologetic. "The shields absorbed the brunt of the blast, but the cargo door was protruding outside the shield envelope and got hit pretty hard. Almost all of the freight in that bay was spaced when the oxygen shield got knocked out. Estimated damages, including repair fees, liabilities for the lost cargo, and penalties for breaching our delivery contracts, totals at... 31459 credits."

God. Fucking. Dammit. I slammed my fist against the ground in frustration. Ow. So much for climbing out of the debt-hole before I turned 30. I slumped against the crate, groaning with a mixture of pain and exhaustion. Well, at least being a Tavros native meant that I wasn't about to get bitchslapped with a fat medical bill. Small victories, I guess. Just as I was about to breathe a small sigh of relief for not being exploded today, I noticed the anxious tension on Athena's face — she still had more bad news.

"You also received a new video message while you were out..." She stalled by clearing her simulated throat; I guess even she can get nervous sometimes. "...from Cassandra."

My stomach dropped. I've been dreading this moment ever since that fateful night when she showed up at my apartment and reinserted herself back into my life. For months, I've tried everything short of physically scouring the entirety of Confederate

space attempting to get a hold of her. I've tried emails, dusty chat rooms, even her old game accounts. It was practically engraved into my daily routine: I'd wake up, dial Cass, and wait exactly 51.2 seconds for the call to go to voicemail before leaving the same message I've already repeated a hundred times over. She never replied. Honestly, I had almost convinced myself that night was nothing more than some weird hormone-fueled nightmare spawned from my own anxieties. That was, until today.

But why now? Why did she decide to call back today of all days? Why did she wait nearly nine months...

Oh god.

I double checked my mental math, desperately hoping that I hit my head harder than I thought, or that my internal calendar was simply off. No such luck. Fuck, I could barely handle my current relationships, let alone my job and my finances. Parenthood was supposed to be a distant 'maybe' for me, something to consider long after I'd paid Talon off and settled down with Anno in some cozy little place we could call our own. It was hard to resist the temptation to curl up into a ball and cry.

Before I could death spiral any further, embedded mental failsafes forcefully derailed that train of thought and banished it to the back of my mind. Baby steps, one life-shattering development at a time. I just had to focus on getting the ship fixed. But first, I needed a drink.

As I slowly stood up, careful not to put too much weight on my left side, I glanced back at Talon Rogue. The entirety of her curvaceous portside was pockmarked with countless micro-shrapnel impacts, but those were peanuts compared to the injuries sustained by the still-unfurled cargo door. It honestly hurt to look at it; the space-grade gull-wing was horrifically perforated and mangled, sticking out like a broken limb. That makes two of us, I guess. I limped out of the hangar and caught a lift on one of the countless cyclical elevators that formed the spine of the station.

Athena filled me in on the rest of the details during the ride up. Apparently, it was some youngster's first day on the job. The kid was too busy fooling around with their new power loader to notice that they had plopped some experimental fuel cell onto the wrong ship (my ship!) with a fair bit of rough handling for good measure. She notified me that she already had a legal fusillade armed and ready, but I waved her off. Call me a softie if you want, but I wasn't about to sue some poor kid into oblivion and drag them into the debt hole, even if they did nearly blow me and Talon up in their stupidity. Don't get me wrong though, I wasn't above cussing them out; it's just

that Ivan had apparently beat me to the punch. At least I could rest easy knowing that he probably scared the living daylights out of them.

I was still picking flakes of dried blood out of my hair by the time the elevator doors opened. I've cleaned worse things out of it, but still, ew. The merchant deck was strangely uncrowded today, relatively speaking. Then again, 'deserted' by Tavros standards just meant you could occasionally catch glimpses of the floor in between the gaps of bustling bodies. It wasn't always like this: back before the planet rush started, I never had to worry about inconsiderate assholes constantly butting into my personal space or stepping on my tail.

Anon's was also a bit on the empty side, but that was to be expected given that it was barely three o'clock. Still, there were more than enough people to fill the bar with the usual sounds and... distinctive aromas.

Tri'en, the four-armed bartender, waved me over with his free hand (his other three were occupied serving other customers). "Hey pup! Long time no— Oh. You look like shit. Bad run?"

Sometimes, I wish people would just mind their own business. "Is it that obvious?" I groaned.

"Well, for one thing, that big ol' tail of yours is practically mopping my floor."

I glanced behind me and sure enough, my prized ginger fur was blackened by all the bar-floor muck I had just trudged through, as if being drenched with sweat wasn't enough. Great. He set down a bottle of aged Windswept on the counter as I sat down on one of the few stools that didn't squeak.

"On the house..."

"Thanks, Tri," I muttered. I reached for the forest-green bottle of rum, only for him to pull it back at the last moment.

"But first, you wanna talk about it?"

"I'm fine, Tri'en," I growled, loud enough to startle the towering suula sitting a few seats down from me. "Can I get my drink now?"

The green man sighed in disappointment before he unstopped the bottle and poured me a glass with his lower arms. I drank it all with a few quick gulps, barely acknowledging the sweet notes of cinnamon and pear before slapping the empty glass down on the counter. I immediately motioned for another round, to which he reluctantly obliged.

"Listen kiddo, I've seen that look in your eyes before," he sighed as he replenished my drink. "If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. I get it. Just... don't lie about it. There's no reward in pretending things are all fine and dandy when they're not."

"I'm not bullshitting you, Tri. I'm **fine**." I downed my drink and gestured for another refill. He shook his head.

"I'm not the one you're bullshitting," he scolded. Much to my irritation, he put my glass away and sealed the bottle. "Besides, your old man is going to kill me if I let you drink yourself stupid like last time, and I'm not carrying your scrawny ass back to your flat again." His upper-right hand reached up to rub two out of his three eyes as he let out another tired exhale. "Tell you what: you get yourself cleaned up and come back tomorrow, and I'll give you the rest of the bottle then. Deal?"

I was starting to get real tired of being infantilized like this. "Oh, fuck off!" is what I was about to say, if not for a familiar tap on my shoulder.

"Hey, Red," Anno purred in all of her snowy-haired glory. She wasn't wearing that skin-tight Steele Tech catsuit this time, but her undersized blouse and shrink-wrapped jeans weren't exactly any more modest. I could practically see her every curve through the thin fabric, not to mention the way her ample chest swelled with every breath. Ack! A stirring between my legs immediately reminded me that I was still wearing nothing but my undergarments.

"H-Hey Anno!" I blurted as I concealed my busted leg behind my tail and tried to make myself look less disheveled. Anno didn't seem to care, at least as far as I could tell.

"Thought you were shipping out today?"

"Yeah uhh... there was a bit of a mixup. I'll probably be stuck here for a few more days."

"Hmm... I still have some shopping I need to do, but what do you say I swing by your place for some fun later tonight? I want to give you a *proper* sendoff." Her voice was practically dripping with sensuality.

Heh, maybe today wasn't going to be a complete shitshow after all. "You know it, babe!" I said as I gave my best attempt at a roguish wink, complete with finger guns. It totally sucked, but I knew it'd make her laugh at least.

"Well, well, aren't you just a charming little hotshot?" she giggled, giving me a quick pet between the ears before waving goodbye. I watched her go, a bit more wistfully than I'd like to admit, and her pale fur soon vanished into the ocean of bodies outside.

"Lemonade?" Tri'en offered diplomatically as he pushed a tall glass of the stuff towards me. I made sure he saw my eyes do a full barrel roll before taking a sip.

The walk back to my apartment was pleasantly unremarkable. I barely acknowledged house-Athena's greeting as I opened the front door and made a beeline for the bathroom. The shower was already warmed up by the time my inadequate clothing hit the floor. Fuck, that felt good... nothing like a nice bit of steam and suds to wash away a day's troubles. Layers of caked-on sweat and dried blood were easily whisked down the drain by the liquid massage. Even the solidified green goop on my shin crumbled and dissolved with minimal effort, revealing a pristine, slender leg beneath. Oh the wonders of modern medical technology.

I was almost presentable by the time I stepped out of the shower, if you ignored the fact that my tail had been replaced by a hairy waterlogged noodle. Ugh, as much as I loved my fur, it was a real pain in the ass sometimes (pun intended). It took nearly half an hour of blow-drying and brushing to restore it to its former fluffy glory. Whatever, gotta look my best for Anno.

After drying the rest of my body off and donning a fresh set of undergarments, I flopped down on the couch and took a nap while I waited for my girlfriend to arrive. For better or for worse, it was a pretty short nap; Anno had already made herself at home before my holoband's alarm clock could go off.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she teased, setting down two glasses of water on the coffee table before plopping down on the couch next to me.

"Morning, babe," I yawned, ignoring the fact that we were already well into the evening. I was still tired as a dog, but a quick smooch from my lover was apparently all that was needed to recharge my weary body.

"Want to try something new tonight?" She tossed a small, rose-colored box my way. *Dry Heat* was written on the front of the package in large, gaudy block lettering, a sharp contrast to the various disclaimers and drug facts that were written in microscopic monochrome on the back. The rest of the packaging was decorated with neon-pink hearts and heavily-stylized... bite marks?

"What's this?"

"Basically, it's the lovechild of Sterilex and Breeder's Bliss: a few hours of intense heat-sex without any of the usual consequences," she explained. "It's a bit of a fad on Ausaril right now. Just thought it'd be fun to see what all the fuss is about."

Heat-sex... if that night with Cass was anything to go by, the pheromones from Anno's heat alone would be more than enough for my ausar breeding instincts to kick in. Combining that with my own drug-induced rut would easily override any remaining shreds of self-control — a sensation I wasn't keen on reliving. Then again, losing myself in a mindless fuck-frenzy would be a great way to take my mind off Cass.

Evidently, my hesitation was written verbatim on my face, as Anno immediately started backpedaling: "Sorry, dumb idea. We don't have to try it if you don't—"

"I'd love to," I lied. I should have said no. Void, I wanted to say no, but I wanted her more.

Anno smiled in relief. I popped out two heart-shaped pills from the packaging — one for each of us. We clinked our glasses together and washed down the two-in-one love-drugs with a dash of ice water. Everything after that point happened in a blur. We were all over each other long before the artificial estrus had a chance to kick in, grinding our hips together and fondling each other's breasts through sheer fabric. Our tails were a furious whirlwind that slapped the walls and furniture with enough force to dent metal. We fumbled into the bedroom and all but ripped each other's clothes off in between moan-filled kisses.

There was a moment of relative calm when Anno stumbled ass-first onto my queen-sized bed. She took the fall in stride though, leaning back against the pillows, spreading her legs, and presenting her already-dripping sex to me, complete with a

perfectly-trimmed tuft of white fur. Her alluring scent diffused into the air just as chemically-induced desire started to diffuse into my bloodstream. I crawled on top of her, instinctively aligning my aching-hard cock so that the tip was kissing her pink folds. Once again I felt that raging inferno, that lusty liquid fire that flowed through my veins with every pulse of my heart. It was the same searing heat I felt with Cass, only stronger, wilder. As I began to push deeper, the heat kept intensifying well past the point of being uncomfortable. It was hot, too hot.

Then it started to burn me from the inside out.

I could feel my self-control crumbling to ash; whatever tender romantic feelings I held for my lover were overwritten with brutal, animalistic hunger.

Why? Why did it hurt this time? Of course, the last remnants of my rational mind knew damn well why. After what Cass and her pheromones did to me — and what I might have done to her — I could never let that happen again with Anno. I would rather tear my own arm off before I would let myself feel like a prisoner in my own body again. Oh Anno, everything's different when I'm with you.

"Kaede? Kaede!"

"Wha..."

"Stars! Are you ok? You're crying!" Gone were those inviting bedroom eyes, her face was now awash with concern.

A bolt of clarity struck my lust-addled mind. I am? I wiped my eyes. Oh. I guess I am. I tried to answer her, tried to reassure her that everything was fine, but my voice got snagged on the barbed wire in my tightening throat. Raindrops rolled down my face before trickling onto Anno's nude form, extinguishing that carnal fire that burned so fiercely just moments before.

"N-No..." I sobbed as I collapsed face-first into her plush chest. I felt her fur-clad arms wrap around me, holding me close. When my hyperventilating lungs made me shudder and writhe in her embrace, she just held me closer. I could feel her carefully run a hand through my hair while the other caressed my back. Her touch was so soft....

"It's okay, babe. It's ok," she whispered. "Just let it all out."

The trickle turned into a downpour. All the pain I had so desperately tried to seal away burst back to the forefront of my mind, gushing forth like blood from a bullet wound. The Voiders, Tarkus, Cass... I wept into my girlfriend's chest like the pathetic mess I was. Thankfully, it wasn't long before sleep took me, sparing me from having to dwell on those memories any longer.



~12 YEARS AGO

I remember that day when I walked into JoyCo for my first dose of Estrobloom+. I especially remember those sterile-white floors with bubblegum-pink decals, mostly because I was staring at them. As my footsteps started to slow, I felt a slender, clawed hand tug at my own.

"Come on, girl! What happened to all that excitement you had yesterday?" That was Cassandra, my best friend since, well, forever. She was a lot more outgoing and confident than me, which wasn't saying much given I was basically a timid ball of awkwardness.

"I don't know... I'm just... really nervous for some reason," I stammered. My voice was so faint I could barely hear it.

Thankfully, she decided not to press any further and changed the subject. "By the way, have you decided on a name yet? No pressure or anything if you haven't, though! I know you've been thinking about it for a while now."

"Actually, I've been thinking about 'Kaede.' "

"Ooh! That's a pretty name! It suits you! Any story behind it?"

"Uh..." I stuttered. In hindsight, it was a bit silly of me to just steal the name of one of my old CRPG characters, but then again, it's not like most people got to choose their own names anyways. "It's an old human name I found online. It means 'maple.' "

Cass tilted her head at me in confusion; one of her feline ears even flicked at me of its own accord.

"Oh, right. They're a species of Terran tree with red leaves," I explained. "I remember seeing them in some old documentaries of Earth. They're also—"

"What's a tree?" she interrupted, feigning ignorance and poorly concealing a mischievous grin.

"Oh come on! You know what a tree is!" Cass just giggled as she playfully ruffled the red hair between my ears. "H-Hey!" I whined halfheartedly. She always loved messing with me like this, and even though I would never have admitted it at the time, I really liked it when she did. Meanwhile, my tail — unbeholden to any sense of embarrassment — made its opinion on the matter crystal clear.

We continued our stroll through the great labyrinth of consumerism, its shelves packed to the brim with brightly colored goods. JoyCo really did have it all, everything from groceries and soap to personal energy shields and gene mods. Speaking of which, we soon found ourselves in the mod section towards the back of the store. The pricier and more uh... *adult* offerings were locked behind transparent acrylic.

I soon spotted the object of my search: a small freezer aisle with yellow and purple popsicles — Estrobloom and Estrobloom+. I glanced at the holographic price tag and winced; it was pretty cheap as far as mods go, but it still wasn't pocket change, especially since my only income sources at the time consisted of birthday money and whatever odd jobs Uncle Ivan let me help with. Grabbing one of the purple ones, I was pleasantly surprised when it wasn't uncomfortably cold to the touch, the thin wrapper somehow providing a fair amount of insulation. In a smaller font towards the bottom, the packaging read: *Bloom into the Feminine Flower You Always Deserved to Be!*

We made our way back to the front of the store. Thankfully, there wasn't much of a line today. The cashier, a bored-looking gryvain whose nametag identified her as Kerrigan, hardly looked at us as she robotically scanned and bagged the purple popsicle. Her towering height and icy demeanor reminded me of my history teacher (listen, he was really scary okay!). She didn't even bother to wear that ubiquitous corporate-issue smile.

"Sorry kid, I'm going to need to see some ID. Company policy," she said flatly, albeit with a faint hint of remorse.

Ever since the dawn of commercially-available gene mods, the minimum age requirement for their use has always been a touchy subject. There were just too many compounding variables: the specific mod being used, the user's genetic makeup, different cultural norms.... At some point, the UGC sort of gave up trying to enforce their rulings and let megacorps and independent polities set their own standards, for the most part.

Fortunately, fairly basic stuff like Estrobloom+ wasn't nearly as scrutinized, especially on a little frontier station like Tavros. Those kinds of mods were allowed right around the time when puberty (or whatever equivalent level of maturity is appropriate for your race) would typically hit. For half-ausars like me, that meant thirteen (Terran) years old.

I flashed my school-issued holo-ID at the scanner, which chirped affirmatively.

"Hmm..." Kerrigan murmured with subtle amusement. "Happy birthday, by the way."

"You too," I blurted before I could stop myself. Idiot. Ugh, Cass is never going to let me live that down.

Just as I started to apologize for my slip-up, the stern draconic woman broke into a surprisingly mirthful laugh, "Oh, don't worry about it. I used to do that all the time." I sighed in relief as I forked over a preloaded credit chit, and she handed me my purchase in a small bag decorated with the megacorp's iconic pink-and-white logo. "Thank you for shopping at JoyCo, Miss," she said candidly.

Huh, 'Miss.' I liked that. It was a bit formal for my tastes, but something about it still made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside, even if I couldn't quite articulate why. Whatever the reason, I could feel my tail start to wag behind me as we stepped out of the store.

After a quick stop at the local ice cream parlor so that Cass could grab a frozen treat of her own, we boarded one of the large central lifts and punched the floor number in. Kilometers of alloy and plexiglass raced past us as we ascended through the residential decks at breakneck speed, fine-tuned inertial dampener fields completely negating the otherwise staggering acceleration. With a cheerful beep, the doors slid open to reveal a massive deck-spanning arboretum. Although most of it was cordoned off with holographic 'under construction' signs, the completed sections were already bustling with vibrant alien ferns and more familiar varieties of Terran flora.

Many years ago, Steele Tech decided to invest a fortune into building out Tavros in preparation for the upcoming planet rush. That meant fancy parks like this one, luxury suites, renovations for the merchant deck, but also new classrooms, medical facilities, and even housing subsidies. Bless our benevolent corporate overlords (unironically for once).

We wandered around and admired the greenery while we looked for a place to sit. If you ignored the faint hum of the station's internal machinery and the slightly unnatural way the grass swayed in the artificial breeze, you could easily pretend you were just taking a stroll through an ordinary park on some lush terrestrial world (not that I would know, I've never actually been planetside before). Although, I think I would have preferred this over the real thing regardless. Sure, the warm sunlight on my skin may have been synthetic, but at least it wasn't chock-full of cancer rays.

"No way! It's you!" Cass teased, pointing at a young Terran tree covered with pink flowers in lieu of leaves. Blush-colored petals silently departed from its branches in a constant trickle.

