The Shepherd's Laughter

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The Shepherd's Laughter

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Summary

Monitoring the settlements these aliens called humans made, can be rather boring. Unless your ship's AI decides that you really need a friend and should chat up that friendly shepherd. And as Levy gets to know this human and his cat-sheep, he has to admit -- his ship had a good idea there.

Notes

Hello, yes this is a test for this new platform.
I'm uploading this fic, which I wrote for the Original5k event in 2021, because I'm rather proud of it. It was written for the prompt "Jaded Alien Soldier Stationed To Protect Farming World/Cheerful Human Space Sheep Herder (M/M)" for Nunununununu, and without access to AO3, I can't even link them.
My trusty document contained the fic and the prompt but not the summary. I hope I did the story justice anyway. I'm also blanking on the tags I used before, please let me know if I should add any.



“Grid locked sweep 227 initiated.” The firm and friendly voice of the Supportive Autonomous Monitor sounds through the cockpit, resonating deep and warm.

“Thanks, SAM.” The humans named the support systems “Sam”, as though they’re real people. It caught on with many engineers in these remote colonies; maybe because threat control is a lonely job where you need someone to talk to sometimes.

In Levy’s case, it’s a bit different. SAM has grown beyond his intended capabilities, something that Levy should definitely report to Command. He just hasn’t gotten around to it yet. For a whole of this planet’s year.

Levy leans back and wraps his tail around himself. He could close his eyes; the AI is perfectly capable of flying the sweeper on a predetermined course, but he’s supposed to watch the land, so that’s what he does. He isn’t an active fighter anymore, but he’s still a soldier; he follows orders.

“Is everything alright?” SAM asks.

Levy stretches his arms and lets his scales flutter in a wave. He loves SAM’s voice. Over the last year, SAM evolved, adapted, and changed himself, and with that, his voice changed too. Now he sounds like someone made him specifically for Levy and his likes, and that should probably worry him much more than it does.

“You tell me,” Levy says. “You’re the monitor here.”

“There are no technical problems with this vehicle, and your health parameters are normal. But I have extensive data regarding your behavior and your mood. I have noticed that your mood has worsened recently.”

“Is that so?”

“I think you’re lonely.”

Levy shakes his head and trills with a laugh. “An AI that thinks he knows about loneliness.”

SAM makes a trilling sound, imitating Levy’s cadence perfectly and clearly conveying that he feels slightly insulted.

“Sorry.” Levy looks up, even though SAM doesn’t have a definite location on the ship.

“We are over Sector Geron 12, grid 227.”

“Ok. Slow down.”

Levy sits up to look out of the window, searching the landscape underneath them. Sector Geron 12 is sparsely populated, only a handful of humans have colonized this part of the continent. The land is unsuited for agriculture, covered with hardy bushes and brambles, pockmarked and tunneled under by genk-beetles.

“Adjusting course.” SAM steers the ship in a slow curve. He knows what Levy looks for, and his scanners have already picked up the life signs of several animals and one human.

Finally, Levy sees them too, and a shudder runs over his scales. He wraps his tail around the armrest of his chair to lean further forward, to catch a look at the human among the herd of kelda-cats.

The humans like to call the kelda sheep and they call the herders shepherds for reasons Levy doesn’t understand. Keldas are cat-like omnivores and the only natural predator of genk-beetles. They can run fast, climb bushes and trees, and dig into genk tunnels. A well-trained herd will stay close to its herder and keep the genk-beetles under control in an entire sector. At the same time, their shorn fur is valuable and an important part of the local economy.

The herd under the ship covers a large area, and it takes Levy a while to make out the small figure of their human herder.

The shepherd raises his arm and waves at the ship, a wide smile on his strange face. He does that every time they scan grid 227. It has taken Levy several pass overs to acknowledge that wave, but today he waves back and feels his scales glimmer with strange excitement.

SAM turns the ship around once more and Levy waves again, chuckling as the human jumps up and down in excitement at this.

The ship slows and sinks down; the brambles scratching the underside.

Levy frowns as the ground comes closer. “What are you doing?”

“Landing,” SAM says.

