

Chapter Eight

When our shuttle returned, I still hadn't worked out just how to ask... *space pirate*, out on a date. Speaking in *pirate*, sounded strange even in my head. 'Arr, would ye like to plunder me doubloons on a night on the town?'

Even in my own skull all I could think was, 'Nope. *That does not sound right.*'

But I still hadn't worked out quite what to say when we were descending, or disembarking.

Or unloading our caged samples.

I probably would have put the notion aside on my own, but our return sparked the usual assembly of the demihumans, and they oohed and ahhed that we returned alive.

Bau and Rebecca approached, the little crowd made way for them both, "You returned, brother. Thank you." My sister inclined her head to me, but while her words were passive I noticed that her tail wagged a little.

"You didn't think I'd abandoned you, did you?" I asked, I honestly wasn't joking, the fact that her tail wagged suggested relief more than happiness, though that might have been more projection on my part.

"No." She drooped her ears, "Your human is here, if it is one thing I am now *certain* of, it is that we are incapable of abandoning our humans. I read through your research notes, and if I had any doubts before, your notes rid me of them."

"Not to interject, but I'm interjecting." Rebecca said and sighed, she had dark circles under her eyes and ran her hand through her hair, "Sorry, I'm just tired. What I mean is, the samples. Put them there. Nobody is using that building and it still has a working door." She pointed to a building that was clearly once a bank.

The 'working door' was a large vault we could see through some gaps in the wall.

A rush of flopping ears and goat feet, among others, scrambled past us to unload our specimens, obeying Rebecca's orders without question, and from there, the three of us were free to walk after them and talk.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Fauve's drone zipping around Usagi while the rabbit girl spun around, showing off a dress that had to be hundreds of years old. I turned one of my ears to them.

"...I found it in an old shop, they had a basement full of different clothes, we can try on all kinds of stuff, see, no more rags!" Fauve said over her audio system.

Usagi made a kind of 'Squeeee' noise and hopped around. "Thank you! Usagi has never had a present before. It's so pretty!" She exclaimed and ran her hands over the surprisingly intact fabric. It was a simple sundress done with a little ruffle pattern up the sides, the red was surprisingly vibrant, I can only assume it must have been in plastic as well as away from the light since it was first put wherever it was. It honestly looked quite new. Usagi's floppy ears were cleaner than they were when we first met.

Rebecca's face was frankly dirty, Bau's fur was covered in concrete dust. I could only imagine what they'd been doing all day to get that way.

But notably, many of the demihumans were much improved, every hour seemed to bring a renewed sense of safety and confidence to them as they saw my sister and MacCoy do their work, and the way Rebecca seemed so thoroughly concerned with their welfare, just the fact that she so openly *wanted* to help, it made a difference.

It's a very interesting facet of human social dynamics. Nothing breaks a human's spirit and will to go on like the belief that nobody gives a damn about them or what happens to them or whether they succeed or fail. 'Neglect' or 'indifference' is a kind of abuse and cruelty that leaves no marks you can see, but is like an insidious poison that seeps into their natures and breaks them down from the inside out.

Usagi seemed to glow with happiness at Fauve's attention, and I admit, she was a very cute little thing. Usagi in my estimation, hadn't had anyone really take an interest in her... probably ever. Perhaps her father did, but she never spoke of him after mentioning that he'd disappeared.

I understood my sister's motivations far more than I liked to admit, if Fauve and Usagi's places were reversed, I would move mountains, even beg a hated rival for help.

"I also found some of these. Close your eyes!" Fauve exclaimed and Usagi took a deep breath, went still, and closed her eyes to wait. Fauve's drone zipped out of view and returned a moment later with a few old plastic bags holding bright, multicolored ribbons and bows in her deftly used little grabby claw. "Ta-da!" Fauve exclaimed. "They're little hair ribbons, you weave them in and then secure the bows down at the bottom, they're little accessories that make pretty girls prettier and stand out more!"

"Fauve thinks Usagi is pretty?" Usagi's left ear flopped to one side and she cocked her head. "Usagi has never been called that before."

"Yes, Usagi is very cute and kawaii." Fauve said sincerely, her drone tilting back and forth like she was nodding her head.

The rabbit-girl took the little baggy of cheap colored antique fabric in hand and her eyes filled with happy tears. "This is the best day of Usagi's whole life!" She squealed and began to tear into the gift.

I lost sight and sound from the pair and paid more attention to what was being said between Bau and Rebecca.