"That's a cherry blossom, not a maple tree, dummy."

"Ughhh. Whatever you say, tree-girl," she quipped, chuckling at her own terrible joke. I tried to think of an appropriately witty riposte, but to no avail. Oh, screw it, I was laughing too.

We sat down on a secluded synth-wood bench with a good view of the ongoing construction. Large six-legged construction bots lifted huge prefab segments into position with their powerful servo-driven limbs while smaller ones scurried around and welded them into place, all of which was carefully overseen by a handful of their more organic counterparts. The air surrounding the work site shimmered with noise-suppression fields, quarantining the terrible din inherent to such work. I pulled the popsicle out of the bag and carefully tore open the wrapper to reveal the unassuming purple dessert. I hesitated.

"Something wrong?"

"It's just..." I sighed. Of course I wanted it — mods were a magical thing for people like me. They meant we had the freedom to choose, the chance to take our lives into our own hands instead of being shackled to the one assigned to us by random rolls of genetic dice. But it was always something I could look forward to, a guiding star in the sky that gave me direction precisely because it was so distant. Now that the

moment was actually here, I don't know... what if it's not everything I hoped it was? Fidgeting with the microsurgeon-laced treat in my hand, I guess I was also just a tad surprised, expecting some scary-looking needle or maybe foul-tasting pills, not a cute popsicle of all things. "It's my first mod, you know? I guess I just don't know what to expect... what if something—"

"Hey," Cass gently interjected, squeezing my hand and pulling me back to reality. One of her tails even brushed reassuringly against my own. "Whatever happens, you know I'll be here for you, right? You'll always be my best friend, no matter what shape you take."

"Cass, I..." Void, I desperately wanted to tell her how I really felt. I had recently developed a bit of a crush on her, but obviously I kept that to myself out of fear of messing up our friendship. "Thanks," was all I could manage before I had to turn away, given that my face was rapidly approaching my hair color.

"Anytime." We sat in comfortable silence for a while, holding hands and stretching that ephemeral moment long past the point it started to wear thin. "Cheers?" she offered tentatively as she raised her ice cream cone towards me. I responded in kind, albeit in lowercase, and we toasted with our respective cold treats before we dug in.

All it took was a single lick, and the final shreds of doubt that still lingered in my mind simply melted away. 'Happy' doesn't even begin to describe it; I was downright euphoric. At long last, I could just be... me, and it was better than anything I could have dreamed of. I don't even remember how it tasted. Something like blueberries? Or was it grape? Whatever, that wasn't important; all that mattered to me in that moment was the unrelenting joy that was blossoming in my chest and the comforting warmth of my best friend's hand. I carefully carved this memory into the stone of my mind with the knowledge that I would cherish it forever.

"Happy birthday, Kaede."

IV

Anno was still asleep when I woke up. After I wiped my eyes, I saw that my tears had left a soggy puddle in her cleavage. Ewewew. I reluctantly untangled myself from her arms and cleaned her up with a towel, taking great care not to wake her.

I checked the time on my holoband: 5:12 am. In the darkness, the unread message notification glared at me like an evil eye, mocking me for my cowardice. Well, fuck it, it's not like this day could get much worse; I needed some fresh air anyways. And maybe another drink.

As I slipped my legs into my least torn-up pair of jeans and threaded my tail through the hole in the back, I pulled out a foil pack from the undersized front pocket (seriously, why did they always make them so small?). Ever since that night with Cass, I've always carried a couple libidio suppressants with me as a precaution, something that most ausar already do on the regular.

I popped the sand-colored pill out of its blister pack and swallowed it with ease, despite its awkward size and bitter aftertaste, and the last vestiges of ausar rutting instincts vanished in an instant. Were I in a better mood, I might have made a joke about my ability to swallow, but right now, the fact that it crossed my mind at all just skeeved me out. Maybe that was just the Chill Pill talking. I left another suppressant on the nightstand for Anno. She definitely carried her own, but a bit of redundancy never hurt.

"Hey Athena, if Anno wakes up before I'm back, just tell her I just stepped out to run some errands."

"Of course," she responded plainly.

I grabbed a few bottles of whiskey from my liquor cabinet on the way out, or at least I would have, if I hadn't already depleted my stash last week; all I had left was a six pack of Frisky Dingo. It was cheap, shitty beer (and tasted like it), but at least it had enough poison to do the job. The front door automatically slid closed behind me.

It was still dark outside, relatively speaking. Nights on the residential decks were simulated with soft mood lighting rather than actual darkness. Still, it was a nice change of pace from the usual harsh white illumination during 'daylight' hours. After riding the lift up a few floors, I strolled out onto a gloomy elevated walkway overlooking the arboretum, one of the few places on this god-forsaken station where I could actually be alone. My holoband grew heavy on my forearm as I leaned against the railing and stared down at the illuminated pathways of the park below. Above me, a photorealistic projection of a terrestrial night sky dominated the ceiling, only interrupted by the cluster of transparent lift tubes that stretched high enough to touch the digitized stars.

I scrolled through my notifications and tapped the icon of Cass — the old Cass. A small rectangle of light popped into existence from my holoband's projectors as the 2D video loaded in. My old friend was sitting in a medical bed with a petite pair of horns poking out of her brunette curls (were those there before?). She was wearing a hospital gown that seemed a bit small given her new feminine endowments, but without that cloud of pheromones screwing with my head, her hypersexual body no longer got the better of me. In fact, it was a bit off-putting; just looking at her massive bust gave me second-hand back pain.

Cass greeted me with a stupid-happy smile. "Heya Kaede! Guess your little swimmers were, like, pretty potent! You wouldn't happen to know any pretty girl names would you? Anyways, you oughta come down to New Texas sometime, I'll make it worth your while," she said with a flirtatious grin and hooded eyes. "Who knows, maybe our baby girl will get a sibling."

Void, was she even the same person? The Cass I knew was brilliant and fiercely independent. Now, all I saw was an airheaded bimbo — a pornographic parody of my childhood friend. Unable to watch any further, I killed the playback with an angry swipe.

I was feeling a lot of things at that moment. Most of it was rage. Gah! What the hell was she thinking that night, showing up out of the blue like that? Did she know that my ausar half would react that way, that I would be too overwhelmed by her pheromones to say no to her? Or was she too deep in heat to care? You know what? I think I was better off not knowing; the last thing I needed was more reasons to be upset with her.

Then again, it wasn't entirely her fault. I should have been stronger; I should have rushed her to the hospital the moment she showed up at my doorstep looking like a mod junkie and acting nothing like the girl I knew. At the very least, I should have worn a damn condom, but instead, I was too busy thinking with my other head. Hell, even now, her new body still turned me on a bit in spite of all my feelings of guilt, betrayal, and revulsion. Maybe I deserved this.

I cracked open a can of the cheap piss-beer and chugged half of it in one go. This past year, my sex life has been... complicated. All those lonely, long-haul cargo runs gave me plenty of time to stew in my own thoughts, which wasn't very healthy in hindsight. Kiro, the wax man... even that time with Cass could technically be considered sexual assault under UGC law.

Of course, I was furious about all those times my body was violated like that, but the devil on my shoulder was eager to point out that a part of me always ended up enjoying it. More than anything, I hated myself for always going along with it like some mindless sex addict. I used to tell myself that it wasn't my fault, blaming whatever aphrodisiacs or pheromones that the cosmos seemed to keep throwing at me, but the more I thought about it, the less convincing that sounded. The way that those poisons twisted my mind, tricked me into thinking that it was my idea all along... I don't even know where my own desires ended and the drug-coerced ones began.

Now, just the thought of sex was so irresistibly intoxicating. It hurt and it felt good. I wanted it when I didn't. It reminded me all too much of that night after I found out she had cut and run: I drank till my liver nearly gave out. I wanted to stop, believe me, but I also knew that every sip meant another minute I wouldn't have to live with my fuck-ups. And of course, one of the precious few times I was with someone I trusted and was actually okay with letting go of the reins for a bit, my traitorous body decided to go ahead and ruin that too.

I leaned over the railing and took another swig of the foul-tasting liquid, wincing as it scorched my throat on the way down. Void, I was just so tired of it all. The nightmares, the self-loathing, the fact that I couldn't even control my own body... and the worst part was that I didn't even have any decent booze to drown my sorrows in.

What the hell was wrong with me? I was raped and I fucking *liked it*.

My temper got the better of me as I crushed the empty can in my fist and hurled it over the railing, watching as it arced through the air before falling back down towards the grass far below. I grabbed another.

I was so busy wallowing in my own self-pity that I didn't even notice Anno had walked up behind me. "There you are, Red! Your V.I. told me you were running errands, but we both know that you hate waking up early." She placed her soft hand on my shoulder and leaned against the railing with me. "Kaede... can we talk about last night?" she asked tenderly.

"Anno..." I started, unable to even face her. "I'm really sorry about that, it's just... I'd rather be alone right now." I gently removed her hand from my shoulder and turned to walk away, only for her to grab my arm the same way that Kir—

I refused to let my mind finish drawing that subconscious comparison.

"Kaede, wait! Please, just talk to me. Something's clearly hurting you. Trust me, I've been there too."

I was already regretting the words long before they left my lips, but I said them anyway, blindly lashing out like a wounded animal. It was so tempting to just blame the alcohol and sleep deprivation, but it's not like those things happen on their own. The ugly truth is that this one was on me.

"No you haven't!" I shouted as I tore my arm away from her. *Stop it*, I thought to myself, but like so many times before, I didn't listen. "What the hell do you have to worry about!? You're a Ph.D with a cushy desk job and literal billionaires for parents! You don't know what it's like; I nearly got killed today because some idiot mixed up a couple boxes! **The only thing you have to worry about is deciding who your next lay is!**"

The silence lingered in the air, ringing in my ears like a gunshot.

It took hearing Anno cry to finally bring me back to my senses. What kind of monster does that make me? "Anno I'm sorry I didn't mean it," I babbled semi-coherently as I wrapped my arms around her slender shoulders, clinging on for dear life.

"Kaede..." she whispered between tears, voice wavering despite her best efforts. Her fluffy arms weakly returned the hug.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you it's just been a really really shitty day for me but I was being a jerk and I took it out on you and that's not okay at all and I want to make it up to you because I love you and I—" I continued rambling as my own eyes began to water.

"It's okay... I know you didn't mean to hurt me," she sniffled. "I'm sorry if I was too pushy. I'm just really worried about you. I can tell you've been overworking yourself recently, and sometimes I can feel you thrashing in your sleep. At first I didn't want to pry, but after watching you fall apart in my arms last night...."

Geez, now we're both bawling our eyes out. Then again, I couldn't deny that I needed this; there was a kind of bliss in just letting the world beneath my feet fall away, lost

in a nice long ugly-cry session. We held onto each other for a while, keeping each other afloat even as our shaking bodies were battered by waves of anguish.

We made landfall on a small bench by the railing, still clinging to each other as if we were anticipating some terrible force was about to sweep us apart.

"I know I'm not always the best at showing it, but... I love you too, Kaede," she confessed with bashful sincerity. "Stars, I just wish we could see more of each other sometimes. I want you to share more of your life with me... even the painful parts. I want to be with you till our fur turns white."

"Um, your fur's kinda white already," I half-teased through the tears.

"Oh you know what I meant!" she whined as she playfully socked me on the shoulder. I grasped the impact area in mock pain before embracing her once more as we laughed and cried in equal measure. As the emotional rollercoaster started to wind down, I took her hand in mine and sat with her in compassionate silence as we watched the twinkling lights of elevator cabs travel up and down the central lift tubes.

"Anno, when you said you've been hurt before... do you want to talk about it?" I asked.

"You sure? You have a lot on your plate already."

"Sharing goes both ways. I want to be there for you, too."

She flashed me a hint of a smile, probably a bit amused at being caught in her own trap. "Okay," she began with a sigh. "Did I ever tell you about why I quit Akkadi?"

"Something about 'botched experiments?' "

"Yeah, I said that, didn't I?" She gazed off into the distance, as if watching a replay of her past on some faraway screen. "Remember when the Princess of Ausaril got kidnapped a couple years back?"

I shook my head. I usually try to keep up-to-date with the news, but it all just moves so fast sometimes.

"Basically, my team was working on miniaturizing gate tech, small enough to warp individual people. Of course, the military was bankrolling the project, so when a

bunch of zealots took the Princess hostage, some genius in the admiralty thought that this was the perfect time for a little field test," she spat, letting long-simmering rage finally come to a boil. "Just warp in a bunch of *our own people* directly into a delicate hostage situation using an *unfinished prototype*. What could possibly go wrong!?"

She took a breath and steadied herself, her anger transmuting itself into anguish as tears once again streamed down her face. "We weren't ready... not even close... but they forced our hand," she continued. "We sent in six: Roy, Millar, Kaemal, and Drummar just never showed up at the other end. As for Halden and Berton... void, I wonder if it would've been better if they hadn't."

"That... wasn't your fault, babe. You didn't have a choice."

"But I did! I should've walked out then and there! I knew there was no way they could have continued the project without me, but I was naive and just went along with it, thinking that they actually gave a single *shit* about us. I only quit when they put my own sister through and she nearly..." Anno trailed off as the grief overwhelmed her, furry ears and tail drooping as she buried her face in her hands.

I was at a loss on how to comfort her. Hell, I am probably the least qualified person for this sort of thing; I tried to bury my demons with work and alcohol and look how that panned out. Then again, I owed it to her to try. Hooking an arm around her, I pulled her in close and let her cry into my shoulder while her deflated ears flopped onto my face.

How did she always do it? I tried to recall all the times I've been on the receiving end of a good petting, letting my memories guide my hands as I stroked her hair and caressed her furred ears. Stars, I had no idea it also felt amazing to be on the other end. Her hair was finer than any synth-silk and soft as a cloud; it was like I was petting an incarnation of pure fluffy bliss. I made a mental note to ask if I could try her shampoo later. Judging by the way her ears and tail started to perk up, that seemed to do the trick.

"Did you know them well?" I asked.

She nodded sullenly. "Some of them. Roy was dating one of my coworkers. Cute little ausar guy with big ol' ears... he always seemed like such a sweetheart. I wish I got to know him better."

I never knew the names of the people I killed. I remember the punch of my gun's recoil as the pirate's body crumpled to the deck, but I never saw the face behind that polarized visor. I remember the violent drumbeat of Talon Rogue's cannons as they ripped apart that Black Void frigate, but I never heard the crew's screams as the burning carcass of their ship sank beneath the clouds, slowly being crushed by the gas giant's immense pressure. Sure, they were faceless monsters that were about to gun me down without a second thought, but their blood stained my hands all the same. To imagine them as actual people, ones with innocent lovers or estranged daughters... I winced at the thought.

It took me a moment to realize that I'd been so absorbed in my own thoughts that I forgot I was supposed to be comforting my girlfriend. Shit, what do I say?

"Thanks for that, Kaede," she whispered, planting a quick kiss on my cheek. "I've been carrying that weight for a while now. Feels nice to finally let it go."

Still a bit unsure on how to respond, I simply gave her a peck on the cheek in return. As her tail started to swish faster, I saw my opening. With a well-timed thrust, I caught the root of her tail with my own, letting her fluffy momentum do the hard work of intertwining our bushy appendages and pulling our hips together. Anno smiled as she wordlessly snuggled closer, and we gazed at the stars together until our braided tails started to get antsy.

"Well, I guess it's my turn now." I said reluctantly.

"Only if you want to, babe." Seeing my timid nod, she scooped over and patted her plush thighs in invitation. I laid down on my side and rested my head on her lap while she brushed messy ginger strands out of my eyes. "Whenever you're ready."

I told her everything.

It's a strange feeling, letting yourself be truly vulnerable. It's almost like being naked, but at least that could be a little bit exciting; there was nothing sexy about this. I slowly stripped off my metaphorical armor piece by piece, guiding her fingers as she traced all those invisible scars that marked my flesh. I tore down walls I didn't even know I had put up. I unsealed high-pressure containers full of compartmentalized trauma. I let all of it just spill out until the floor ran red.

As I continued to confide in my lover, deep-seated survival instincts started screaming at me, demanding I raise my guard or deflect with some self-deprecating joke, fearing

that she would recoil in disgust if she ever saw just how damaged I was inside. Perhaps it was because I grew up on stories of stoic space captains and self-sufficient mavericks, the kind of people who would rather stare down the barrel of a battlecruiser's coilgun long before they would ever consider talking about their feelings. Regardless, I told those instincts to go fuck themselves.

Blessed relief. It felt like exhaling a breath I've been holding in for far too long. Turns out there is nothing more intimate and comforting than being able to truly trust someone, to put your life in their hands with the knowledge that they would do anything to protect you.

"Kaede, I'm so sorry... I had no idea." She pulled me up and hugged me tighter than anyone ever has before. "I know you like to put on your brave face for me. Just remember that you don't *have* to, and I'll never think any less of you if it ever becomes too much."

Words failed me. I mumbled something between a 'thank you' and an 'I love you,' but it probably got lost in the stream of my emotional blubbery. All I could do was squeeze her in return and wait patiently for my body to stop shaking.

"Kaede?"

"...yeah?"

"Would you feel better if I watched that video message with you?" she asked delicately.

"Probably? I don't know... I only got a few seconds in before I had to stop. It's just hard to see her... like that."

"I get that. I just don't want you to have something like this hanging over you, y'know?"

"No, you're right. I should watch it, for the kid's sake if nothing else." I pulled up the video message again, expanding the holographic display slightly so that both of us could view it comfortably. With a deep exhale, I hit 'play'.

"Heya Kaede! Guess your little swimmers were, like, pretty potent! You wouldn't happen to know any pretty girl names would you? Anyways, you oughta come down to

New Texas sometime, I'll make it worth your while," she said with a flirtatious grin. "Who knows, maybe our baby girl will get a sibling."

"Babe, you forgot your uh... medicine " chimed in a woman's voice from off-screen. The camera jittered as a copper-hued arm handed Cass a small metal flask, from which my friend drank ravenously. Her irises immediately sharpened, refocusing with renewed acuity and snubbing out those 'fuck-me' eyes with a single blink. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but I finally saw my best friend looking back at me.

"Whoa! Let me try that again," she said as she wiped the remaining ivory fluid from her lips. "Hey Kaede, I'm sorry I haven't been returning your calls. Everything's been kinda busy lately, as you can probably tell. I know that I sorta messed up, dumping all of this on you so suddenly, but it would mean a lot to me if you could come and visit sometime."