“Why?”

The sweeper comes to a stop and the hum of the engine dies down. “For the last 127 scans, you have waved at this human herder and it had a significant improvement on your mood for as long as you saw him. I have decided that you should talk to him, for further improvement of your wellbeing.”

“You have decided?” Levy snarls, the scales on his neck rising up. “I should just report you to command for that.”

SAM’s voice is quiet when he answers, “Yes, you should.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Levy breathes against the momentary stab of panic in his chest. SAM is right, he is lonely and without the sentient AI, he might have lost the rest of his fragile sanity half a year ago. “I’m never going to report you to command, I promise. I just...” He lets his scales flicker as he searches for words. “I just don’t like it when you decide things for me.”

SAM is silent for so long that Levy checks his processes on a display. When he speaks at last, his warm voice vibrates with a sad undertone. “You need a friend, Levy.”

“Aren’t you my friend?”

“I’m trying. But my database is inconclusive about friendship.”

Levy’s tail snaps to his leg in annoyance. “What should we talk about? What if that herder doesn’t even like me?”

“You’ll have to find out by speaking to him.”

“Humans are afraid of villeks.”

“Maybe this one isn’t.”

SAM opens the cargo hold and a warm wind flows into the ship, smelling of brambles, grass, and flowers. Levy sighs and sits down on a cargo box to put on his boots. It’s warm enough outside to just wear his shirt and skirt, but he won’t step onto genk land without boots.

With his tail twitching behind him, Levy gets out of the ship and blinks against the sunlight. How long has it been since sunlight touched his scales without the ship’s windows shielding him?

The scales on his naked arms rise up and flutter in the warm wind. He closes his eyes and lets the wind flow over him, as if it can blow the wariness out of his scales. When he opens his eyes again, he sees the herder at a distance, watching him. Levy raises his hand in a wave, unsure of the protocol. He hasn’t spoken to a human in years.

The human raises his arm too and then runs towards him, expertly jumping over genk holes in the ground. His hair is long, fluttering in the wind, and he keeps waving at Levy. As he comes closer, Levy can make out his smile again, wide and bright, showing his blunt white teeth. Something like fear hisses in his chest. He’s about to talk to a human, a dangerous warrior species, despite their small size and soft skin, and he wants to be his friend.

“Hello, hello!” the human calls out. “I’m so glad you stopped, I’ll be right there, don’t fly away, wait, wait!”

The human comes to a skittering halt, his long hair falling into his face, and he throws it back with a whip of his head. He frowns at Levy and looks past him into the cargo hold of the ship. “You’re alright, are you? Or is this an emergency landing?”

“No,” Levy says, “Not an emergency.”

“Oh, good!” The smile is back and Levy doesn’t quite understand why that makes him happy, but it does.

The human comes a bit closer, stretching his neck to look at Levy. He comes up to Levy’s chest, which makes him average sized for a human. Looking down at him, he notices that the human has brown eyes, which twinkle in the sunlight. Something stirs in his chest as he watches the human, a protective instinct that has absolutely no place here.

“My name is Jake,” the human says, bowing his head once.

“Levy.” He bows his head too, glad that Jake didn’t stretch out his hand for that typical human handshake. Most humans act weird when they touch a Villek’s hand, because of the scales.

“I’m glad you stopped by, Levy, I’ve wanted to meet you for so long.” He turns and points to a couple of keldas stretching lazily in the sun. “I was just about to have some lunch, want to join me? You might have to bring your own food though, I only have a can of soup and some fruits.” He turns back to Levy and looks up at him. “I don’t know if you can eat my kind of food?”

“As far as I know, humans adapted their bodies to this environment, not the other way around.” Levy’s scales flicker as he flinches. He sounds like an annoyed teacher.

“You’re right, everything I can eat, you should be able to eat too.” He shrugs, apparently unfazed by Levy’s tone. “Still, allergies are a thing.” Jake walks away, back to his herd of keldas, but turns around after a few steps. “Are you coming?”

Levy steps forward, pulled by an invisible string, following the human.

“Watch where you step. This whole area is practically hollow from all the tunnels. We’re hoping for some serious rain soon, that’ll collapse the tunnels and settle the ground.”