"Reversing a mutation is impossible after this many generations. But if we can synthesize something to stabilize it... see according to the latest scans, it's a lot like telomer degradation, which is essentially the cause of aging in humans. But it's kept at bay by their diet. If we can come up with an alternative, a kind of gene therapy, something that prevents the degradation of their bodies? At least until we can find a way to gene *replacement*?" Rebecca answered something I had frankly missed.

"When I lived on Dlamias and we did mutation experiments we would target areas of the body with various forms of radiation. I'll show Tomas how it works and maybe we can start trying something..." Bau suggested.

"Assuming Bonny Red has the equipment on her ship, or maybe your government?" She suggested.

Rebecca shook her head, "No, nothing like that, we've got some broad uses, we irradiate crops to create mutations and then selectively breed the traits we want. But we've had an aversion to radiation in general for a long time. For...*obvious reasons*." Rebecca's hand swept out toward the ruined city.

"Oh. Yes. I suppose you would." Bau said and her tail drooped in apology.

The little yips and noises drowned out further conversation within the old vault, and I frankly couldn't think of *anything* to say or do. What *were* my options anyway? Rebecca and Bau had begun babbling technical nonsense I hadn't the training to understand.

The harvest was complete, Bonny Red and Byron had gone off to do who knew what...

It's not a great feeling, to know you have no real use or purpose. To know you just can't help with much.

So I cleared my throat to get their attention as soon as the noises died down and asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

I wasn't asking either one in particular, honestly I would have been happy for an answer from any direction.

"You could go help with food distribution, it's nearly time to eat anyway." Rebecca suggested, "We've got more work to do anyway."

"Right, I'll do that." I promised, and leaving them behind, I went to the improvised kitchen area, it was easy enough to find even if I *hadn't* been there for weeks.

There were racks made of bits of old metal and wood on which various rat skins were stretched and drying out, along with the furs of other creatures I didn't recognize.

It seemed that the demihumans had a very 'waste nothing' approach to living, and several had torn out the remnants of chairs and seats from who knew where, even cars, and laid them out for use. A few reclined beside the deep pools created by the recent rain, and other small children played while watched by various... I hate to say 'elders' given their ages, but that is what they were.

Perhaps spurred on by Fauve, some were fiddling with various recently rediscovered clothing items, others going in and out of buildings in search of more of the moss they needed to survive.

That irradiated substance was imposing a firm limit on how many of them that could live at any given time, and I dared not think of how many died very young because their mothers didn't get enough before their young could be born.

The more I thought as I went into the kitchen building and began unpacking small boxes, the more Usagi made sense to me, her personality, temperament...

Humans are an apex predator, but they are apex predators on a death world more dangerous than any I knew of. They, perhaps more than *any* other species, are shaped by their environment and circumstances. Selfishness and selflessness war constantly as the individual decides between themselves and the group. Comparing these two societies, that of the demihumans and the more common humans I knew in Louisville...

I looked out the window and watched a rabbit-boy hauling a furry armed goat-boy over to the edge of the water as he hacked and spat up water...

Well, how to say this?

The people I knew were good people. But I also knew there were ones who were less good, and from what Fauve, Byron, and to a lesser extent, Teresa,

said of the recent past, there are a lot who have been 'less than good' over the years. I could readily believe it, Bonny Red's arrival brought some of those out in protest.

It's easier for selfish people to thrive amidst plenty and among many. A selfish person can move from one to the next, using those around them and never run out of victims to lie to or deceive. They can easily exploit great numbers and through this evolutionary niche, they can survive and even *prosper*.

By contrast, in smaller numbers, a selfish individual is easily recognized, cast out, killed... in reading up on human psychology, those they term 'evil', or 'psychopathic' have occurred throughout time. In the book, 'Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, and My Sister Stole My Mother's Boyfriend' the author noted that in such small societies those persons might be quietly 'disposed of'. Or to put it as they did, 'He might be pushed off the ice and into the water when nobody was looking'.

In short, small numbers weed out excess selfishness fairly well, while large numbers do not. This selection for selflessness and group cohesion was strong enough that Usagi thought nothing of using herself as *bait* for the rats before.

In the worst of times and conditions, paradoxical as it may seem, humans can be the most noble species I've ever encountered. It was part of what made me love them, mourn them, never want to leave them, and it was part of what made Earth feel more like home than my own world ever did.

And that's also what made their scant, brief lives so tragic in my eyes.

Or so I concluded as I went outside with a box full of food to distribute.