Somewhere below, out of frame, an infant's cry captured everyone's attention. The view dipped suddenly as the (dzaan?) woman who was previously holding the camera set it down on a nearby table in order to pass a bundle of cloth to my friend with both hands. Two floppy little auburn ears poked out of the fabric burrito at one end and a half-canine, half-feline tail out the other. Cass soothed the little girl's cries with a paragraph of gibberish and a lullaby I didn't recognize before cradling her into her bosom. With the baby as calm as she was going to get, I finally got a good look at her adorable little face: I couldn't see her eyes, scrunched up as they were, but somehow I knew that they were the same shade of blue as my own.

"Look! it's your mommy!" Cass pointed at me through the screen and held up our daughter to face the camera, tugging at my heartstrings from hundreds of lightyears away. For a moment, whatever animosity I still held towards my old friend all but evaporated. That's *my daughter*. Stars above... I let maternal instincts I didn't even know I had take the wheel as bubbles of joyous pride welled up in my chest. I was going to be—

"My little Kaedeypoo is going to be a mom!" Anno squealed with delight and shook me by the shoulders, as if we had just won some grand cosmic lottery. "Err... dad? Sorry, I'm not sure which one you'd pref—"

" 'Mom' is fine," I reassured her.

"Good." She leaned in to whisper into my pointed ear: "Now I get to say I'm dating the cutest MILF in the universe."

"A-Anno!" I yelped in embarrassment, practically jumping out of my seat as blood saturated my cheeks.

"Sorry! Just teasing," Anno chuckled. "Not your cup of tea then?" she asked more sincerely.

"It's not that. It's just... I'm not ready to be a mom yet," I sighed. Goddammit Cass, why did you have to make everything so difficult? "I'm flying blind here. My mom wasn't around for, well, anything really, and as much as I appreciate my dad, he still had a business to run. There was only so much time left for me. I guess I just don't want to be a deadbeat like her, but my job means that I can only visit so often, and I can barely stay above water as-is."

"Oh Kaede, the fact that you're already so worried about your daughter... I think that speaks for itself," she reassured before nuzzling her cheek against my own. "Besides, you'll have me, you know!"

"Wait, I thought you didn't want pups?"

"I mean, I guess not. Not right now, at least. But I meant it when I said I'm going to be there for you. Besides, how could I say no to such an adorable little pup-kitten?" she said as she gestured to the little bundle of red fur on the holo-display. By the time the video message ended, rays of magenta-orange light had already started to crest over the high-resolution horizon.

"As for... this..." she said as she placed a hand on my thigh, low enough to not be overtly sexual, but high enough to make her intention clear. "How do you feel about me giving you some... training?"

"Training?"

"Remember that time you sent me the wrong 'homework' folder?"

Oh, *that* one. I blushed at the memory. We went over the details on the walk back to my apartment. I could hardly wait.

V

I kneeled down on my bed, clothes having long been discarded. Stars, was it always this soft?

Anno took a moment to fiddle with the lights till they were the color of a soft Terran sunrise before bending over to rifle through her bag. Naturally, I enjoyed the wonderful view. She pulled out a flat velvet package that resembled an oversized wedding ring box before turning her attention to my exposed body. After a short, dramatic pause, she lifted the lid off to reveal a bright red collar with a silver buckle, my name already engraved on the heart-shaped tag.

"You know, this was supposed to be your birthday gift, but I think you deserve your present early this time," she said as she looped the collar around my neck. The soft clinking of the tag was strangely pleasant, almost chime-like. As she finished adjusting the latch, I expected to feel a bit restrained, but paradoxically I felt freer than ever, the weight off my chest compensating for the more literal one on my neck.

A part of me still had mixed feelings about letting go of the wheel again, but deep down I knew this was different. I wasn't surrendering control to my feral libido or some oversexed stranger, but to Anno, and if there was anyone I trusted more than myself, it was her.

She kneeled down across from me on the mattress. "Remember, I want *you* to enjoy it, not just your body," she said as her furred hand brushed my own. "If anything's wrong, I want you to say so. Okay?"

I nodded eagerly.

"Now, tell me the safeword we agreed on. I need to be sure that you remembered it."

I whined affirmatively and nodded again, forgetting that I was supposed to speak.

"Come on babe, I know I'm an ausar and all, but I don't actually speak puppy. Use your words."

"Avocado," I squeaked, barely suppressing the urge to laugh.

"Good gir—" was all Anno could manage before she burst into laughter. Oh well, I might as well join in. On any other day that might have spoiled the mood, but today, I

think we both needed that. After taking a moment to flush the last of the giggles out of our systems, she planted her hands on my head and let her fluffy digits dance idly through my short hair as she began to pet me at leisurely pace. "Sorry babe, probably should have picked something more serious. Anyways, who's my good girl?" She switched targets and scritchd at the weak spots behind my ears, throwing me headfirst into subby bliss.

"Ahh," I whimpered. "I a-am." My tail swished in agreement, rapidly thumping against the sheets.

"You're what?"

"I'm..." I struggled to form the words as the scratches intensified, obedient puppy-feelings starting to crowd out higher-level thoughts. "I'm a good girl."

"Oh, silly pup." One of her hands wandered down my spine as she straddled my thighs; the other grabbed me by the collar and tugged, pulling me face-first into her generous cleavage. "You're not *just* a good girl, Kaede." She brought her lips to my ear and growled softly, "You're my good girl," before gently sinking her teeth into it and officializing her claim.

At that point, my vocabulary consisted of nothing but meek whimpers and submissive moans. I was a cuddly, Kaede-shaped instrument that eagerly sang for her owner at the slightest touch, and I *loved* it. My heart fluttered as I practically swooned from the slightly demeaning, yet adoring praises she placed in my ears. I felt that heat again, only it was not the instant conflagration of lust I was used to but something calmer, softer. It was more like the gentle warmth of an ancient fireplace or, well, a lover's embrace.

"Time for your medicine, pup." Anno teased before leaning over to grab a pair of Sterilex packets from the nightstand, skillfully puncturing both the wrappers in one go with one of her canines before presenting the grey pills to me in her open palm. I tucked my ears back and leaned in to take my share, only for her to pull me back by the collar and coax a sad whine out of me. "Nuh-uh. Stay." She smirked, wagging a finger at me before knocking back both pills.

Before I could object to her blatant thievery, she shoved me onto my back and grabbed my wrists, pinning them down on either side of my head. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't help but instinctively wriggle in an attempt to free my trapped limbs. Thankfully, my lover's taller frame and better leverage let her effortlessly quell

my half-hearted revolt; a spark of wolfish glee even shimmered in her eyes. Still a bit stunned by her sudden aggression, I didn't even have a chance to protest before she pressed the rest of her body against me and sealed my lips with her own. I've never felt so vulnerable yet so safe.

Meanwhile, my now rapidly-stiffening length was sandwiched between our stomachs, caught in the crossfire of our passionate makeout. Stars, was my dick always this warm? Never mind the pleasurable friction I was experiencing as Anno began to grind herself against me; just the heat of it against my bare skin felt heavenly.

What started as moderately intimate saliva sharing rapidly evolved into a rough liplock that teetered on the brink of primal ferociousness. Her tongue repeatedly penetrated my lips, wrestling my own into submission before abruptly retreating in a series of devastating hit-and-run attacks. All the while, her fangs hungrily nipped at my lower lip and occasionally at my exposed collarbone. She was careful to not break the skin, but aggressive enough to thoroughly mark me as *hers*. I felt so small beneath her, but in a good way, like she was sheltering me from a rainstorm. Worn down by her oral affection, I was too spent to resist as her practiced tongue battered my mouth open once more and pushed the contraceptive she previously stole down my throat. I swallowed it eagerly.

Just as I was starting to feel a bit lightheaded, my lover finally pulled away, ending the passionate tonguefucking and leaving us both panting heavily, even as shiny bridges of fluid still connected our lips. My senses started to return to me following the injection of fresh oxygen into my lungs, and I found myself lost in those fiercely intelligent cobalt eyes of hers before I realized they were subtly checking me over for any signs of discomfort. A few heartbeats later, I also registered that my ausar half had been busy: I could feel my erection throbbing in sync to my quickening pulse, not to mention the slick pre that was lathered all over our abdomens.

"Gooooo girl. Time for your treat," she cooed as she rose to her knees and wrapped a hand around my shaft, her fingers just the right length to fully encircle it. Warm, adoring touches started at my tapered tip before gliding down to the oh-so-sensitive bulbous base and then doubling back, again and again. Embarrassingly high-pitched whimpers escaped my lips as she slowly began to stroke me off, using my own copious precum as lubricant even as it stained her snowy digits.

Possessed by wanton desire, my hands unconsciously reached for my heaving chest, eager to elevate my own pleasure. When my hips started to thrust on their own, a soft hand pushed down on my midriff, gently arresting my overeager bucking.

"Stay still, babe," she whispered lovingly as she leaned in to nibble on my ear again. "Let me take care of you." It wasn't exactly a command, but I was so deep in that submissive headspace that it may as well have been. When she resumed stroking me, I could do nothing but dig my nails into the bedsheets and squirm in ecstasy as every square inch of my pride was subjected to her careful ministrations. In just a few seconds, I was already so close to the edge....

"Anno, slow dow— Ah!" All it took was a single squeeze of my swollen knot, and I was immediately busy painting my upper torso pearl-white, back arching and muscles spasming. I was lucky I didn't have claws, otherwise my deathgrip on the sheets would have torn them to ribbons as repeated pulses of concentrated bliss battered my nerves and overwhelmed whatever motor control I had left.

"Oh wow!" Anno giggled, slightly breaking character. She didn't stop though. Instead, she merely adjusted the timing of her strokes to better synchronize with the orgasmic pulses that were racing up my length, milking out every drop my body had to offer until I was howling like a bitch in heat. Fuck, I never knew my voice could go that high. I collapsed as soon as the final shots struck my sternum, the mess quickly pooling between my tits with just the right combination of warmth and stickiness to feel strangely pleasurable on my skin.

"S-sorry," I managed to eke out between ragged breaths.

"Awww, don't worry. I'm just happy my pet is enjoying herself. Now, come here." She hoisted me up by the collar into a tight hug, ravaging my lips once more. It didn't seem to bother her that she was now smearing my cum all over our upper bodies like some lewd imitation of a sandwich cookie. Then again, neither did I.

"Does my good girl want more?" she asked as she cupped my chin. The question was, of course, rhetorical; there was no denying how much we wanted each other.

"Anno, please..." I begged, letting my baser instincts begin to seep into my words.

"Tsk, such a needy girl," she chastised. "Roll over."

My body obeyed her automatically. I was on my hands and knees before I even fully registered her instruction. She told me to turn around, and I turned around, simple as that. I even lifted my tail out of the way as I presented myself to my owner, almost wishing she brought her strapon so she could mount me properly.

As if she could read my mind, my lover climbed atop me, pressing her heavy melons into my shoulder blades and her soft cheek against my own. I felt a warm wetness as a cum-slathered finger prodded at my hole before slowly sliding in with a thrust of her hips. Her supple lips caught mine over my shoulder, and she gradually added one finger after another between every faux-doggystyle thrust, stretching me out and making me shiver whenever she brushed against my cum-button.

Just before I was about to hit my limit, she pulled out and gave me a slap on the ass as a parting gift. Before I could get used to the sensation of emptiness, she jammed a tapered plug up my lubed-up tailhole, causing me to yelp as my softening boner instantly bounced back to full strength. Holy fuck... it felt like it was the size of my fully-inflated knot, maybe even a bit bigger. I was going to be soooo sore later, but for now, I could just revel in the feeling of being pleasantly stuffed.

"Good girl! Now, sit," she ordered, pointing at the floor beside the bed. It was a bit tricky, given that the thick toy rearranged my guts each time I moved, but I was already sitting on my knees by the time my owner swung her feet over the edge of the mattress. When she started to splay her furry legs, I couldn't help but inch my mouth closer to her exposed slit.

"Stay!" she barked in disapproval. Agh! No fair! Pets are supposed to please their owners, right? "Stay..." As I impatiently slapped my tail against the ground, I finally noticed that there was now a leather leash connecting my collar to my owner's hand. When did she put that on?

"Go!" she relented, even tugging on my leash to pull me in, but it was wholly unnecessary given how eager I was to please her. My upper lips met her lower ones in a sloppy kiss before I began to eat her out. Her fluffy hands played with my fluffier ears, rewarding my subby devotion with vigorous petting. I glanced up at my lover, trying to meet her eyes in spite of the prodigious underboob that obscured her lovely visage. Still, I was able to catch a sly grin on her face as well as a small remote in her other hand.

"So eager!" she said as her mischievous smile grew wider. "I think you deserve another treat for that!"

Oh fuuuck... the plug was vibrating! Even on all fours, it was a struggle to keep myself from collapsing as the rhythmic buzzing milked out sweet little mini-orgasms and ribbons of thin precum straight from the source. The best part was that I didn't even

need to touch my turgid canine endowment as it twitched and drooled, on the verge of orgasm from the overwhelming anal pleasure alone. I just had to stay still and take it. Mmm! Easier said than done....

The leather around my neck tightened, reminding me that I still had a job to do. Pushed into a lusty overdrive by the mechanical prostate massage, I all but threw myself at her sex, forgoing technique in favor of simply mashing my face into her muff and lapping up her tangy juices like I was dying of thirst. My tongue ran wild as I desperately feasted on her gushing sex, especially when the anal vibrations made me moan inside her and dribble more pre onto the floor.

I could hear my name being called in between her pleasure-filled vocalizations, but it was as if I was underwater, submerged so deep that any words from the surface were heavily distorted by the time they reached me. My lungs started to ache as they demanded that I come up for air, but I was too lost in my own lust to care. Instead, I just continued to drink deeply from her sodden cunt as if her nectar could substitute for oxygen. The vibrations from the plug only added more fuel to the fire. I was so close... just one more lick...

A firm backwards tug on my leash pulled me out of that carnal haze, like a splash of ice-cold water to the face. "Running a bit too hot there, babe," she said oh-so-tenderly, ruffling my hair and bringing me back down (or was it up?) to reality. After the vibrator clicked off, all it took was a few rapid heartbeats for me to sober up. I was about to feel a bit dejected for losing control again, but with the way she lathered me with praises and ear-stitches, it was impossible to feel ashamed of myself when I was being pampered like that. Her eyes silently asked me if I still wanted to continue. I answered with my lips, in more ways than one.

I took things a bit slower the second time around, starting with a string of kisses along her inner thighs on an approach vector towards her winking sex. My tongue drew circles around her labia, making her gasp and squirm every time I brushed her clit with each circuit I completed. Instead of thrusting inside, I just danced around her honeypot and continued to savor all the cute noises she made, at least until her heels pressed into my back to force me deeper.

Turning up the heat, I let my tongue slip inside to explore her quim and search for all of her sensitive spots. "Mhh... right there!" she gasped, her voice shifting up an octave when I brushed the roof of her tunnel again. Heh. Found one. Using my tongue as a stylus, I wrote out a love poem as I continued to caress her innermost reaches, paying close attention to the pressure of her thighs on my head and the cadence of

her breathing. Each of her moans pulled me close to my own, sympathetic orgasm, or maybe that was just the vibe kicking back in. Regardless, it wasn't much longer until we were both tumbling over the edge.

Anno came first, screaming my name as her body was racked with blissful spasms while her thighs clamped down hard on my head, almost as hard as her pussy clamped down on my tongue. I lightly suckled her clit to amplify her orgasm, careful to not push her too far into oversensitivity, and was rewarded with a sudden gush of girlcum that flooded my mouth to overflowing. The sticky excess dribbled down my chin in spite of my efforts to swallow it all, leaving me utterly soaked with her love-juices — as if my own weren't enough.

It was my turn to lose my composure when Anno cranked the vibe-plug up to full power. Earth-shaking tremors pounded my ass before resonating throughout my lower body, instantly making my cock jump to full mast. Sublime hands-free orgasm hit me with all the subtlety of a New-Texan amazon, forcing my cum out in powerful jets that left my arms and legs shaking. Still stuck in a leg-lock with my mouth buried inside her, I could do nothing but vocalize my bliss into her vulva while continuing to dump my seed onto the floor in heavy, messy spurts.

We came down from our sexual high after a few minutes that felt like a few hours. Before I knew it, I was pinned down on the bed again, being bombarded with more positive reinforcement. Turns out, if you're called a good girl a few dozen times, you might just start to believe it.

"Think you can go one more round?" she asked, chuckling softly as she watched my eyes go wide. "It's a marathon, not a sprint, babe."

"I didn't say no..." I replied.

"That's my good girl." She kissed me on the lips, sampling her own flavor before trailing down to my cum-covered midriff to sample mine. A quick kiss on my glans rekindled my inner flame, making me hard as diamonds as she straddled my hips. Not bothering to wipe off the multiple layers of spermy paint that coated my sloppy prick, she cupped my knot to align my cockhead with her netherlips and let gravity do the work of slowly wedging herself open, millimeter by millimeter. Ironically, the same traits that make ausar cocks so well-suited for rough breeding sessions also makes them perfect tender lovemaking. The narrow, tapered tip adds an unrivaled gentleness to the initial penetration, starting off nice and easy before slowly ramping up to stretch a lover's hole open with the full girth. I was tempted to buck up into her

to hasten our inevitable union, but I managed to keep my desires in check in favor of letting my girlfriend have her way with me.

By the time her folds kissed the top of my bulbous base, I was already shaking with pleasure and battering the sheets with my tail. My turgid rod was shrouded in the most intimate version of a hug: surrounded on all sides by affectionate warmth. Then she started to gyrate her hips, doing wonderful things to her internal passage and forcing me to close my eyes in an attempt to delay the inevitable. I felt her shift her weight forward to smother my comparatively smaller bust with her own, making me squeal when my sensitive buds brushed against hers.

Suddenly, she paused. I opened my eyes again.

"Sorry pet, I just wanted to look into those pretty eyes of yours when you cum," she whispered in a gentle voice with an undercurrent of wolfish desire. Without warning, she started to bounce her hips on my lap, filling the room with deliciously moist schlicking sounds as fresh shots of pre and girlcum soaked our crotches. My length was subjected to the most exquisite friction as it repeatedly slid in and out of warm, wet heaven. At this rate, there was no way I could hold out.

Sensing my rapidly approaching climax, she slowed her frantic riding to a crawl, keeping me twitching and hard for her, but just below the euphoric threshold. "Come on, use those cute little hips of yours, babe," she ordered playfully as she tugged on the soft leather around my neck.