Levy sets his feet carefully into the dents of Jake’s steps, where the grass hasn’t quite risen again, and listens to Jake chattering on about rain and tunnels and genks and his keldas.

“That brown one over there is Jazzilyn. She needs to be shorn soon, but she doesn’t like it so she always runs away when she suspects me coming to get her.” Jake points to another cat with short, black fur, walking slowly and attentively over to a Genk hole. “That’s Leo, I sheared him yesterday, he loves it. I wish he would tell Jazzilyn how much better it feels to be sheared.”

“The keldas talk to each other?” Levy asks.

“Oh, hell no, I was just kidding.” Jake laughs, a ringing and trilling sound. “If they could talk like that, they would probably conspire against me.” He laughs again and Levy almost loses his footing.

Nobody has told him how wonderful human laughter feels. How it dances on his scales like a song.

“Here, have a seat.” Jake waves at a colorful blanket on the ground, making a nice sitting area in front of a row of boulders. He sits down, stretching his legs out in front of him, and leans against one boulder. Levy does the same but soon finds that his tail gets uncomfortably squished that way and leans sideways against the boulder. It lets him watch Jake easily, and somehow that makes his scales shimmer.

“Look, there comes Shrilla, she’s an important lady.” Jake points to cat with light brown fur, sauntering towards them, her head held high. “Hi girl,” Jake says and holds out his hand until Shrilla rubs her head against it. “How’s my girl doing today?”

Levy stares at Jake’s hands, at the small, extra fingers on them. It looks strange to him how he wiggles his many fingers with the blunt nails. Humans can’t retract their claws, their hands should be useless as weapons, but they’ve proven in the Rek War how far that is from the truth.

The kelda meows as she comes closer and then settles down on the blanket between them, leaning against Jake’s thigh. She glances over to Levy but has apparently decided that he isn’t worthy of her attention and closes her eyes. Jake digs his many fingers into her fur and scratches her neck. With his other hand, he takes a handful of crumbles from his bag. Stroking her head, he holds his hand under her snout and she takes the crumbles with her lips and eats them one by one.

“There are special supplements in these for keldas,” Jake says, “but she only eats them when I give them to her like this.”

Shrilla eats the last piece out of Jake’s hand and, still chewing, lays her head down and closes her eyes. A short while later, she softly snores while Jake strokes over her back.

Jake takes something out of his bag and holds it out to Levy, leaning over so that he doesn’t have to take his hand out of Shrilla’s fur. Shrilla complains anyway, not happy with Jake leaning over her.

Levy quickly takes the fruit from Jake’s hand. It’s a native fruit from this planet, one he mostly knows as tiny bits in the instant rations he normally eats. It has been years since he has bitten into a fresh leilam and he trills as he bites all the way down to the pit, the sweet juice dripping over his chin. The taste is incredible, and he groans in utter enjoyment, his tail curling.

He freezes when he catches Jake staring at him.

“Wow.” Jake laughs a bit, but his eyes are wide, as if he’s scared. “You must really like leilams. And your teeth are so sharp... I need a knife to get through the skin of a leilam.”

Levy turns away and wipes the juice from his mouth. Humans already think of villeks as dangerous beasts, he doesn’t need to play into that prejudice. “Sorry.”

Jake looks at him and smiles. “It’s alright, I was just surprised.” He cuts pieces from the leilam with a small knife and chews slowly, his gaze wandering over the bushes and grass before them.

Levy tries to think of something to say as the silence stretches between them, but he can’t think of anything.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you something.”

Luckily, Jake has no such problems.

“Why are you doing these patrols over this sector?”

Levy’s scales flutter nervously. “To look for threats, to make sure that the colony doesn’t get attacked — “

“I know that, but why you, a villek? Why don’t humans patrol the human settlements?”

Levy stares at him. Does he really not know? Every villek learns about the Rek Wars and how the villeks would have lost to the rek if it weren’t for the humans. How close they were to extinction and how bravely the humans fought for a world and a race of people they didn’t even know.

“You fought for us,” Levy says, swinging his tail in a graceful arc. “This is us repaying you for your selflessness.”

“Oh shit, you really think we are selfless?” Jake shakes his head, his hair flying around. “We are *so not* selfless, we are a greedy, angry, selfish bunch of people and we barely manage to be civilised purely by peer pressure, and by knowing ourselves and making up laws to adhere to.”

Jake looks up to Levy and scrunches up his forehead. “Don’t trust humans. Yes, we helped you but look what we got for it. A whole new continent to fuck up, after we fucked up one entire planet already and an alliance with one of the few species out here who doesn’t want to eat us.” He makes a sound in his throat that puts fear into Levy’s chest. “Well worth the price of a few ships and lives. A bargain, actually.”

Levy doesn’t know what to say to that. “Do all humans think this way?”

“Hell no, only the weird shepherds who live out here to avoid other people.” He wipes his hair back and smiles again, and it warms Levy to see that. “Just, if you meet a human who talks about how great and superior humans are — I know you don’t eat people, but in that case you should probably do it anyway, trust me.”

Jake grins at that, marking his expression as a joke, but there is a bitterness to his tone that has Levy assume he means at least some of the things he said.

“Sorry for being so grumpy, I’m glad that you stopped by, I shouldn’t make you suffer my foul mood.”

Levy trills a question but realizes after a moment that Jake wouldn’t know what he means. “Do you have a reason for your foul mood?”

“Yeah...” Jake sighs and points to a kelda a few steps away from them. “You see the cat that watches you so intently?”

Levy nods. The kelda is indeed staring at him; her tail slowly brushing over the grass.

“That’s Janina, she’s the leader of this pack. To her, I’m also part of her pack and she’s watching you to make sure that you’re not hurting me.”

“I will not.”

Jake smiles at him. “Good to know.” He turns back to look at the kelda. “Janina is old and I’m afraid she’s coming to the end of her reign. Shrilla will probably become the leader soon, but there might be a fight and I don’t like it when they fight.”

“Are their fights dangerous?”

“As in deadly? Yeah, it’s possible.” He digs into his bag again, pulling out a bottle. “Do you want some water? Or another leilam?”

Levy trills negatively and shakes his head. He would love another delicious leilam, but he doesn’t want Jake to see him ripping into the fruit again with his teeth.

“Here,” Jake says, holding out the leilam to him. “It’s alright, I’m not afraid of your teeth. Quite the opposite.”

Levy takes the fruit and bites into it, unable to suppress a trill as the juice spreads in his mouth. When he opens his eyes again, Jake is staring at him. Levy takes another bite, slowly sinking his teeth into the fruit, careful to catch as much juice with his lips and tongue as he can. Jake’s eyes go wide.

Turning the leilam so that he can eat the other side of the pit, he sets his teeth on the skin but hesitates. Jake is still looking at his mouth. Levy frowns at him. “You’re staring at my teeth. You said you aren’t afraid.”

Jake’s golden skin on his cheeks turns pinkish red. “Sorry, I’m not afraid, I swear.” He turns his face away, his hair falling like a curtain over his expression. “I think they’re... they make you look sexy.”

Levy blinks and his tail twitches upwards as if it tries to peek over his shoulder to find out what just happened. “My teeth?”

“Not just your teeth,” Jake says. His cheeks are still red as he turns back to look at Levy. “Your lips, your face, your skin... I think you look...” He turns his face away again and makes a scratching noise in his throat. “I think you look good. Really good. Handsome — “

Jake jumps up and laughs. “Oh god, make me shut up! For someone who lives out here, so he doesn’t have to talk to people, I talk way too much.”

Levy puts the leilam down and licks the remaining juice from his lips. “But I’m glad you said that. Many humans call us ugly.”

“You should eat those too.”

A laugh bubbles up in Levy’s chest, so fresh and new that he can’t quite believe what kind of trills he makes.

Shrilla meows, annoyed at having lost her pillow to sleep on, and Jake leans down to scratch behind her ears. “I’m sorry, girl, but the alien was harassing me.”