She didn't need to tell me twice. I answered with a fierce tip-to-knot thrust that left us both reeling with carnal delight. The rapid bucking left us speechless as I let loose all of the lustful urges I'd been holding back. Still, I was not some simple beast, mindlessly rutting the nearest hole in sight, but a tamed, well-trained animal. Bestial mating instincts were reforged into tools dedicated solely for maximizing my partner's pleasure — the perfect mix of animalistic passion and expert technique of a born sub. If the way Anno started to howl and desperately meet my thrusts with her own was any indication, I was doing a *very* good job.

Still, it didn't take more than a few seconds before she was the one fucking me into the mattress, not that I had any intention of stopping her. Eager to reassert her doting dominance, her white tail coiled around mine and wrestled it into submission while her fingers interlaced with my own. Fast, slow, gentle, rough... all those words ceased to have meaning. The only thing that mattered was following the melody of our conjoined bodies and blissful vocalizations. The tempo ebbed and flowed like the

tide, meaty breeding strokes one moment, gentle cuddlefucking the next. Stars, her skin was so warm against mine, her breath so heavy on my shoulder. I could hear, no, **feel** my heart pounding in my chest, overtaxed from its double-duty as both a circulatory organ and a reservoir for my overflowing ardor. We were lost in our own little universe, dancing to the twinned metronomes of our beating hearts.

"I love you," we didn't say. What need have we for words?

We could both feel our respective climaxes coming a mile away, having listened to this song together so many times before. I angled my thrusts to hit all of those sweet spots I found earlier, making sure to grind my rapidly growing breeding-bulb against her pink pearl at the apex of every thrust. She did the same to me, clamping down on my shaft in ways that made me twitch inside her and scream her name. With a final declaration of our sapphic desire, we slammed our hips together and forced my knot to spread her open before slipping in with a lewd pop and a spray of our mixed fluids. We clung to each other tightly, as intertwined and connected as two lovers could physically be. A single heartfelt kiss was all that we needed to push us both over the threshold and into paradise.

Climax hit both of us in full force as soon as our lips touched, an electrical arc that made both of us writhe with pleasure while our muscles ran on autopilot. We were stuck in an incredible feedback loop of pure bliss: she'd squeeze me tightly with her inner walls in ways that made me throb and twitch, which just made her squeeze harder in turn. Another gush of her juices flooded the space between us, dowsing our crotches with another wave of slick warmth. My pearlescent offering erupted inside of her while her orgasmic contractions milked me with masterful finesse, extending my own orgasm into a minutes-long affair and coaxing my overtaxed balls to pump out more and more ivory seed. It wasn't long before her slim midriff started to swell out into the most adorable little cum-paunch.

"Wow, Red," she murmured as she leaned back and glanced down at her abdominals, caressing the faint bulge. Her eyes were half-focused and dreamy, probably not too dissimilar to my own. "Guess the pills haven't fully worn off. I don't remember you ever being this... productive."

My reply was cut short by a loud whimper as the dormant plug still embedded in my backdoor suddenly sprang to life, vibrating right against my overworked prostate and making my legs quiver at the same frequency. Coupled with her walls clenching down on my hypersensitive knot, I was immediately pulled over the edge and into another toe-curling orgasm, refractory period be damned.

"I didn't say you could stop though, pet," she mumbled between breathy moans as I continued to overfill her channel. "I want all of you. Every. Last. Drop."

I cried out in ecstasy as I gave her my all, melting into a little Kaede-puddle beneath her.

After riding out the last aftershocks of our intense finale, we snuggled into each other's arms, our rapid heartbeats slowing and synchronizing as our eyelids started to leaden. It didn't matter that we were utterly filthy, covered nearly head-to-toe in multiple layers of each other's orgasmic fluids; cleanliness could come later. Right now, nothing was more important than savoring the magical afterglow that came with knot-mandated cuddles. We basked in the subdued lusty ambience and whispered sweet nothings until we lulled each other to sleep.

The rest of the day disappeared in a dream-like blur. After we awoke from our post-coital nap, we washed up and took turns drying and brushing each other's fur. We split a bowl of instant ramen for brunch (Anno somehow managed to burn hers) and spent the afternoon watching some old holos together. One thing led to another, and we ended up in a mating press on the couch before making out for another couple hours. We went to get cleaned up again, only to end up fucking in the shower. Twice. It almost felt like we were back in college, carefree and still discovering ourselves, making the most of my cramped little dorm room and getting teased by my neighbors for all the noise we made. After a picturesque dinner date straight out of a cheesy romance novel, we made love for the seventh time that day before passing out in each other's arms again.

I've never slept better.

EPILOGUE

Desire is a funny thing. It's fickle, confusing, even contradictory at times. I've never been much of a planner, but I always had at least a vague idea of what I wanted to do with my life. Thing is, life's a fucking asshole sometimes, throwing wrenches into your plans and sending you careening down a path you never saw coming.

Inhale.

Exhale.

The soothing pitter-patter of raindrops hitting the virtual windows slowly brought me back to the material world. I opened my eyes to see the fox-eared therapist sitting across from me. His nine, purple tails wriggled idly behind his warm smile.

"Ok, that's good enough for today," he said, his voice somehow comfy, like a pillowy bed you could just sink into. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. A lot better, actually. Thanks for this, Mitch."

"No need! You did all of the hard work; I merely guided you," he replied.

"Still, thanks for guiding me."

"My pleasure."

After exchanging goodbyes, I walked out of Mitch's little office and onto the cozy wood-paneled corridors of Canadia Station. My lover was waiting on a bench recessed into a small alcove outside, reading something physics-y on her holopad.

"How'd it go?" she asked as she put her device away and took my hand.

"Pretty good! I was a bit skeptical at first, but it certainly helped me feel a bit more 'in control' of things."

"Bold words for a subby little fluffbutt," she said as her naughty hand squeezed my ass.

"Hey!" I yelped as my face started to redden.

A short walk later, we arrived at one of the small circular landing platforms that ringed the lower levels of the station. Automatic flood lights illuminated Talon Rogue in all of her beat-up glory while a translucent shield bubble held back the cold vacuum, leaving us with an unimpeded view of the stellar ocean. Her new cargo door was as pristine as can be, and her name was now stenciled in sharp white letters along her slender neck. There were still a couple of new scars on her portside that evidently didn't buff out, but she wore them with pride, like medals of honor.

Athena lowered the boarding ramp as we approached, and we reminisced about our first date back at the academy as we climbed up. I let Anno get comfy in my quarters while I made my way up to the cockpit. Athena's diminutive avatar popped into existence out of thin air as I cycled the hatch.

"Hey, I probably should have said this sooner, but thanks for... you know... for saving my life earlier," I told her.

A cheery laugh slipped through a crack in her armor. "Oh, don't worry about it! It's practically my job, you know. Now, shoo! Your girlfriend is waiting for you, Captain *Kaedeypoo*," she snickered.

"ANNOOO!" I yelled down the hall as my girlfriend started laughing uproariously. Geez, you two....

I let Athena handle the lift-off sequence as I joined my lover on my little bunk. It was barely long enough to fit six feet of snowy-haired ausar beauty, but it's not like we needed an excuse to snuggle in close.

The ship's main engines hummed to life as we cleared the station. I quickly pulled up a starmap on my holoband, charting a course for the system's warp gate and then Tarkus beyond. For a moment, I thought about all of the things I've done up until now, superimposing the trajectory of my life onto the holographic projection. Infinite possible pathways branched out like the arms of a fractal, every happy memory and every misadventure a fork in the road. And yet, there was still so much ahead of me... more trials to overcome and more life to live.

Of course I still had hell of a libido, but for once, I felt like I was the one in the captain's seat. Gone was that uncontrolled wildfire, in its place the brilliant glow of a starship's drive plume. It was still hot enough to burn straight through metal, sure, but only when I wanted it to (which to be fair, was pretty fucking often).

I uncorked the half-full bottle of Windswept and poured two glasses for me and my lover, taking time to savor the sweet notes of cinnamon and pear as I held her close. The lightdrive kicked in with a mechanical whine and we shot off at relativistic speed, a single streak of light in the infinite night sky.

END NOTE

Hey everyone, thanks so much for reading all the way to the end! This was actually my second piece of creative writing that made it to a full draft (all of my previous projects never made it out of the cradle), so please forgive my overall amateur-ness. I obviously ended up taking some minor creative liberties from the source material, but I hope this piece still feels like it still kind of fits within the setting and provides an emotionally-satisfying bookend to the *Talon Rogue* saga.

Any and all feedback would be greatly appreciated, either on the discord or on [this copy](#) that has comments enabled. I'm mostly looking for feedback on how the emotional beats landed, but please let me know if there's any continuity errors (regardless of how small) or any typos/formatting blunders that managed to slip through.

Cheers!

Author's Note: This is an unofficial sequel to Savin's *Talon Rogue* Trilogy ([read here](#)), so please go read those short stories first (even if you've done so previously). Otherwise, the plot/tone of this story won't work as intended since I wrote it with the assumption that the reader is coming straight off the tail end of Downtime.

Synopsis: Several months after that short-lived reunion with her childhood friend, Kaede is forced to confront her inner demons after a cargo run nearly blows up in her face. Definitely a bit of a departure from the usual tone of TiTS, this is more of an angsty drama/romance fic than a smut one.

Tags: TiTS, Kaede/Anno, TF/F, Plot with Porn, French Kissing, Petplay, Handjob, Cunnilingus, Toys, P-in-V Sex, Hurt/Comfort, (Literal) Fluff, Love, Romantic Sex

Warnings: Angst, No-Seriously-a-Lot-of-Angst, Mild Alcoholism, Mild Gore, Detailed Depictions of PTSD/Mental Trauma

RAIN ON TAVROS

by Kitbashed

|

"Tavros Control, this is Talon Rogue. Requesting departure clearance."

"Copy, Talon Rogue. You are cleared for burn on vector zero-five one-two. Releasing docking arms now. Acknowledge please."

"Acknowledged, Tavros Control. Proceeding to burn on zero-five one-two."

The docking clamps fell away with hollow thuds that reverberated through the ship's hull. Freed from her moorings, Talon Rogue began to drift aimlessly, like a leaf on the solar wind. Switching off the grav generator, I hopped out of my seat and let myself do the same. There was always something calming about being in zero-G, something special about that sensation of being completely unburdened. I never understood why it made people feel uneasy. Then again, I grew up out here in the black; they probably get spacesick the same way I get groundsick after being stuck planetside for too long.

Like all good things, the moment ultimately passed. I strapped in and reengaged the gravity, only to hear a muffled splat behind me, presumably from something in the rec room I forgot to secure. Oh well. With a couple more button-presses and switch-flips that were ingrained into my muscle memory, I spooled up the main drives and plotted a course for the system's warp gate. Outside my starboard viewport, the great nanosteel rings of Tavros station slowly danced about their central axis.

I tapped a button on my console to summon Athena as I stood up. The 12" digital goddess instantly materialized from the overhead holo-projectors, the bronze armor that she wore over her toga gleaming in the sunlight of an unseen world.

"Shall I take the helm, Captain Entara?" she asked with her usual ice-cold confidence. I could have sworn there was a slight smirk on her verdant visage.

"Oh come on! I know you're just messing with me at this point," I replied, exasperated. "It's *Kaede*."

"Ah, apologies, Captain... Kaede."

"Fine, whatever," I groaned. "Just wake me up when we get there." I walked down from the cockpit and cycled the door to the common room. Bell peppers and synth-beef (with actual synth-beef this time!) were splattered all over the central holotable with a crumpled paper takeout container acting as the centerpiece to the greasy exhibit. Ugh, that's what I get for not putting leftovers away. I'll deal with that later.

I lazily slapped the wall terminal and the door to my quarters rolled open with a mechanical thump. To be honest, it was more like a converted storage closet than a proper bedroom; there was barely enough space to fit my bunk (and the occasional lover) in there. I cut power to my legs and faceplanted onto the bed with enough force to make my pillow jump. What? I've been awake for 22 hours straight; I think I've earned a little nap. Besides, I was already in my pajamas.

My mind began to wander as I prepared to shut down the rest of my weary body. These past months have been nothing but back and forth, coming and going, only stopping at port long enough to refuel, exchange cargo, and restock on instant noodles. Such is the life of a tramp-freighter captain. You can't compete with those massive Atlas-class superfreighters in the core, so you just have to take whatever contracts the big fish deem too small or too dangerous to bother with.

Sure, I probably could have let Athena do my job and snoozed the time away instead of pushing myself this hard, but I couldn't risk anyone finding out that I had an intelligent superweapon stolen from the most powerful criminal syndicate in the galaxy casually hanging out aboard my ship. The less involved Athena was, the better. Besides, work helped me keep my mind off things; turns out you don't get nightmares if you're so tired that your brain simply ceases to function the instant you hit the sack. That's the thing about being self-employed: I get to be my own boss, and sometimes she's a prick.

On the bright side, all that hard work meant I actually had a decent amount of spending money for once. I could treat Anno to fancy dinners and fun dates a lot more often, maybe even start looking into buying some upgrades for the ship. Those new Type-R Aegis engines did look pretty sweet....

Just as I was about to doze off, the Talon's klaxon stabbed me right in my sensitive ausar ears.

"What the *fuck* Athena!?"

"Apologies, Captain Kaede," her disembodied voice responded from my holoband, the blaring alarm falling silent as she did. "I'm getting an excessive temperature alert coming from the portside cargo hold: 115.2 degrees and climbing rapidly."

"Give me a visual," I groaned, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Camera seven is still down after last week's incident with that loading drone. I only became aware of the issue when the hold's atmospheric control unit reported it was unable to maintain temperature."

"Probably just another coolant leak." And I just had that fixed....

Not bothering to dress myself, I staggered out of bed wearing nothing but my boxers and a weathered tank-top before making my way to the entrance of the cargo bay on the opposite side of the ship. Looking through the small viewport on the door, everything seemed fine: no superheated coolant was spewing from the ceiling, nor was anything on fire. I pulled up the room's environmental data on the nearby wall terminal. Strange, everything else was in the green, only the temperature readout was flashing red. A faulty sensor perhaps?

I fingered the 'open' button on the interface, just enough to crack the hermetic seal. Big mistake. A sudden blast of heat rushed through the crack and washed over me, instantly evaporating all of the moisture from my exposed skin and stinging my eyes. It was as if I had opened a portal to a scorching desert on Ausaril. Not wanting to become half-ausar jerky, I manually slammed the reinforced door shut.

While my head was busy pondering why the fuck my ship suddenly had a new room-sized oven, my legs were already hauling ass to grab my EVA suit from the airlock at the ship's fore. I know it's made for hard vacuum, not extreme heat in a pressurized environment, but it should be fine, right? I threw open the equipment locker and grabbed a blocky, orange space suit, its mottled surface riddled with scuff marks and patched-up punctures. I always hated how I had to squish my ears and tuck my tail down my right leg to fit into the skin-tight undersuit, but I guess that's just what I get for being stingy and buying second-hand gear that wasn't even made for an ausar.

"Hey Athena, go through the cargo manifest and see if you can find anything. Oh, and add that camera to the maintenance schedule."

"Done," she replied instantaneously. "If the manifest is to be believed, nothing we're carrying could possibly generate that much heat, so it must be something else I'm not seeing."

Great. I finished donning my gear as I made my way back, sealing the helmet with a quarter turn and a reassuring click. Alright, let's try this again. I triple checked my suit's diagnostics before taking a deep breath and breaching the seal once more.

The cargo bay was about 20 by 30 feet, rounded into an arc that followed the contours of Talon's disk-shaped main hull. Cargo containers of various colors, shapes, and sizes were arranged in neat stacks on either side, held (relatively) secure by a mixture of magnetic clamps and good ol' ratchet straps. A small freight elevator sat flush with the floor towards the center, and the far wall was dominated by a large gull-wing door, intended to facilitate cargo transfers with ships that weren't big enough to have their own hangars. I don't use it much.

It didn't take an infrared cam to figure out who the culprit was. The air roiled angrily around a four-foot metal cube towards the center of the hold, causing my suit's thermal control unit to sputter as it struggled to keep the heat at bay. Plastered all over the heavy-duty crate's surface were warning labels in various languages: English, Ausari, even Gabilanese. These kinds of crates were designed to safely transport all

sorts of nasties, everything from radioactive waste to xenobiological samples, hence the tank-like armor. Hell, they were supposedly safe enough that even an indie like me could hypothetically take them after signing a few papers, provided that I didn't try to open them. Or ask too many questions. Unfortunately for me, this one didn't seem to live up to the hype; there was a massive dent on the crate's backside that exposed thick layers of delaminated armor plating.

"You getting this?" I asked as I tapped my helmet's built-in camera.

"Loud and clear," Athena's voice crackled over the suit's shitty commlink.

"Alright, what exactly am I looking at?"

"A Pyrite Industries hazmat container, model 2B. Not sure about its contents yet, I need a second to do some more cross-referencing, but according to the manifest, this one isn't ours. Coincidentally, we're missing a RhenWorld crate of similar size. It's likely they got mixed up at the docks."

Well, sucks for whoever owned this one, because it sure as hell wasn't staying on my ship any longer. If there's one thing that I actually remembered from my academy days, it's that overheating your ship is a surefire way to die a slow, painful death out here. Contrary to popular belief, space is only cold by technicality, the real issue is that it's an incredible insulator (a bit of a problem for us spacers since fusion reactors get pretty fucking hot).

Speaking of which, the heat emanating from my new mystery box was already starting to penetrate my suit, intensifying with every step. My underdressed form was soon coated head-to-toe in a solid film of sweat, soaking into my undersuit and matting my fur. It was such an aggravating combination of hellish heat and disgusting stickiness that it probably would have turned off even the most hardcore sweat fetishist (well, at least I naively imagined it would). A cold shower sounded downright amazing right about now.

Pushing through the blistering air, I finally got close enough to activate the hover-platform underneath the crate with a tap of my boot, causing it to slowly rise into the air as the repulsor pads hummed to life. It wasn't a smooth ascent though — the mechanical beast of burden shuddered as it struggled to support the immense weight, and the repulsor pads immediately started to leak thin wisps of pale smoke, overheating from being in direct contact with the two-ton space heater.

Yeah... that's not good. I had Athena unfurl the bay's cargo door and gave the hover-platform a hard shove, sending it gliding frictionlessly across the hold towards the sea of stars beyond. Just as the platform was about to slip through the blue-tinted oxygen shield, one of the repulsor pads gave out, causing the hover-plat to lurch as the other pads attempted to compensate. A half-second later, another pad burned out, causing a rapid cascading failure as each dead repulsor put more and more strain on the ones that remained. By the time I realized what was going on, the unbalanced thrust sent the platform and its superheated cargo careening back toward me.