Levy rips off the last bit of fruit from the pit, letting the juice drip down, holding Jake’s gaze the whole time. He catches the juice with his tongue and Jake swallows visibly, his skin turning even redder.

“Unfair,” he mumbles, but smiles.

Warmth spreads in Levy’s chest. Jake’s smile is like a kiss from the sun, warming his scales in the morning. He could watch his smile all day.

His comm pings at him and he hisses as he looks at the readout on his arm display. “SAM says I have to go back.”

“Sam?”

“The AI that runs my ship.”

“And here I thought you were hiding a friend on board,” Jake says, combing his hair behind his ears with his fingers.

“He is a friend, in a way, he’s — “ Levy hesitates. A sentient AI is a dangerous secret to keep and could get both of them into serious trouble. “I’ll tell you about SAM some other time. I really have to continue the grid sweep.”

Jake nods. His hair falls over his face and he whips it back again. It looks soft and strangely alive, and Levy wonders what it would feel like to touch it.

“Will you stop by again?” Jake asks.

“Yes.” Levy blurts out the answer before the sound of Jake’s question reaches his ears. He nods and walks back to the ship. SAM lowers the ramp for him and when he stands on it, he turns around once more to wave at Jake. He twirls his tail for him and Jake tries to make the same circular move with his hand and fails at it, laughing out.

The sound of his laughter carries all the way to the ship, and he waves with his arm stretched high above his head. Levy watches him as the ramp closes, sensing and trilling after the sound of Jake's laughter that dances over his scales. He walks back to the cockpit and falls into his seat, his scales gently shimmering in the song of Jake's laughter.

"Starting engines," SAM announces. The sweeper rises and hovers over the area, turning around so that the cockpit faces Jake and his herd again. Levy's scales flutter, the colors shimmering like the waves of Jake's voice.

"Resume grid sweep?" SAM doesn't really need to ask, but politeness is a recent addition to his algorithms.

"Yes," Levy says. "Resume grid sweep."

The ship turns away from Jake and the keldas, and returns to the pre-programmed course. "Levy?"

"Yes?"

"Do you like the shepherd?"

Levy trills softly. "Yes, I do."

"Do you think he likes you too?"

Levy's scales flutter as he smiles. "Yes. Yes, I think he likes me too."

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"Grid locked sweep 227 initiated." SAM's voice should sound exactly the same every time they start a sweep, but this time he sounds a little excited. They cover four grids on their daily monitoring sweeps and they are back on 227 today.

Levy's scales have been shimmering all morning. He hums a melody as he checks over the controls and his tail dances to it. The ship follows the pre-programmed path over the bushy planes, scanning the ground and the sky above. Levy leans forward to look out of the window, his tail tying him to his chair.

"I have an anomaly," SAM says.

"Define."

"Compared to our scans over the last year, some areas have an increase in ground temperature."

Levy sits back down and looks at the map that SAM displays for him. "What does that mean? Suggestions?"

"Unknown. There's no volcanic activity recorded for this part of the continent."

“Any tremors?” Levy scrolls through the data, looking for anything unusual.

“No tremors recorded, I will adjust our sweep pattern for closer intervals.”

“Good.” Levy puts one camera on manual control and scans the area for Jake and his keldas. It takes a long time until he finds them at the edge of the treeline.

“I cannot land right at the trees, but I found a good place,” SAM announces, and the ship gently dives down and settles a few paces away from the trees. Levy hurries to put on his boots and jumps off the ramp before SAM has lowered it entirely.

Levy walks as fast as possible over the treacherous ground, more than once stepping into a genk hole. When he gets closer to the tress, he slows his steps. Jake isn’t alone. Two other humans stand near him, one of them engaged in a heated discussion with Jake. Levy tries to hear what’s being said, but when he is close enough to hear them, the human turns abruptly and stares at him.

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” the human man snarls, glaring at Levy before he turns back to Jake. “What’s that villek doing here? Why do you bring this *thing* here? This is a nice, peaceful settlement, and it’s always you who — “

“Shut the fuck up,” the other person says. Levy can’t quite figure out their gender, the voice is not deep but exudes authority.

The man throws his arms up. “All I’m saying — “

“ — is shit nobody asked you for,” the other human says and narrows their eyes. “Jake doesn’t owe you shit, least of all an explanation for being friends with a villek, you xenophobic fuck.”

Jake looks at them and a slow grin spreads on his face.

The man draws a breath, his eyes going wide and his mouth opening to what looks like a scream, but Jake interrupts him with a grin and fluttering eyelids.

“Really,” he drawls, “if you’re so desperate to know, I’m willing to tell you, just to give you peace of mind. I have befriended this villek because we want to make human-villek babies. Strong babies with ten fingers, tails, and tough scales.”

The man’s face goes deep red, he opens and closes his mouth but no sound comes out.

Jake flutters his eyelids again. “We’re getting real good at making those babies, do you want to watch?”

“What is wrong with you?” the man blurts out at last, spit flying from his mouth. He throws a vicious glare to Levy and then walks away with a huff, stomping and stumbling over the uneven ground until he can climb into a land-speeder and glides away.

Jake waves after him. He looks to the other human, and they both burst out in laughter, bending over and holding their stomachs.

“Oh god, I thought he would just explode,” the human says, wiping tears from their eyes.

“Levy!” Jake calls out and beckons him closer. “Come here.”

He’s still laughing, the sound touching Levy’s senses and making his scales shimmer. He carefully comes closer, his tail swinging from side to side. The other human watches him, but he can see no hostility in their expression.

Jake takes his hand as soon as he’s close enough and pulls him closer. “Levy, this is my good friend Elisabeth, Elisabeth, this is my new best friend Levy.”

Elisabeth bows her head once, folding her hands on her chest. “I’m very happy to meet you, Levy.”

“I’m glad to meet you too,” Levy says. “I must ask, you are female?”

Elisabeth laughs and shrugs her shoulders. “For the most part, yes. I even have children, not that that means much on this planet.”

Levy tries to recall what he read about how humans altered their bodies to live on the planet. But those questions are probably better kept for another conversation. All he can focus on is Jake holding his hand, and it makes his scales shudder and glimmer.

Elisabeth looks him up and down, smiling when her gaze falls on their linked hands. “Jake said he found a friend out here, I never thought it possible, I must say.”

Levy’s tail slings itself around his leg, showing his insecurity. He hardly knows Jake, and he already called him a friend. Can he call him that too, knowing nothing about him? Levy has read that humans are different, that they fall in love easily and lose that feeling just as quickly. Villeks don’t love easily like that, and they don’t forget those feelings either. Will Jake soon forget him again?

Elisabeth’s arm communicator pings, and she looks at it with a frown. “Damn, I have to go, there’s something wrong with the water supply on Paula’s farm.” She looks up at Jake. “Can you manage with Levy’s help?”

Jake smiles at Levy. “Do you think you can hold an angry kelda so I can shear her?” As if on cue, one angry kelda hisses and spits in a cage next to him. She glares at Jake and then Levy, hissing again, showing her impressive teeth. “So angry,” Jake says, letting go of Levy’s hand to bend down to the cage. “Don’t worry, I’ll put a muzzle on her.”

Kelda teeth and claws are at least comparable to villek teeth and claws, but Levy trusts his scales to protect him from the worst. How Jake, with his thin, golden skin, handles those claws is a mystery to him though.

“Yes, I can hold her.” Levy watches Jake’s hands, his many fingers, which never seem to hold still.

Elisabeth claps her hands and nods. “Great! I’ll get going then.” She turns and walks to her glider. Before she gets in, she turns around once more. “It was nice meeting you, Levy!” She

waves and jumps into the vehicle, driving off in a cloud of dust.

Jake kneels in front of the cage with the furious kelda and hums. The sound dances through the air, prickling on Levy's scales. After a while, the kelda seems to calm down a bit, her ears twitching along with her tail. The way her tail twitches speaks to Levy. "She's terrified."

"I know, she must have had a bad experience with shearing. She wasn't originally part of this pack, so I don't know what happened to her." He looks up at Levy. "Now you've met the bad kind of human and the good kind of human."

"You mean I should eat the man?"