Move! Move dammit! I mentally screamed at my cumbersome suit and exhausted body in a last-ditch attempt to get them to dodge out of the way faster, but my efforts were in vain. The corner of the platform clipped my waist as the last of the hover-pads died, knocking me prone before crashing down hard on my lower legs. I heard a sickening crunch followed by an ear-splitting scream as sharpened spears of pure agony raced up my nervous system to jab at my psyche. Satisfied with the damage it had inflicted, the smoldering crate skidded off the hover-plat and screeched to a halt on the opposite end of the hold.

"Kaede? Are you alright!?" cried Athena's static-filled voice over the commlink. Biting back the pain and stream of expletives, I ordered her to shut off the grav generator. After a subjective eternity, the crushing weight on my legs relented and I managed to extricate myself out from under the smoking hover-plat. When I clicked on my mag-soles and reflexively tried to stand back up, my right boot made me wince slightly as it tugged at my bruised, tail-wrapped leg till it touched down on the deck. I slowly lowered my other leg to do the sam—

"OW-FUCK-SHIT-OW-SON-OF-A—"

A torrent of curses flew out of my mouth till I got sick of repeating the same swears and started to make up new ones. Even without gravity, the gentle pull of my magboot was enough to make me feel like my tibia was about to splinter apart like rotten wood. Images of gruesome industrial accidents flashed in my mind, lingering for a few excruciating seconds before I could marshal enough willpower to swat them away. As the pain slowly stopped occupying the entirety of my cognitive bandwidth, I became increasingly aware of the fact that someone was shouting directly into my folded-up ears.

"...KAEDE!? KAEDE!? DO YOU COPY!?"

"OKAY OKAY! STOP YELLING DAMMIT!" I shouted back. Athena's voice instantly decreased in volume, but not in urgency.

"That crate is fucking bomb! You need to bail—"

"How long do I have?" I interrupted.

"Less than a minute!" she returned without skipping a beat.

"Can the shields take it?"

"Kaede, are you insane!? There's not enough time to push it overboard! You need to bail out now so I can put enough distance between us to get you clear of the blast radius."

"Sorry," I grunted before severing the commlink in a flash of anger. I knew Athena was probably right (as usual) and I was being rash, but abandoning the life I've worked so hard to build... I couldn't do that. Flying my own ship, seeing the stars, this has *always* been the dream for me. I wasn't ready to give Talon Rogue up, not without a fight.

As soon as a timer started ticking in the back of my head, I was already busy attaching a safety tether from my belt to an anchor point recessed into the floor and then immediately pushing off the deck with my good leg. After a few seconds of weightless flight, I managed an awkward one-legged landing on the bulkhead closest to the now glowing-red crate. After an even more awkward one-legged-and-two-handed climb down from the wall, I positioned myself behind the metal cube, magnetically locked my right boot to the deck, and pushed. Hard.

The crate barely budged. It was weightless, not massless. Shit. Its superheated surface should've been hot enough to burn my hands at this point — I could almost smell the horrid stench of burning polymer as the outer layers of my gloves started to melt — but all I could feel was my eyelids growing heavy as heat stroke and exhaustion started to exact their toll on me. Just as my arms were about to fully extend, I threw all the strength I could muster into a final shove and propelled the crate towards the cold void... at a snail's pace. To add insult to injury, that shove also overpowered the lone magboot anchoring me to the deck, sending me into an uncontrolled zero-G backflip.

The countdown in my head grew louder as I burned precious seconds tumbling helplessly in the air. You know what? At this point I was just fucking pissed. Over these past few years, I've cheated death more times than I can count; I've had bullets, lasers, even actual nukes thrown at me and I lived to tell the tale, like hell I was going to die because of some overgrown hot potato!

As soon as the spinning brought me back into alignment with the deck, I reactivated my magboots and thrust both of my legs downwards. The taste of copper filled my mouth as I bit my tongue stifling a scream. I sprint-limped to catch up with my slow-moving adversary, every step punctuated with a muffled cry or a colorful expletive, sometimes even a hybrid of the two. The crate was glowing bright enough to hurt my eyes by the time my damaged gloves reestablished contact, at least until my polarized visor flipped down automatically. I resumed pushing, but everything was too hot... too heavy... maybe if I closed my eyes a little....

A fresh burst of agony from my leg jolted me awake as I threw myself against the container. I was running off pure adrenaline at this point, ignoring the biological alarms blaring in my head as I felt fire tearing at my skin and sharp fragments of bone shredding my leg from the inside out. The pain howled louder and louder, threatening to tear my mind apart, but the noise also kept me on the knife's edge of consciousness, letting me keep my feet firmly planted on the deck as I continued to push. But even then, it wasn't enough; darkness soon began to encroach on the edges of my vision while the strength in my limbs started to run dry. Just as I was about to close my eyes and let myself succumb, a final blood-curdling scream resonated in my helmet as my shoulder slammed into the crate, sending it lazily floating past the sky-blue oxygen barrier and the orange combat shield behind it.

Then it exploded.

You know what the worst part is about having big ears? You hear *everything*. Momentarily blinded by the brilliant flash of the detonation, I could do nothing but listen in horror as everything around me went to shit. The blaring of the depressurization alarm as both of the shields collapsed, the rumble of cargo crates being ripped from the hold and thrown into the black abyss, even Athena's desperate cries of "Mayday! Mayday!" over the emergency channel — I could hear all of it in excruciating detail.

Before my eyes could recover, explosive decompression swept my legs out from under me and threw me overboard with the rest of the cargo, at least until my safety tether drew taut and swung me in a vicious arc back towards the ship. Still dazed and

half-conscious, I barely registered the pain of being slammed face-first into the portside engine nacelle, only noticing the subtle hiss of air leaking out of the freshly-bloodstained cracks in my faceplate. The stars started to dim as the air in my suit grew thinner.

It wasn't long before it all faded to black.

||

I heard my name being called.

There was nothing but featureless white expanse when I opened my eyes.

They called my name again, and I could faintly make out someone snapping their fingers. My ears swiveled on auto-track, scanning the colorless void in an attempt to pinpoint the origin of the sounds. I heard it again: nine o' clock high. They were close. As soon as I started to turn my head, the illusion collapsed.

The flashlight that had been previously shining directly into my retinas clicked off. After blinking a few times to clear the bright afterimages, I saw a grey-haired kaithrit medic staring down at me. A six-pointed star of life was emblazoned on his fireproof jacket, and based on the heavy bags that lay under his experienced eyes, he was someone who had seen everything and yet was still frequently disappointed. I saw his lips move as he put the flashlight away, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. My ears worked just fine, but it felt like my brain was lagging behind, unable to process the noises into words fast enough.

I took a moment to get my bearings: I was laying down on a stretcher in one of Tavros's numerous hangar bays. Scraps of my EVA suit were strewn haphazardly on the hangar floor around me, presumably shredded by the paramedics' trauma shears. My helmet didn't fare much better; its spiderwebbed visor was spattered with small blotches of freeze-dried crimson. A motley collection of dockworkers, technicians, and fellow pilots had already gathered around the perimeter to watch, although they maintained a polite distance so that the medics had enough space to work.

"Wha-appened?" I slurred.

"Broken fibula, fractured tibia, acute hypoxia, hyperthermia, a couple lacerations, and some first degree burns. Hardly anything serious," the paramedic said in a disinterested monotone, as if I hadn't been on death's door but a few minutes prior. "Do tell me if you notice any problems with your vision though. Ocular injuries are an entirely different beast."

I responded in the negative, but I'm not entirely sure he heard me.

"Good. The nanogel should come off on its own after an hour or two," he continued, gesturing to the green, blobby cast that covered my left shin. Although the outer layers had already solidified into a hard shell, it still felt all cold and slimy on the inside, but at least it seemed to keep the pain at bay. "You're free to go, just don't engage in any strenuous activity before the cast comes off."

The kaithrit walked off before I could even reply. A younger human EMT sheepishly removed the autodoc hugging my bicep and wiped off the excess medigel that remained on my palms and forehead, clearly a bit embarrassed by the curtness of her older colleague. As she helped me to my feet, I heard a couple sighs of relief from a few familiar faces in the crowd before they started to disperse, with the exception of a burly equine mechanic that was hurriedly pushing his way toward the front. The poor EMT nearly got trampled as Uncle Ivan charged forward and scooped me up into an airtight hug.

"Told eem ya be fine! It take more than zat to keep little wolf down!" he cheered as he effortlessly lifted me off the deck.

"Good to see you too," I replied — not an easy task considering the fact that his high-caliber arms were squeezing me like a plushie. "Is Dad here?"

Ivan's smile faltered, even if only for a microsecond. "Papa is off-station. 'Meet with Mr. Chow,' he say." Noticing the disappointment on my face, he gingerly set me down and rubbed my entire head with his enormous paw in a hyper-sized headpat. I almost felt like a little kid again. "Do not worry, pup! Papa be back soon. Ivan fix ship in no time!"

"Thanks. You're the best, Uncle Ivan." I returned the favor with a brief hug of my own before letting him get back to work. Once the medics packed up and the fanfare died down, I took a seat against a large container filled with spare transponder beacons and pinged Athena on my holoband. "How bad is it?"

"You heard the doctor, you should be fine after a bit of rest." she responded.

"You know that's not what I meant."

Athena gave me a look that was approximately apologetic. "The shields absorbed the brunt of the blast, but the cargo door was protruding outside the shield envelope and got hit pretty hard. Almost all of the freight in that bay was spaced when the oxygen shield got knocked out. Estimated damages, including repair fees, liabilities for the lost cargo, and penalties for breaching our delivery contracts, totals at... 31459 credits."

God. Fucking. Dammit. I slammed my fist against the ground in frustration. Ow. So much for climbing out of the debt-hole before I turned 30. I slumped against the crate, groaning with a mixture of pain and exhaustion. Well, at least being a Tavros native meant that I wasn't about to get bitchslapped with a fat medical bill. Small victories, I guess. Just as I was about to breathe a small sigh of relief for not being exploded today, I noticed the anxious tension on Athena's face — she still had more bad news.

"You also received a new video message while you were out..." She stalled by clearing her simulated throat; I guess even she can get nervous sometimes. "...from Cassandra."

My stomach dropped. I've been dreading this moment ever since fateful night when she showed up at my apartment and reinserted herself back into my life. For months, I've tried everything short of physically scouring the entirety of Confederate space attempting to get a hold of her. I've tried emails, dusty chat rooms, even her old game accounts. It was practically engraved into my daily routine: I'd wake up, dial Cass, and wait exactly 51.2 seconds for the call to go to voicemail before leaving the same message I've already repeated a hundred times over. She never replied. Honestly, I had almost convinced myself that night was nothing more than some weird hormone-fueled nightmare spawned from my own anxieties. That was, until today.

But why now? Why did she decide to call back today of all days? Why did she wait nearly nine months...

oh god.

I double checked my mental math, desperately hoping that I hit my head harder than I thought or that my internal calendar was simply off. No such luck. Fuck, I could

barely handle my current relationships, let alone my job and my finances. Parenthood was supposed to be a distant 'maybe' for me, something to consider long after I'd paid Talon off and settled down with Anno in some cozy little place we could call our own. It was hard to resist the temptation to curl up into a ball and cry.

Before I could death spiral any further, embedded mental failsafes forcefully derailed that train of thought and banished it to the back of my mind. Baby steps, one life-shattering development at a time. I just had to focus on getting the ship fixed. But first, I needed a drink.

As I slowly stood up, careful to not put too much weight on my left side, I glanced back at Talon Rogue: the entirety of her curvaceous portside was pockmarked with countless micro-shrapnel impacts, but those were peanuts compared to the injuries sustained by the still-unfurled cargo door. It honestly hurt to look at it; the space-grade gull-wing was horrifically perforated and mangled, sticking out like a broken limb. That makes two of us, I guess. I limped out of the hangar and caught a lift on one of the countless cyclical elevators that formed the spine of the station.

Athena filled me in on the rest of the details during the ride up. Apparently, it was some youngster's first day on the job: the kid was too busy fooling around with their new power loader to notice that they had plopped some experimental fuel cell onto the wrong ship (my ship!) with a fair bit of rough handling for good measure. She notified me that she already had a legal fusillade armed and ready, but I waved her off. Call me a softie if you want, but I wasn't about to sue some poor kid into oblivion and drag them into the debt hole, even if they did nearly blow up me and Talon in their stupidity. Don't get me wrong though: I wasn't above cussing them out, but apparently Ivan had beat me to the punch. At least I could rest easy knowing that he probably scared the living daylights out of them.

I was still picking flakes of dried blood out of my hair by the time the elevator doors opened. I've cleaned worse things out of it, but still, ew. The merchant deck was strangely uncrowded today, relatively speaking. Then again, 'deserted' by Tavros standards just meant you could occasionally catch glimpses of the floor in between the gaps of bustling bodies. It wasn't always like this: back before the planet rush started, I never had to worry about inconsiderate assholes constantly butting into my personal space or stepping on my tail.

Anon's was also a bit on the empty side, but that was to be expected — not a whole lot of patrons at this early hour. Still, there were more than enough people to fill the bar with the usual sounds and... pleasant... aromas.

Tri'en, the four-armed bartender, waved me over with his free hand (his other three were occupied serving other customers). "Hey pup! Long time no— Oh. You look like shit. Bad run?"

Sometimes, I wish people would just mind their own business. "Is it that obvious?" I groaned.

"Well, for one thing, that big ol' tail of yours is practically mopping my floor."

I glanced behind me and sure enough, my prized ginger fur was blackened by all the bar-floor muck I had just trudged through, as if being drenched with sweat wasn't enough. Great. He set down a bottle of aged Windswept on the counter as I sat down on one of the few stools that didn't squeak.

"On the house..."

"Thanks, Tri," I muttered. I reached for the forest-green bottle of rum, only for him to pull it back at the last moment.

"But first, you wanna talk about it?"

"I'm fine, Tri'en," I growled, loud enough to startle the towering suula sitting a few seats down from me. "Can I get my drink now?"

The green man sighed in disappointment before he unstoppered the bottle and poured me a glass with his lower arms. I drank it all with a few quick gulps, barely acknowledging the sweet notes of cinnamon and pear before slapping the empty glass down on the counter. I immediately motioned for another round, to which he reluctantly obliged.

"Listen kiddo, I've seen that look in your eyes before," he sighed as he replenished my drink. "If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. I get it. Just... don't lie about it. There's no reward in pretending things are all fine and dandy when they're not."

"I'm not bullshitting you, Tri. I'm **fine**." I downed my drink and gestured for another refill. He shook his head.

"I'm not the one you're bullshitting," he scolded. Much to my irritation, he put my glass away and sealed the bottle. "Besides, your old man is going to kill me if I let you

drink yourself stupid like last time, and I'm not carrying your scrawny ass back to your flat again." His upper-right hand reached up to rub two out of his three eyes as he let out another tired exhale. "Tell you what: you get yourself cleaned up and come back tomorrow, and I'll give you the rest of the bottle then. Deal?"

I was starting to get real tired of being infantilized like this. "Oh, fuck off!" is what I was about to say, if not for a familiar tap on my shoulder.

"Hey, Red," Anno purred in all of her snowy-haired glory. She wasn't wearing that skin-tight Steele Tech catsuit this time, but her undersized blouse and shrink-wrapped jeans weren't exactly any more modest. I could practically see her every curve through the thin fabric, not to mention the way her ample chest swelled with every breath. Ack! A stirring between my legs immediately reminded me that I was still wearing nothing but my undergarments.

"H-Hey Anno!" I blurted as I concealed my busted leg behind my tail and tried to make myself look less disheveled. Anno didn't seem to care, at least as far as I could tell.

"Thought you were shipping out today?"

"Yeah uhh... there was a bit of a mixup. I'll probably be stuck here for a few more days."

"Hmm... I still have some shopping I need to do, but what do you say I swing by your place for some fun later tonight? I want to give you a *proper* sendoff." Her voice was practically dripping with sensuality.

Heh, maybe today wasn't going to be a complete shitshow after all. "You know it, babe." I gave my best attempt at a roguish wink, complete with finger guns. It totally sucked, but I knew it'd made her laugh at least.

"Well, well, aren't you just a charming little hotshot?" she giggled, giving me a quick pet between the ears before waving goodbye. I watched her go, a bit more wistfully than I'd like to admit, and her pale fur soon vanished into the ocean of bodies outside.

"Lemonade?" Tri'en offered diplomatically as he pushed a tall glass of the stuff towards me. I made sure he saw my eyes do a full barrel roll before taking a sip.

The walk back to my apartment was pleasantly unremarkable. I barely acknowledged house-Athena's greeting as I opened the front door and made a beeline for the

bathroom. The shower was already warmed up by the time my inadequate clothing hit the floor. Fuck, that felt good... nothing like a nice bit of steam and suds to wash away a day's troubles. Layers of caked-on sweat and dried blood were easily whisked down the drain by the liquid massage; even the solidified green goop on my shin crumbled and dissolved with minimal effort, revealing a pristine, slender leg beneath. Oh the wonders of modern medical technology.

I was almost presentable by the time I stepped out of the shower... if you ignored the fact that my tail had been replaced by a hairy waterlogged noodle. Ugh, as much as I loved my fur, it was a real pain in the ass sometimes (pun intended); it took nearly half an hour of blow-drying and brushing to restore it to its former fluffy glory. Whatever, gotta look my best for Anno.

After drying the rest of my body off and donning a fresh set of undergarments, I flopped down on the couch and took a nap while I waited for my girlfriend to arrive. For better or for worse, it was a pretty short nap; Anno had already made herself at home by the time my holoband's alarm clock went off.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she teased, setting down two glasses of water on the coffee table before plopping down on the couch next to me.

"Morning, babe," I yawned, ignoring the fact that we were already well into the afternoon. I was still tired as a dog, but a quick smooch from my lover was apparently all that was needed to recharge my weary body.

"Want to try something new tonight?" She tossed a small, rose-colored box my way. *Dry Heat* was written on the front of the package in large, gaudy block lettering, a sharp contrast to the various disclaimers and drug facts that were written in microscopic monochrome on the back. The rest of the packaging was decorated with neon-pink hearts and heavily-stylized... bite marks?

"What's this?"

"Basically, it's the lovechild of Sterilex and Breeder's Bliss: a few hours of intense heat-sex without any of the usual consequences," she explained. "It's a bit of a fad on Ausaril right now — just thought it'd be fun to see what all the fuss is about."