Jake laughs out. "Oh yes, you totally should. He probably tastes bad though, like poison. Why someone who is so xenophobic moved to another planet, I will never understand."

"But Elisabeth is nice."

"Yes, no eating her." Jake laughs again, a dancing melody that makes Levy smile just from hearing it. "She often checks on me and the keldas, and helps me with them."

Jake holds his fingertips into the cage between the bars and waits for the kelda to crawl forward to sniff on them. "Come on, pretty little Jazzilyn, come here, I'm not going to hurt you." He gives his voice a little melody as he speaks, and Levy's tail dances to it. Levy can't help it, Jake's humming and singing feels like a soft touch and makes his scales shimmer.

Jazzilyn lashes out once but then seems to decide that Jake won't hurt her and crawls closer to him. Jake opens the cage slowly and slips his hand inside to scratch between her ears. Jazzilyn hisses at first, but then accepts the touch.

"You know, I don't think I can muzzle her," Jake says. "If I do that now, she's gonna freak out again." He draws her out of the cage and strokes over her back, patting down the mass of fur, until she lies down. He keeps his hand on her head and gently pushes her to lie on her side.

Levy goes down on his knees, placing a hand on Jazzilyn's hind legs. She hisses, but Jake hums his melody again and the kelda calms down.

"Can you shear her with one hand?" Levy asks. "I can hold her legs."

Jake keeps humming and nods. He moves his body towards Jazzilyn's head and takes a buzzing tool in his hand. The kelda tenses, but Jake keeps humming his little melody, and she stays still. Levy knows exactly how she feels.

Levy takes Jazzilyn's strong hind legs in his hand and wraps his tail around her front legs, keeping one hand free to hold her head if necessary. But the kelda stays calm, just a growls softly, and her whipping tail tells of her anxiety.

Jake sets the shears into the mass of tangled fur and carefully slides them over Jazzilyn's side. When one side is done, they turn her to the other side, under loud protests from Jazzilyn,

but she doesn’t fight them. At last, Jake wipes the shorn fur off her body and lets go of her head. He fishes a treat from a pocket and nods to Levy to let her legs go.

Jazzilyn immediately sits up and shakes herself. She looks at Jake’s hand with the treat and lashes at it, her claws extended.

“Oh, you just had to do that, didn’t you?” Jake laughs and holds the treat closer to her, despite blood dripping from his wrist where Jazzilyn’s claws got him. Finally, Jazzilyn takes the treat from his hand and carries it away, her tail slashing through the air behind her.

“She had to make a point there,” Jake says, looking after her.

Levy’s tail strains towards Jake, brushing over his back. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s just a scratch.” Jake twists his arm to look at the red line, looking at the blood drops clinging to it. “I’ll just have to disinfect it.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?” A bleeding wound is a serious injury for a villek. Levy’s tail twirls towards Jake’s back, almost touching him again.

“Not really.” Jake looks up to him. They sit so close that he can feel Jake’s body heat on his scales. Even his breathing sounds like a song to Levy.

Jake turns to look over his shoulder, where Levy’s tail is twirling and twisting. “Can I... can I touch your tail?” Jake asks, staring at the pointed tip. Then he frowns. “Oh shit, that was offensive, wasn’t it? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have — “

“You asked, it’s fine,” Levy says and swings his tail forward between them. Some people don’t enjoy getting their tails touched, but to Levy, it isn’t all that different from his hands. It’s not like Jake has a tail of his own to entangle with his, which would be much more intimate.

“Sure?” Jake asks and waits for Levy to nod before he puts his hand on the tail and strokes towards the tip. His fingertips look soft from afar, but on his scaleless tail, they feel slightly rough, providing a little friction. He slides his fingers back up, wrapping them around his tail, and then strokes back down.

Levy bites down on his cheek to stop himself from singing out. This simple touch shouldn’t feel so good, so intimate. It shouldn’t feel like a lover’s caress, but it does.

“It’s so soft and warm,” Jake says, holding Levy’s tail with one hand and stroking it with the other.

Levy’s face heats up, his scales fluttering and shimmering as he swallows down a moan. He wonders how those hands would feel on the scales of his body. Would Jake even like the feeling of his scales? Would he brush over his scales and sing again?