Heat-sex... if that night with Cass was anything to go by, the pheromones from Anno's heat alone would be more than enough for my ausar breeding instincts to kick in. Combining that with my own drug-induced rut would easily override any remaining

shreds of self-control, a feeling I wasn't keen on reliving. Then again, losing myself in a mindless fuck-frenzy would be a great way to take my mind off Cass.

Evidently, my hesitation was written verbatim on my face, as Anno immediately started backpedaling: "Sorry, dumb idea. We don't have to try it if you don't—"

"I'd love to," I lied. I should've said no. Void, I wanted to say no, but I wanted her more.

Anno smiled in relief. I popped out two heart-shaped pills from the packaging — one for each of us. We clinked our glasses together and washed down the two-in-one love-drugs with a dash of ice water. Everything after that point happened in a blur. We were all over each other long before the artificial estrus had a chance to kick in, grinding our hips together and fondling each other's breasts through sheer fabric. Our tails were a furious whirlwind that slapped the walls and furniture with enough force to dent metal. We fumbled into the bedroom and all but ripped each other's clothes off in between moan-filled kisses.

There was a moment of relative calm when Anno stumbled ass-first onto my queen-sized bed. She took the fall in stride though, leaning back against the pillows, spreading her legs, and presenting her already-dripping sex to me, complete with a perfectly-trimmed tuft of white fur. Her alluring scent diffused into the air just as chemically-induced desire started to diffuse into my bloodstream. I crawled on top of her, instinctively aligning my achingly-hard cock so that the tip was kissing her pink folds. Once again I felt that raging inferno, that lusty liquid fire that flowed through my veins with every pulse of my heart. It was the same searing heat I felt with Cass, only stronger, wilder. As I began to push deeper, the heat kept intensifying well past the point of being uncomfortable. It was hot... too hot.

Then it started to burn me from the inside out.

I could feel my self-control crumbling to ash; whatever tender romantic feelings I held for my lover were overwritten with brutal, animalistic hunger.

Why? Why did it hurt this time? Of course, the last remnants of my rational mind knew damn well why: after what Cass and her pheromones did to me — and what I might have done to her — I could never let that happen again with Anno. I would rather tear my own arm off before I would let myself feel like a prisoner in my own body again. Oh Anno... everything's different when I'm with you.

"Kaede? Kaede!"

"Wha..."

"Stars! Are you ok? You're crying!" Gone were those inviting bedroom eyes, her face was now awash with concern.

A bolt of clarity struck my lust-addled mind. I am? I wiped my eyes. Oh... I guess I am. I tried to answer her, tried to reassure her that everything was fine, but my voice got snagged on the barbed wire in my tightening throat. Raindrops rolled down my face before trickling onto Anno's nude form, extinguishing that carnal fire that burned so fiercely just moments before.

"N-No..." I sobbed as I collapsed face-first into her plush chest. I felt her fur-clad arms wrap around me, holding me close. When my hyperventilating lungs made me shudder and writhe in her embrace, she just held me closer. I could feel her carefully run a hand through my hair while the other caressed my back. Her touch was so soft....

"It's okay, babe... it's ok," she whispered. "Just let it all out."

The trickle turned into a downpour. All the pain I had so desperately tried to seal away burst back to the forefront of my mind, gushing forth like blood from a bullet wound. The Voiders, Tarkus, Cass... I wept into my girlfriend's chest like the pathetic mess I was. Thankfully, it wasn't long before sleep took me, sparing me from having to dwell on those memories any longer.



~12 YEARS AGO

I remember that day when I walked into JoyCo's for my first dose of Estrobloom+. I especially remember those sterile-white floors with bubblegum-pink decals, mostly because I was staring at them. As my footsteps started to slow, I felt a slender, clawed hand tug at my own.

"Come on, girl! What happened to all that excitement you had yesterday?" That was Cassandra, my best friend since, well, forever. She was a lot more outgoing and

confident than me, which wasn't saying much given I was basically a timid ball of awkwardness.

"I don't know... I'm just... really nervous for some reason," I stuttered. My voice was so faint I could barely hear it.

Thankfully, she decided not to press any further and changed the subject. "By the way, have you decided on a name yet? No pressure or anything if you haven't, though! I know you've been thinking about it for a while now."

"Actually... I've been thinking about 'Kaede.' "

"Ooh! That's a pretty name! It suits you! Any story behind it?"

"Uh..." I stuttered. In hindsight, it was a bit silly of me to just steal the name of one of my old CRPG characters, but then again, it's not like most people got to choose their own names anyways. "It's an old human name I found online. It means 'maple.' "

Cass tilted her head at me in confusion; one of her feline ears even flicked at me of its own accord.

"Oh, right. They're a species of Terran tree with red leaves," I explained. "I remember seeing them in some old documentaries of Earth. They're also—"

"What's a tree?" she interrupted, feigning ignorance and poorly concealing a mischievous grin.

"Oh come on! You know what a tree is!" Cass just giggled as she playfully ruffled the red hair between my ears. "H-Hey!" I whined halfheartedly. She always loved messing with me like this, and even though I would never have admitted it at the time, I really liked it when she did. Meanwhile, my tail — un beholden to any sense of embarrassment — made its opinion on the matter crystal clear.

We continued our stroll through the great labyrinth of consumerism, its shelves packed to the brim with brightly colored goods. JoyCo really did have it all, everything from groceries and soap to personal energy shields and gene mods. Speaking of which, we soon found ourselves in the mod section towards the back of the store. The pricier and more uh... *adult* offerings were locked behind transparent acrylic.

I soon spotted the object of my search: a small freezer aisle with yellow and purple popsicles — Estrobloom and Estrobloom+. I glanced at the holographic price tag and winced; it was pretty cheap as far as mods go, but it still wasn't pocket change, especially since my only income sources at the time consisted of birthday money and whatever odd jobs Uncle Ivan let me help with. Grabbing one of the purple ones, I was pleasantly surprised when it wasn't uncomfortably cold to the touch, the thin wrapper somehow providing a fair amount of insulation. In a smaller font towards the bottom, the packaging read: *Bloom into the Feminine Flower You Always Deserved to Be!*

We made our way back to the front of the store. Thankfully, there wasn't much of a line today. The cashier, bored-looking gryvain whose nametag identified her as 'Kerrigan', hardly looked at us as she robotically scanned and bagged the purple popsicle. Her towering height and icy demeanor reminded me of my history teacher (listen, he was really scary, alright!). She didn't even bother to wear that ubiquitous corporate-issue smile.

"Sorry kid, I'm going to need to see some ID. Company policy," she said flatly, albeit with a faint hint of remorse.

Ever since the dawn of commercially-available gene mods, the minimum age requirement for their use has always been a touchy subject. There were just too many compounding variables: the specific mod being used, the user's genetic makeup, different cultural norms.... At some point, the UGC sort of gave up trying to enforce their rulings and let megacorps and independent polities set their own standards, for the most part.

Fortunately, fairly basic stuff like Estrobloom+ wasn't nearly as scrutinized, especially on a little frontier station like Tavros. Those kinds of mods were allowed right around the time when puberty (or whatever equivalent level of maturity is appropriate for your race) would typically hit. For half-ausars like me, that meant thirteen (Terran) years old.

I flashed my school-issued holo-ID at the scanner, which chirped affirmatively.

"Hmm..." Kerrigan murmured with subtle amusement. "Happy birthday, by the way."

"You too," I blurted before I could stop myself. Idiot. Ugh, Cass is never going to let me live that down.

Just as I started to apologize for my slip-up, the stern draconic woman broke into a surprisingly mirthful laugh, "Oh, don't worry about it. I used to do that all the time." I sighed in relief as I forked over a preloaded credit chit, and she handed me my purchase in a small bag decorated with the megacorp's iconic pink-and-white logo. "Thank you for shopping at JoyCo, Miss," she said candidly.

Huh, 'Miss.' I liked that. It was a bit formal for my tastes, but something about it still made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside, even if I couldn't quite articulate why. Whatever the reason, I could feel my tail start to wag behind me as we stepped out of the store.

After a quick stop at the local ice cream parlor so that Cass could grab a frozen treat of her own, we boarded one of the large central lifts and punched the floor number in. Kilometers of alloy and plexiglass raced past us as we ascended past residential decks at breakneck speed, fine-tuned inertial dampener fields completely negating the otherwise staggering acceleration. With a cheerful beep, the doors slid open to reveal a massive deck-spanning arboretum. Although most of it was cordoned off with holographic 'under construction' signs, the completed sections were already bustling with vibrant alien ferns and more familiar varieties of Terran flora.

Many years ago, Steele Tech decided to invest a fortune into building out Tavros in preparation for the upcoming planet rush. That meant fancy parks like this one, luxury suites, renovations for the merchant deck, but also new classrooms, medical facilities, and even housing subsidies. Bless our benevolent corporate overlords (unironically for once).

We wandered around and admired the greenery while we looked for a place to sit. If you ignored the faint hum of the station's internal machinery and the slightly unnatural way the grass swayed in the artificial breeze, you could easily pretend you were just taking a stroll through an ordinary park on some lush terrestrial world (not that I would know, I've never actually been planetside before). Although, I think I would have preferred this over the real thing regardless. Sure, the warm sunlight on my skin may be synthetic, but at least it wasn't chock-full of cancer rays.

"No way! It's you!" Cass teased, pointing at a young Terran tree covered with blush-colored flowers in lieu of leaves. Pink petals silently departed from its branches in a constant trickle.

"That's a cherry blossom, not a maple tree, dummy."

"Ughhh. Whatever you say, tree-girl," she quipped, chuckling at her own terrible joke. I tried to think of an appropriately witty riposte but to no avail. Oh screw it, I was laughing too.

We sat down on a secluded synth-wood bench with a good view of the ongoing construction. Large six-legged construction bots lifted huge prefab segments into position with their powerful servo-driven limbs while smaller ones scurried around and welded them into place, all of which was carefully overseen by a handful of their more organic counterparts. The air surrounding the work site shimmered with noise-suppression fields, quarantining the terrible din inherent to such work. I pulled the popsicle out of the bag and carefully tore open the wrapper to reveal the unassuming purple desert. I hesitated.

"Something wrong?"

"It's just..." I sighed. Of course I wanted it — mods were a magical thing for people like me. They meant we had the freedom to choose, the chance to take our lives into our own hands instead of being shackled to the one assigned to us by random rolls of genetic dice. But it was always something I could look forward to, a guiding star in the sky that gave me direction precisely because it was so distant. Now that the moment was actually here... I don't know... what if it's not everything I hoped it was? Fidgeting with the microsurgeon-laced treat in my hand, I guess I was also just a tad surprised, expecting some scary-looking needle or maybe foul-tasting pills, not a cute popsicle of all things. "It's my first mod, you know? I guess I just don't know what to expect... what if something..."

"Hey," Cass gently interjected, squeezing my hand and pulling me back to reality. One of her tails even brushed reassuringly against my own. "Whatever happens, you know I'll be here for you, right? You'll always be my best friend, no matter what shape you take."

"Cass, I..." Void, I desperately wanted to tell her how I really felt. I had recently developed a bit of a crush on her, but obviously I kept that to myself out of fear of messing up our friendship. "Thanks," was all I could manage before I had to turn away, given that my face was rapidly approaching my hair color.

"Anytime." We sat in comfortable silence for a while, holding hands and stretching that ephemeral moment long past the point it started to wear thin. "Cheers?" Cass offered tentatively as she raised her ice cream cone towards me. I responded in kind, albeit in lowercase, and we toasted with our respective cold treats before we dug in.

All it took was a single lick, and the final shreds of doubt that still lingered in my mind simply melted away. 'Happy' doesn't even begin to describe it; I was downright euphoric. At long last, I could just be... me, and it was better than anything I could have dreamed of. I don't even remember how it tasted. Something like blueberries? Or was it grape? Whatever, that wasn't important; all that mattered to me in that moment was the unrelenting joy that was blossoming in my chest and the comforting warmth of my best friend's hand. I carefully carved this memory into the stone of my mind with the knowledge that I would cherish it forever.

"Happy birthday, Kaede."

IV

Anno was still asleep when I woke up. After I wiped my eyes, I saw that my tears had left a soggy puddle in her cleavage. Ewewew. I reluctantly untangled myself from her arms and cleaned her up with a towel, taking great care not to wake her.

I checked the time on my holoband: 5:12 am. In the darkness, the unread message notification glared at me like an evil eye, mocking me for my cowardice. Well, fuck it, it's not like this day could get much worse; I needed some fresh air anyways. And maybe another drink.

As I slipped my legs into my least torn-up pair of jeans and threaded my tail through the hole in the back, I pulled out a foil pack from the undersized front pocket (seriously, why did they always make them so small?). Ever since that night with Cass, I've always carried a couple libidio suppressants with me as a precaution, something that most ausar already do on the regular.

I popped the sand-colored pill out of its blister pack and swallowed it with ease, despite its awkward size and bitter aftertaste, and the last vestiges of ausar rutting instincts vanished in an instant. Were I in a better mood, I might have made a joke about my ability to swallow, but right now, the fact that it crossed my mind at all just skeeved me out. Maybe that was just the Chill Pill talking. I left another suppressant on the nightstand for Anno. She definitely carried her own, but a bit of redundancy never hurt.

"Hey Athena, if Anno wakes up before I'm back, just tell her I just stepped out to run some errands."

"Of course," she responded plainly.

I grabbed a few bottles of whiskey from my liquor cabinet on the way out, or at least I would have, if I hadn't already depleted my stash last week; all I had left was a six pack of Frisky Dingo. It was cheap, shitty beer (and tasted like it), but at least it had enough poison to do the job. The front door automatically slid closed behind me.

It was still dark outside, relatively speaking; nights on the residential decks were simulated with soft mood lighting rather than actual darkness. Still, it was a nice change of pace from the usual harsh white illumination during 'daylight' hours. After riding the lift up a few floors, I strolled out onto a gloomy elevated walkway overlooking the arboretum, one of the few places on this god-forsaken station where I could actually be alone. My holoband grew heavy on my forearm as I leaned against the railing and stared down at the illuminated pathways of the park below. Above me, a photorealistic projection of a terrestrial night sky dominated the ceiling, only interrupted by the cluster of transparent lift tubes that stretched high enough to touch the digitized stars.

I scrolled through my notifications and tapped the icon of Cass — the old Cass. A small rectangle of light popped into existence from my holoband's projectors as the 2D video loaded in. My old friend was sitting in a medical bed with a petite pair of horns poking out of her brunette curls (were those there before?). She was wearing a hospital gown that seemed a bit small given her new feminine endowments, but without that cloud of pheromones screwing with my head, her hypersexual body no longer got the better of me. In fact, it was a bit off-putting; just looking at her massive bust gave me second-hand back pain.

Cass greeted me with a stupid-happy smile. "Heya Kaede! Guess your little swimmers were, like, pretty potent! You wouldn't happen to know any pretty girl names would you? Anyways, you oughta come down to New Texas sometime, I'll make it worth your while," she said with a flirtatious grin and hooded eyes. "Who knows, maybe our baby girl will get a sibling."

Void, was she even the same person? The Cass I knew was brilliant and fiercely independent. Now, all I saw was an airheaded bimbo — a pornographic parody of my childhood friend. Unable to watch any further, I killed the playback with an angry swipe.

I was feeling a lot of things at that moment. Most of it was rage. Gah! What the hell was she thinking that night, showing up out of the blue like that? Did she know that my ausar half would react that way, that I would be too overwhelmed by her pheromones to say no to her? Or was she too deep in heat to care? You know what? I think I was better off not knowing; the last thing I needed was more reasons to be upset with her.

Then again, it wasn't entirely her fault. I should have been stronger; I should have rushed her to the hospital the moment she showed up at my doorstep looking like a mod junkie and acting nothing like the girl I knew. At the very least, I should have worn a damn condom, but instead, I was too busy thinking with my other head. Hell, even now, her new body still turned me on a bit in spite of all my feelings of guilt, betrayal, and revulsion. Maybe I deserved this.

I cracked open a can of the cheap piss-beer and chugged half of it in one go. This past year, my sex life has been... complicated. All those lonely, long-haul cargo runs gave me plenty of time to stew in my own thoughts, which wasn't very healthy in hindsight. Kiro, the wax man... even that time with Cass could technically be considered sexual assault under UGC law.

Of course, I was furious about all those times my body was violated like that, but the devil on my shoulder was eager to point out that a part of me still enjoyed it — every single time. More than anything, I hated myself for always going along with it like some mindless sex addict. I used to tell myself that it wasn't my fault, blaming whatever aphrodisiacs or pheromones that the cosmos seemed to keep throwing at me, but the more I thought about it, the less convincing that sounded. The way that those poisons twisted my mind, tricked me into thinking that it was my idea all along... I don't even know where my own desires ended and the drug-coerced ones began.

Now, just the thought of sex was so irresistibly intoxicating. It hurt and it felt good. I wanted it when I didn't. It reminded me all too much of that night after I found out she had cut and run: I drank till my liver nearly gave out. I wanted to stop, believe me, but I also knew that every sip meant another minute I wouldn't have to live with my fuck-ups. And of course, one of the precious few times I was with someone I trusted and was actually okay with letting go of the reins for a bit, my traitorous body decided to go ahead and ruin that too.

I leaned over the railing and took another swig of the foul-tasting liquid, wincing as it scorched my throat on the way down. Void, I was just so tired of it all. The nightmares, the self-loathing, the fact that I couldn't even control my own body... the worst part was that I didn't even have any decent booze to drown my sorrows in.

What the hell was wrong with me? I was raped and I fucking *liked it*.

My temper got the better of me as I crushed the empty can in my fist and hurled it over the railing, watching as it arced through the air before falling back down towards the grass far below. I grabbed another.

I was so busy wallowing in my own self-pity that I didn't even notice Anno had walked up behind me. "There you are, Red! Your V.I. told me you were running errands, but we both know that you hate waking up early." She placed her soft hand on my shoulder and leaned against the railing with me. "Kaede... can we talk about last night?" she asked tenderly.

"Anno..." I started, unable to even face her. "I'm really sorry about that, it's just... I'd rather be alone right now." I gently removed her hand from my shoulder and turned to walk away, only for her to grab my arm the same way that K—

I refused to let my mind finish drawing that subconscious comparison.

"Kaede, wait! Please, just talk to me. Something's clearly hurting you. Trust me, I've been there too."

I was already regretting the words long before they left my lips, but I said them anyway, blindly lashing out like a wounded animal. It was so tempting to just blame the alcohol and sleep deprivation, but it's not like those things happen on their own. The ugly truth is that this one was on me.

"No you haven't!" I shouted as I tore my arm away from her. *Stop it*, I thought to myself, but like so many times before, I didn't listen. "What the hell do you have to worry about!? You're a Ph.D with a cushy desk job and literal billionaires for parents! You don't know what it's like; I nearly got killed today because some idiot mixed up a couple boxes! **The only thing you have to worry about is deciding who your next lay is!**"

//A few alternate lines I tried and ended up rejecting:

1. "The only thing you worry about is who your next lay is!"
 - I like this one since it's more concise, but it leans a little too heavy on the slut-shaming
2. "The only hard thing in your life is whoever's dick you're sucking!"
 - Too unserious
3. "Don't pretend you care about me when I'm just the latest notch on your bedpost!"
 - Kaede feeling like her love isn't being reciprocated was a plot point I initially wanted to explore more, but it didn't make it past the outlining phase. Hence, this line was scrapped.

The silence lingered in the air, ringing in my ears like a gunshot.

It took hearing Anno cry to finally bring me back to my senses. What kind of monster does that make me? "Anno I'm sorry I didn't mean it," I babbled semi-coherently as I wrapped my arms around her slender shoulders, clinging on for dear life.

"Kaede..." she whispered between tears, voice wavering despite her best efforts. Her fluffy arms weakly returned the hug.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you it's just been a really really shitty day for me but I was being a jerk and I took it out on you and that's not okay at all and I want to make it up to you because I love you and I—" I continued rambling as my own eyes began to water.

"It's okay... I know you didn't mean to hurt me," Anno sniffled. "I'm sorry if I was too pushy... I'm just really worried about you. I can tell you've been overworking yourself recently, and sometimes I can feel you thrashing in your sleep. At first I didn't want to pry, but after watching you fall apart in my arms last night...."

Geez, now we're both bawling our eyes out. Then again, I couldn't deny that I needed this; there was a kind of bliss in just letting the world beneath my feet fall away, lost in a nice long ugly-cry session. We held onto each other for a while, keeping each other afloat even as our shaking bodies were battered by waves of anguish.

We made landfall on a small bench by the railing, still clinging to each other as if we were anticipating some terrible force was about to sweep us apart.

"I know I'm not always the best at showing it, but... I love you, Kaede," she confessed with bashful sincerity. "Stars, I just wish we could see more of each other sometimes. I want you to share more of your life with me... even the painful parts. I want to be with you till our fur turns white."

"Um, your fur's kinda white already," I half-teased through the tears.

"Oh you know what I meant!" she whined as she playfully socked me on the shoulder. I grasped the impact area in mock pain before embracing her once more as we laughed and cried and in equal measure. As the emotional rollercoaster started to wind down, I took her hand in mine and sat with her in compassionate silence as we watched the twinkling lights of elevator cabs travel up and down the central lift tubes.

"Anno... when you said you've been hurt before... do you want to talk about it?" I asked.

"You sure? You have a lot on your plate already."

"Sharing goes both ways. I want to be there for you, too."

She flashed me a hint of a smile, probably a bit amused at being caught in her own trap. "Okay," she began with a sigh. "Did I ever tell you about why I quit Akkadi?"

"Something about 'botched experiments?' "

"Yeah, I said that, didn't I?" She gazed off into the distance, as if watching a replay of her past on some faraway screen. "Remember when the Princess of Ausaril got kidnapped a couple years back?"

I shook my head. I usually try to keep up-to-date with the news, but it all just moves so fast sometimes.

"Basically, my team was working on miniaturizing gate tech, small enough to warp individual people. Of course, the military was bankrolling the project, so when a bunch of zealots took the Princess hostage, some genius in the admiralty thought that this was the perfect time for a little field test," she spat, letting long-simmering rage finally come to a boil. "Just warp in a bunch of *our own people* directly into a delicate hostage situation using an *unfinished prototype*. What could possibly go wrong!?"

She took a breath and steadied herself, her anger transmuting itself into anguish as tears once again streamed down her face. "We weren't ready... not even close... but they forced our hand," she continued. "We sent in six: Roy, Millar, Kaemal, and Drummar just never showed up at the other end. As for Halden and Berton... void, I wonder if it would've been better if they hadn't."

"That... wasn't your fault, babe. You didn't have a choice."

"But I did! I should've walked out then and there! I knew there was no way they could have continued the project without me, but I was naive and just went along with it, thinking that they actually gave a single *shit* about us. I only quit when they put my own sister through and she nearly..." Anno trailed off as the grief overwhelmed her, furry ears and tail drooping as she buried her face in her hands.

I was at a loss on how to comfort her. Hell, I am probably the least qualified person for this sort of thing; I tried to bury my demons with work and alcohol and look how that panned out. Then again, I owed it to her to try.

Hooking an arm around her, I pulled her in close and let her cry into my shoulder, letting her deflated ears flop onto my face. How did she always do it? I tried to recall all the times I've been on the receiving end of a good petting, letting my memories guide my hands as I stroked her hair and caressed her furred ears. Stars, I had no idea it also felt amazing to be on the other end. Her hair was finer than any synth-silk and soft as a cloud; it was like I was petting an incarnation of pure fluffy bliss. I made a mental note to ask if I could try her shampoo later. Judging by the way her ears and tail started to perk up, that seemed to do the trick.

"Did you know them well?" I asked.

She nodded sullenly. "Some of them. Roy was dating one of my coworkers. Cute little ausar guy with big ol' ears... he always seemed like such a sweetheart. I wish I got to know him better."

I never knew the names of the people I killed. I remember the punch of my gun's recoil as the pirate's body crumpled to the deck, but I never saw the face behind that polarized visor. I remember the violent drumbeat of Talon Rogue's cannons as they ripped apart that Black Void frigate, but I never heard the crew's screams as the burning carcass of their ship sank beneath the clouds, slowly being crushed by the gas giant's immense pressure. Sure, they were faceless monsters that were about to gun me down without a second thought, but their blood stained my hands all the same. To

imagine them as actual people, ones with innocent lovers or estranged daughters... I winced at the thought.

It took me a moment to realize that I'd been so absorbed in my own thoughts that I forgot I was supposed to be comforting my girlfriend. Shit, what do I say?

"Thanks for that, Kaede," she whispered, planting a quick kiss on my cheek. "Been carrying that weight for a while now... feels nice to finally let it go."

Still a bit unsure on how to respond, I simply gave her a peck on the cheek in return. As her tail started to swish faster, I saw my opening. With a well-timed thrust, I caught the root of her tail with my own, letting her fluffy momentum do the hard work of intertwining our bushy appendages and pulling our hips together. Anno smiled as she wordlessly snuggled closer, and we gazed at the stars together until our braided tails started to get antsy.

"Well, I guess it's my turn now." I said reluctantly.

"Only if you want to, babe." I nodded timidly and she scooped over, patting her plush thighs in invitation. I laid down on my side and rested my head on her lap while she brushed messy ginger strands out of my eyes. "Whenever you're ready."

I told her everything.

It's a strange feeling, letting yourself be truly vulnerable. It's almost like being naked, but at least that could be a little bit exciting; there was nothing sexy about this. I slowly stripped off my metaphorical armor piece by piece, guiding her fingers as she traced all those invisible scars that marked my flesh. I tore down walls I didn't even know I put up. I unsealed high-pressure containers full of compartmentalized trauma. I let all of it just spill out until the floor ran red.

As I continued to confide in my lover, deep-seated survival instincts started screaming at me, demanding I raise my guard or deflect with some self-deprecating joke, fearing that she would recoil in disgust if she ever saw just how damaged I was inside. Perhaps it was because I grew up on stories of stoic space captains and self-sufficient mavericks — the kind of people who would rather stare down the barrel of a battlecruiser's coilgun long before they would ever consider talking about their feelings. Regardless, I told those instincts to go fuck themselves.

Blessed relief. It felt like exhaling a breath I've been holding in for far too long. Turns out, there is nothing more intimate and comforting than being able to truly trust someone, to put your life in their hands with the knowledge that they would do anything to protect you.

"Kaede, I'm so sorry... I had no idea." She pulled me up and hugged me tighter than anyone ever has before. "I know you like to put on your brave face for me, just know that you don't *have* to, and I'll never think any less of you if it ever becomes too much."

Words failed me. I mumbled something between a 'thank you' and a 'I love you,' but it probably got lost in the stream of my emotional blubbing. All I could do was squeeze her in return and wait patiently for my body to stop shaking.

"Kaede?"

"...yeah?"

"Would you feel better if I watched the video with you?" she asked delicately.

"Probably? I don't know... I only got a few seconds in before I had to stop. It's just hard to see her... like that."

"I get that. It's just... I just don't want you to have something like this hanging over you, y'know?"

"No, you're right. I should watch it, for the kid's sake if nothing else." I pulled up the video message again, expanding the holographic display slightly so that both of us could view it comfortably. With a deep exhale, I hit 'play'.

"Heya Kaede! Guess your little swimmers were, like, pretty potent! You wouldn't happen to know any pretty girl names would you? Anyways, you oughta come down to New Texas sometime, I'll make it worth your while," she said with a flirtatious grin. "Who knows, maybe our baby girl will get a sibling."

"Babe, you forgot your uh... medicine " chimed in a woman's voice from off-screen. The camera jittered as a copper-hued arm handed Cass a small metal flask, from which my friend drank ravenously. Her irises immediately sharpened, refocusing with renewed acuity and snubbing out those 'fuck-me' eyes with a single blink. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but I finally saw my best friend looking back at me.

"Whoa! Let me try that again," she said as she wiped the remaining ivory fluid from her lips. "Hey Kaede, I'm sorry I haven't been returning your calls. Everything's been kinda busy lately, as you can probably tell. I know that I sorta messed up, dumping all of this on you so suddenly... but it would mean a lot to me if you could come and visit sometime."

Somewhere below, out of frame, an infant's cry captured everyone's attention. The view dipped suddenly as the (dzaan?) woman who was previously holding the camera set it down on a nearby table in order to pass a bundle of cloth to my friend with both hands. Two floppy little auburn ears poked out of the fabric burrito at one end and a half-canine, half-feline tail out the other. Cass soothed the little girl's cries with a paragraph of gibberish and a lullaby I didn't recognize before cradling her into her bosom. With the baby as calm as she was going to get, I finally got a good look at her adorable little face: I couldn't see her eyes, scrunched up as they were, but somehow I knew that they were the same shade of blue as my own.

"Look! it's your mommy!" Cass pointed at me through the screen and held up our daughter to face the camera, tugging at my heartstrings from hundreds of lightyears away. For a moment, whatever animosity I still held towards my old friend all but evaporated. That's my daughter, *my daughter*. Stars above... I let maternal instincts I didn't even know I had take the wheel as bubbles of joyous pride welled up in my chest. I was going to be—

"My little Kaedepoo is going to be a mom!" Anno squealed with delight and shook me by the shoulders, as if we had just won some grand cosmic lottery. "Err... dad? Sorry, I'm not sure which one you'd pref—"

" 'Mom' is fine," I reassured her.

"Good." She leaned in to whisper into my pointed ear: "Now I get to say I'm dating the cutest MILF in the universe."

"A-Anno!" I yelped in embarrassment, practically jumping out of my seat as blood saturated my cheeks.

"Sorry! Just teasing," Anno said, chuckling. "Not your cup of tea then?" she asked more sincerely.

"It's not that. It's just... I'm not ready to be a mom yet," I sighed. Goddammit Cass, why did you have to make everything so difficult? "I'm flying blind here. My mom wasn't around for, well, anything really, and as much as I appreciate my dad, he still had a business to run. There was only so much time left for me. I guess I just don't want to be a deadbeat like her, but my job means that I can only visit so often, and I can barely stay above water as-is."

"Oh Kaede, the fact that you're already so worried about your daughter... I think that speaks for itself," she reassured before nuzzling her cheek against my own. "Besides, you'll have me, you know!"

"Wait, I thought you didn't want pups?"

"I mean... I guess not. Not right now, at least. But I meant it when I said I'm going to be there for you. Besides, how could I say no to such an adorable little pup-kitten?" gesturing to the little bundle of red fur on the holo-display. By the time the video message ended, rays of magenta-orange light had already started to crest over the high-resolution horizon.

"As for... this..." She placed a hand on my thigh, low enough to not be overtly sexual, but high enough to make her intention clear. "How do you feel about me giving you some... training?"

"Training?"

"Remember that time you sent me the wrong 'homework' folder?"

Oh, *that* one. I blushed at the memory. We went over the details on the walk back to my apartment. I could hardly wait.

V

I kneeled down on my bed, clothes having long been discarded. Stars, was it always this soft?

Anno took a moment to fiddle with the lights till they were the color of a soft Terran sunrise before bending over to rifle through her bag. Naturally, I enjoyed the wonderful view. She pulled out a flat velvet package that resembled an oversized

wedding ring box before turning her attention to my exposed body. After a short, dramatic pause, she lifted the lid off to reveal a bright red collar with a silver buckle, my name already engraved on the heart-shaped tag.

"You know, this was supposed to be your birthday gift, but I think you deserve your present early this year," she said as she looped the collar around my neck. The soft clinking of the tag was strangely pleasant, almost chime-like. As she finished adjusting the latch, I expected to feel a bit restrained, but paradoxically I felt freer than ever, the weight off my chest compensating for the more literal one on my neck.

A part of me still had mixed feelings about letting go of the wheel again, but deep down I knew this was different. I wasn't surrendering control to my feral libido or some oversexed stranger, but to Anno, and if there was anyone I trusted more than myself, it was her.

She kneeled down across from me on the mattress. "Remember, I want *you* to enjoy it, not just your body," she said as her furred hand brushed my own. "If anything's wrong, I want you to say so. Okay?"

I nodded eagerly.

"Now, tell me the safeword we agreed on. I need to be sure that you remembered it."

I whined affirmatively and nodded again, forgetting that I was supposed to speak.

"Come on babe, I know I'm an ausar and all, but I don't actually speak puppy. Use your words."

"Avocado," I squeaked, barely suppressing the urge to laugh.

"Good gir—" was all Anno could manage before she burst into laughter. Oh well, I might as well join in. It took us a while to flush the last of the giggles out of our systems. On any other day that might have spoiled the mood, but today, I think we both needed that. She planted her hands on my head, her fluffy digits idly dancing through my short hair as she began to pet me at leisurely pace. "Sorry babe, probably should have picked something more serious. Anyways, who's my good girl?" She switched targets and scritchd at the weak spots behind my ears, throwing me headfirst into subby bliss.

"Ahh," I whimpered. "I a-am." My tail swished in agreement, rapidly thumping against the sheets.

"You're what?"

"I'm..." I struggled to form the words as the scritch intensified, obedient puppy-feelings starting to crowd out higher-level thoughts. "I'm a good girl."

"Oh, silly pup." One of her hands wandered down my spine as she straddled my thighs; the other grabbed me by the collar and tugged, pulling me face-first into her generous cleavage. "You're not **just** a good girl, Kaede." She brought her lips to my ear and growled softly, "You're **my** good girl," before gently sinking her teeth into it and officializing her claim.

At that point, my vocabulary consisted of nothing but meek whimpers and submissive moans. I was a cuddly, Kaede-shaped instrument that eagerly sang for her owner at the slightest touch, and I loved it. My heart fluttered as I practically swooned from the slightly-demeaning yet adoring praises she placed in my ears. I felt that heat again, only it was not the instant conflagration of lust I was used to but something calmer, softer. It was more like the gentle warmth of an ancient fireplace or, well, a lover's embrace.

"Time for your medicine, pup." Anno teased before leaning over to grab a pair of Sterilex packets from the nightstand, skillfully puncturing both the wrappers in one go with one of her canines before presenting the grey pills to me in her open palm. I tucked my ears back and leaned in to take my share, only for her to pull me back by the collar and coax a sad whine out of me. "Nuh-uh. Stay." She smirked, wagging a finger at me before knocking back both pills.

Before I could object to her blatant thievery, she shoved me onto my back and grabbed my wrists, pinning them down on either side of my head. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't help but instinctively wriggle in an attempt to free my trapped limbs. Thankfully, my lover's taller frame and better leverage let her effortlessly quell my half-hearted revolt; a spark of wolfish glee even shimmered in her eyes. Still a bit stunned by her sudden aggression, I didn't even have a chance to protest before she pressed the rest of her body against me and sealed my lips with her own. I've never felt so vulnerable yet so... safe.

Meanwhile, my now rapidly-stiffening length was sandwiched between our stomachs, caught in the crossfire of our passionate makeout. Stars, was my dick always this

warm? Never mind the pleasurable friction I was experiencing as Anno began to grind herself against me, just the heat of it against my bare skin felt heavenly.

What started as moderately-intimate saliva-sharing rapidly evolved into a rough liplock that teetered on the edge of primal ferociousness. Her tongue repeatedly penetrated my lips, wrestling my own into submission before abruptly retreating in a series of devastating hit-and-run attacks. All the while, her fangs hungrily nipped at my lower lip and occasionally at my exposed collarbone, not aggressively enough to break the skin, but more than enough to mark me as hers. I felt so small beneath her, but in a good way, like she was sheltering me from a rainstorm. Worn down by her oral affection, I was too spent to resist as her practiced tongue battered my mouth open once more and pushed the contraceptive she previously stole down my throat. I swallowed it eagerly.

Just as I was starting to feel a bit lightheaded, Anno finally pulled away, ending the passionate tonguefucking and leaving us both panting heavily even as shiny bridges of fluid still connected our lips. My senses started to return to me following the injection of fresh oxygen into my lungs, and I found myself lost in those fiercely intelligent, cobalt eyes of hers before I realized they were subtly checking me over for any signs of discomfort. A few heartbeats later, I also registered that my ausar half had been busy: I could feel my erection throbbing in sync to my quickening pulse, not to mention the slick pre that was lathered all over our abdomens.

"Gooooood girl. Time for your treat," she cooed as she rose to her knees and wrapped a hand around my shaft, her fingers just the right length to fully encircle it. Warm, adoring touches started at my tapered tip before gliding down to the oh-so-sensitive, bulbous base and then doubling back, again and again. Embarrassingly high-pitched whimpers escaped my lips as she slowly began to stroke me off, using my own copious precum as lubricant even as it stained her snowy digits.

Possessed by wanton desire, my hands unconsciously reached for my heaving chest, eager to elevate my own pleasure. When my hips started to thrust on their own, a soft hand pushed down on my midriff, gently arresting my overeager bucking. "Stay still, babe," she whispered lovingly as she leaned in to nibble on my ear again. "Let me take care of you." It wasn't exactly a command, but I was so deep in that submissive headspace that it may as well have been. When she resumed stroking me, I could do nothing but dig my nails into the bedsheets and squirm in ecstasy as every square inch of my pride was subjected to her careful ministrations. In just a few seconds, I was already so close to the edge....

"Anno... slow dow— Ah!" All it took was a single squeeze of my swollen knot, and I was immediately busy painting my upper torso pearl-white, back arching and muscles spasming. I was lucky I didn't have claws, otherwise my deathgrip on the sheets would have torn them to ribbons as repeated pulses of concentrated bliss battered my nerves and overwhelmed whatever motor control I had left.

"Oh wow!" Anno giggled, slightly breaking character. She didn't stop though, instead merely adjusted the timing of her strokes to better synchronize with the orgasmic pulses that were racing up my length, milking out every drop my body had to offer until I was howling like a bitch in heat. Fuck, I never knew my voice could go that high. I collapsed as soon as the final shots struck my sternum, the mess quickly pooling between my tits with just the right combination of warmth and stickiness to feel strangely pleasurable on my skin.

"S-sorry," I managed to eke out between ragged breaths.

"Awww. Don't worry, I'm just happy my pet is enjoying herself. Now, come here." She hoisted me up by the collar into a tight hug, ravaging my lips once more. It didn't seem to bother her that she was now smearing my cum all over our upper bodies like some lewd imitation of a sandwich cookie. Then again, neither did I.

"Does my good girl want more?" she asked as she cupped my chin. The question was, of course, rhetorical; there was no denying how much we wanted each other.

"Anno... please..." I begged, letting my baser instincts begin to seep into my words.

"Tsk, such a needy girl," she chastised. "Roll over."

My body obeyed her automatically; I was on my hands and knees before I even fully registered her instruction. She told me to turn around, and I turned around, simple as that. I even lifted my tail out of the way as I presented myself to my owner, almost wishing she brought her strapon so she could mount me properly. As if she could read my mind, my lover climbed atop me, pressing her heavy melons into my shoulder blades and her soft cheek against my own. I felt a warm wetness as a cum-slathered finger prodded at my hole before slowly sliding in with a thrust of her hips. Her supple lips caught mine over my shoulder, and she gradually added one finger after another between every faux-doggystyle thrust, stretching me out and making me shiver whenever she brushed against my cum-button.

Just before I was about to hit my limit, she pulled out and gave me a slap on the ass as a parting gift. Before I could get used to the sensation of emptiness, she jammed a tapered plug up my lubed-up tailhole, causing me to yelp as my softening boner instantly bounced back to full strength. Holy fuck... it felt like it was the size of my fully-inflated knot, maybe even a bit bigger. I was going to be soooo sore later, but for now, I could just revel in the feeling of pleasantly stuffed.

"Good girl! Now, sit," she ordered, pointing at the floor beside the bed. It was a bit tricky given that the thick toy rearranged my guts each time I moved, but I was already sitting on my knees by the time my owner swung her feet over the edge of the mattress. When she started to splay her furry legs, I couldn't help but inch my mouth closer to her exposed slit.

"Stay!" she barked in disapproval. Agh! No fair! Pets are supposed to please their owners, right? "Stay..." As I impatiently slapped my tail against the ground, I finally noticed that there was now a leather leash connecting my collar to my owner's hand. When did she put that on?

"Go!" she relented, even tugging on my leash to pull me in, but it was wholly unnecessary given how eager I was to please her. My upper lips met her lower ones in a sloppy kiss before I began to eat her out. Her fluffy hands played with my fluffier ears, rewarding my subby devotion with vigorous petting. I glanced up at my lover, trying to meet her eyes in spite of the prodigious underboob that obscured her lovely visage. Still, I was able to catch a sly grin on her face as well as a small remote in her other hand.

"So eager!" she said as her mischievous smile grew wider. "I think you deserve another treat for that...."

Oh fuuuck... the plug was vibrating! Even on all fours, it was a struggle to keep myself from collapsing as the rhythmic buzzing milked out sweet little mini-orgasms and ribbons of thin precum straight from the source. The best part was that I didn't even need to touch my turgid canine endowment as it twitched and drooled, on the verge of orgasm from the overwhelming anal pleasure alone. I just had to stay still and take it. Mmm! Easier said than done....

The leather around my neck tightened, reminding me that I still had a job to do. Pushed into a lusty overdrive by the mechanical prostate massage, I all but threw myself at her folds, forgoing technique in favor of simply mashing my face into her muff and lapping up her tangy juices like I was dying of thirst. My tongue ran wild as I

desperately feasted on her gushing sex, especially when the anal vibrations made me moan inside her and dribble more pre onto the floor.

I could hear my name being called in between her pleasure-filled vocalizations, but it was as if I was underwater, submerged so deep that any words from the surface were heavily distorted by the time they reached me. My lungs started to ache as they demanded that I come up for air, but I was too lost in my own lust to care. Instead, I just continued to drink deeply from her honeypot as if her nectar could substitute for oxygen. The vibrations from the plug only added more fuel to the fire. I was so close... just one more lick....

A firm backwards tug on my leash pulled me out of that carnal haze, like a splash of ice-cold water to the face. "Running a bit too hot there, babe," she said oh-so tenderly, ruffling my hair and bringing me back down (or was it up?) to reality. After the vibrator clicked off, all it took was a few rapid heartbeats for me to sober up. I was about to feel a bit dejected for losing control again, but the way she lathered me with praises and ear-stitches... it was impossible to feel ashamed of myself when I was being pampered like that. Her eyes silently asked me if I still wanted to continue. I answered with my lips, in more ways than one.

I took things a bit slower the second time around, starting with a string of kisses along her inner thighs on an approach vector towards her winking folds. My tongue drew circles around her labia, making her gasp and squirm every time I brushed her clit with each circuit I completed. Instead of thrusting inside, I just danced around her sodden cunt and continued to savor all the cute noises she made, at least until her heels pressed into my back to force me deeper.

Turning up the heat, I let my tongue slip inside to explore her quim and search for all of her sensitive spots. "Mhh... right there!" she gasped, her voice shifting up an octave when I brushed the roof of her tunnel again. Heh. Found one. Using my tongue as a stylus, I wrote out a love poem as I continued to caress her innermost reaches, paying close attention to the pressure of her thighs on my head and the cadence of her breathing. Each of her moans pulled me close to my own, sympathetic orgasm, or maybe that was just the vibe kicking back in. Regardless, it wasn't much longer until we were both tumbling over the edge.

Anno came first, screaming my name as her body was racked with blissful spasms while her thighs clamped down hard on my head — almost as hard as her pussy clamped down on my tongue. I lightly suckled her clit to amplify her orgasm, careful to not push her too far into oversensitivity, and was rewarded with a sudden gush of

girlcum that flooded my mouth to overflowing. The sticky excess dribbled down my chin in spite of my efforts to swallow it all, leaving me utterly soaked with her love-juices — as if my own weren't enough.

It was my turn to lose my composure when the Anno cranked the vibe-plug up to full power. Earth-shaking tremors pounded my ass before resonating throughout my lower body, instantly making my cock jump to full mast. Sublime hands-free orgasm hit me with all the subtlety of a New-Texan amazon, forcing my cum out from behind in powerful jets that left my arms and legs shaking. Still stuck in a leg-lock with my face buried in her muff, I could do nothing but vocalize my bliss into her mound while continuing to dump my seed onto the floor in heavy, messy spurts.

We came down from our sexual high after a few minutes that felt like a few hours. Before I knew it, I was pinned down on the bed again, being bombarded with more positive reinforcement. Turns out, if you're called a good girl a few dozen times, you might just start to believe it.

"Think you can go one more round?" she asked, chuckling softly as she watched my eyes go wide. "It's a marathon, not a sprint, babe."

"I didn't say no...." I replied.

"That's my good girl." She kissed me on the lips, sampling her own flavor before trailing down to my cum-covered midriff to sample mine. A quick kiss on my glans rekindled my inner flame, making me hard as diamonds as she straddled my hips. Not bothering to wipe off the multiple layers of spermy paint that coated my sloppy prick, she cupped my knot to align my cockhead with her netherlips and let gravity do the work of slowly wedging herself open, millimeter by millimeter. Ironically, the same traits that make ausar cocks so well-suited for rough breeding sessions also makes them perfect tender lovemaking. The narrow, tapered tip adds an unrivaled gentleness to the initial penetration, starting off nice and easy before slowly ramping up to stretch a lover's hole open with the full girth. I was tempted to buck up into her to hasten our inevitable union, but I managed to keep my desires in check in favor of letting my girlfriend have her way with me.

By the time her folds kissed the top of my bulbous base, I was already shaking with pleasure and battering the sheets with my tail. My turgid bone was shrouded in the most intimate version of a hug: surrounded on all sides by affectionate warmth. Then she started to gyrate her hips, doing wonderful to her internal passage and forcing me to close my eyes in an attempt to not immediately blow my load. I felt her shift her

weight forward to smother my comparatively smaller bust with her own, making me squeal when my sensitive buds brushed against hers.

Suddenly, she paused. I opened my eyes again.

"Sorry pet, I just wanted to look into those pretty eyes of yours when you cum," she whispered in a gentle voice with an undercurrent of wolfish desire. Without warning, she started to bounce her hips on my lap, filling the room with deliciously moist schlicking sounds as fresh shots of pre and girlcum soaked our crotches. My length was subjected to the most exquisite friction as it repeatedly slid in and out of warm, wet heaven. Void... at this rate, there was no way I could hold out.

Sensing my rapidly approaching climax, she slowed her frantic riding to a crawl, keeping me twitching and hard for her, but just below the euphoric threshold. "Come on, use those cute little hips of yours, babe," she ordered playfully as she tugged on the soft leather around my neck.

She didn't need to tell me twice. I answered with a fierce tip-to-knot thrust that left us both reeling with carnal delight. The rapid bucking left us speechless as I let loose all of the lustful passion I'd been holding back. Still, I was not some simple beast, mindlessly rutting the nearest hole in sight, but a tamed, well-trained animal. Bestial mating instincts were honed and refined, reforged into tools dedicated solely for maximizing my partner's pleasure — the perfect mix of animalistic passion and expert technique of a born sub. If the way Anno started to howl and desperately meet my thrusts with her own was any indication, I was doing a *very* good job.

Still, it didn't take more than a few seconds before she was the one fucking me into the mattress, not that I had any intention of stopping her. Eager to reassert her doting dominance, her white tail coiled around mine and wrestled it into submission while her fingers interlaced with my own. Fast, slow, gentle, rough... all those words ceased to have meaning. The only thing that mattered was following the melody of our conjoined bodies and blissful vocalizations. The tempo ebbed and flowed like the tide, meaty breeding strokes one moment, gentle cuddlefucking the next. Stars, her skin was so warm against mine, her breath so heavy on my shoulder. I could hear, no, *feel* my heart pounding in my chest, overtaxed from its double-duty as both a circulatory organ and a reservoir for my overflowing ardor. We were lost in our own little universe, dancing to the twinned metronomes of our beating hearts.

"I love you," we didn't say. What need have we for words?

We could both feel our respective climaxes coming a mile away, having listened to this melody together so many times before. I angled my thrusts to hit all of those sweet spots I found earlier, making sure to grind my rapidly growing breeding-bulb against her pink pearl at the apex of every thrust. She did the same to me, clamping down on my rod in ways that made me twitch inside her and scream her name. With a final declaration of our amorous desire, we slammed our hips together and forced my knot to spread her open before slipping in with a lewd pop and a spray of our mixed fluids. A single heartfelt kiss was all that we needed to push us both over the threshold and into paradise.

Bracing for impact, we clung to each other tightly, as intertwined and connected as two lovers could physically be. Climax hit both of us in full force as soon as our lips touched, an electrical arc that made both of us writhe with pleasure while our muscles ran on autopilot. We were stuck in an incredible feedback loop of pure bliss: she'd squeeze me tightly with her inner walls in ways that made me throb and twitch, which of course, just made her squeeze harder in turn. Another gush of her juices flooded the space between us, dowsing our crotches with another wave of slick warmth. My pearlescent offering erupted inside of her while her orgasmic contractions milked me with masterful finesse, extending my own orgasm into a minutes-long affair and coaxing my overtaxed balls to pump out more and more ivory seed till her slim midriff started to swell out into the most adorable little cum-paunch.

"Wow, Red," she murmured as she leaned back and glanced down at her abdominals, caressing the faint bulge. Her eyes were half-focused and dreamy, probably not too dissimilar to my own. "Guess the pills haven't fully worn off... I don't remember you ever being this... productive."

My reply was cut short by a loud whimper as the dormant plug still embedded in my backdoor suddenly sprang to life, vibrating right against my overworked prostate and making my legs quiver at the same frequency. Coupled with her walls clenching down on my hypersensitive knot, I was immediately pulled over the edge and into another toe-curling orgasm, refractory period be damned.

"I didn't say you could stop though, pet," she mumbled between breathy moans as I continued to overfill her channel. "I want *all* of you. Every. Last. Drop."

I cried out ecstasy as I gave her my all, melting into a little Kaede-puddle in her arms.

After riding out the last aftershocks of our intense finale, We snuggled into each other's bodies, our rapid heartbeats slowing and synchronizing as our eyelids started to leaden. It didn't matter that we were utterly filthy, covered nearly head-to-toe in multiple layers of each other's orgasmic fluids; cleanliness could come later. Right now, nothing was more important than savoring the magical afterglow that came with knot-mandated cuddles, enjoying the subdued lusty ambience inherent to tender cockwarming and whispering sweet nothings into each other's ears until we lulled each other to sleep.

The rest of the day disappeared in a dream-like blur. After we awoke from our post-coital nap, we washed up and took turns drying and brushing each other's fur. We split a bowl of instant ramen for brunch (Anno somehow managed to burn hers) and spent the afternoon watching some old holos together. One thing led to another, and we ended up in a mating press on the couch before making out for another couple hours. We went to get cleaned up again, only to end up fucking in the shower. Twice. It almost felt like we were back in college, carefree and still discovering ourselves, making the most of my cramped little dorm room and getting teased by my neighbors for all the noise we made. After a picturesque dinner date straight out of a cheesy romance novel, we made love for the seventh time that day before passing out in each other's arms again.

I've never slept better.

EPILOGUE

Desire is a funny thing. It's fickle, confusing, even contradictory at times. I've never been much of a planner, but I always had at least a vague idea of what I wanted to do with my life. Thing is, life's a fucking asshole sometimes, throwing wrenches into your plans and sending you careening down a life-path you never saw coming.

Inhale.

Exhale.

The soothing pitter-patter of raindrops hitting the virtual windows slowly brought me back to the material world. I opened my eyes to see the fox-eared therapist sitting across from me. His nine, purple tails wriggled idly behind his warm smile.

"Ok, that's good enough for today," he said, his voice somehow... comfy, like a pillowy bed you could just sink into. "How are you feeling?"

"Better... a lot better. Thanks for this, Mitch."

"No need. You did all of the hard work; I merely guided you," he replied.

"Still, thanks for guiding me."

"My pleasure."

After exchanging goodbyes, I walked out of Mitch's little office and onto the cozy wood-paneled corridors of Canadia station. My lover was waiting on a bench recessed into a small alcove outside, reading something physics-y on her holopad.

"How'd it go?" she asked as she put her device away and took my hand.

"Pretty good! I was a bit skeptical at first, but it certainly helped me feel a bit more... 'in control' of things."

"Bold words for a subby little fluffbutt," she said as her naughty hand squeezed my ass.

"Hey!"

A short walk later, we arrived at one of the small circular landing platforms that ringed the lower levels of the station. Automatic flood lights illuminated Talon Rogue in all of her beat-up glory while a translucent shield bubble held back the cold vacuum, leaving us with an unimpeded view of the stellar ocean. Her new cargo door was as pristine as can be, and her name was now stenciled in sharp white letters along her slender neck. There were still a couple of new scars on her portside that evidently didn't buff out, but she wore them with pride, like medals of honor.

Athena lowered the boarding ramp as we approached, and we reminisced about our first date back at the academy as we climbed up. I let Anno get comfy in my quarters while I made my way up to the cockpit. Athena's diminutive avatar popped into existence out of thin air as I cycled the hatch.

"Hey, I probably should have said this sooner, but thanks for... you know... for saving my life earlier," I told her.

A cheery laugh slipped through a crack in her armor. "Oh, don't worry about it! It's practically my job, you know. Now, go spend some quality time with your girlfriend, Captain *Kaedeypoo*," she snickered.

"ANNO!" I yelled down the hall as my girlfriend started laughing uproariously. Geez, you two....

I let Athena handle the lift-off sequence as I joined my lover on my little bunk. It was barely long enough to fit six feet of snowy-haired ausar beauty, but it's not like we needed an excuse to snuggle in close.

The ship's main engines hummed to life as we cleared the station. I quickly pulled up a starmap on my holoband, charting a course for the system's warp gate and then Tarkus beyond. For a moment, I thought about all of the things I've done up until now, superimposing the trajectory of my life onto the holographic projection. Infinite possible pathways branched out like the arms of a fractal, every happy memory and every misadventure a fork in the road. And yet, there was still so much ahead of me – more trials to overcome and more life to live.

Of course I still had hell of a libido, but for once, I felt like I was the one in the captain's seat. Gone was that uncontrolled wildfire, in its place the brilliant glow of a starship's drive plume. It was still hot enough to burn straight through metal, sure, but only when I wanted it to (which to be fair, was pretty fucking often).

I uncorked the half-full bottle of Windswept and poured two glasses for me and my lover, taking time to savor the sweet notes of cinnamon and pear as I held her close. The lightdrive kicked in with a mechanical whine and we shot off at relativistic speed, a single streak of light in the infinite night sky.

END NOTE

Hey everyone, thanks so much for reading all the way to the end! This was actually my second piece of creative writing that made it to a full draft (all of my previous projects never made it out of the cradle), so please forgive my overall amateur-ness. I obviously ended up taking some minor creative liberties from the source material, but

I hope this piece still feels like it still kind of fits within the setting and provides an emotionally-satisfying bookend to the *Talon Rogue* saga.

Any and all feedback would be greatly appreciated, either on the discord or on [this copy](#) that has comments enabled. I'm mostly looking for feedback on how the emotional beats landed, but please let me know if there's any continuity errors (regardless of how small) or any typos/formatting blunders that managed to slip through.

Cheers!