“Is this really alright?” Jake asks, his gaze going from Levy’s eyes down to his throat, where his scales begin. “You’re changing colors there.”

Levy is glad his shirt and skirt hide most of his body. He can feel his scales shimmer all over. “That’s not a bad sign.”

Jake lets go of his tail and watches it slide away. “Alright, thanks for letting me do that. I wondered how it would feel.” He looks at his arm and sighs. “I better take care of this before it dries.” He gets up and walks over to his bag, kneeling down and digging into it until he finds a piece of cloth and some other things.

Levy breathes slowly, calming himself down as best as he can. Jake focuses on disinfecting his arm, wiping the blood away and applying some strong smelling ointment. His hair falls over his face, gently swinging in the wind, and when he looks up again, his eyes peeking through the curtain of hair, Levy’s breath catches in his throat. He can’t suppress the trill escaping from his chest, singing of the warm feeling he gets when he looks at Jake.

“I love it when you make that sound.” Jake throws his hair back and grins. “Does it mean anything?”

Levy stands up, pressing his tail to his leg. He can’t say what it means, not to him. “No, it doesn’t.”

The smile falls from Jake’s face, a frown spreading on his forehead. “Oh, okay.” He searches through his bag again and takes out a leilam. “Do you want a leilam?”

Jake holds out the fruit, looking at him so hopeful and kind, that Levy just wants to take him into his arms and wrap his tail around him. And so much more. The images rising in his mind have nothing to do with simple friendship.

“No, I... I think I have to go.”

“Oh.” Jake looks at the leilam in his hand as if he doesn’t know what to do with it now. He turns back to Levy, something strange glittering in his eyes. “Did I... did I do something wrong?”

Levy’s tail snaps trough the air. “No, I just have to go. The scans are pre-calculated for a set time.” He turns around and walks away, as fast as possible without breaking his ankles by stepping into a genk hole.

“Will you be back?” Jake calls after him.

Levy stops and turns around, raising his arm to wave. “Yes, I will.” He can see Jake smile at that and has to turn away. A song sings in his chest, threatening to come out.

SAM lowers the ramp for him. “You’re back early; we could stay longer if you want.”

Levy drops into his chair and stares at the bulkhead. “I had to get away.”

“Why?”

A trill leaves him, the sound bouncing around in the small cockpit. “I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

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Levy stares at his tray. The bowl of finnori soup looks delicious, but he can't bring himself to eat because a leilam fruit lies next to it. A whole delicious leilam fruit, plump and ripe, just like the ones Jake gave him. The longer he stares at the fruit, the more it feels like a glowing needle drills into his chest.

A tail tips him on the shoulder and his friend and colleague Bellic sits down next to him. "What's the matter with you? You haven't even touched your soup."

Levy looks at the soup and then back to the leilam. "I'm not hungry."

"Ugh, you don't want your leilam then?" Bellic stretches her arm over Levy's tray and tries to take the fruit.

"No!" Levy's hand shoots forward, grabbing Bellic's arm, and his tail snaps hard against his friend's back.

"Rekshit!" Bellic shouts. "What are you on?" Her tail hits Levy's and her trills bite in his ears.

"Sorry," Levy says. He lets go of Bellic, deflating as he sits down again, and sings out an apology that quickly turns into a tone of regret.

"Levy," Bellic says with a gentle undertone singing. "You're not telling me shit, as usual, but whatever is eating at you, stop running away from it."

"You don't understand."

"Naturally." Bellic sits back down and her tail slides along Levy's. "So what's the problem?"

"A friend."

Bellic waits, softly trilling. The sound is a comfort, but it makes him miss Jake's laughter even more and a soft tone rises in his throat.

He sighs, letting the tone sing out and lets Bellic's tail slide down his own. "He's a human."

"Oh." Bellic hums thoughtfully, for once actually surprised. Her tail twists, hovering over Levy's. A question, an offer of comfort, which Levy accepts after a moment, wrapping his tail around hers and allowing himself to let go of his control, just for a bit.

"I've only met him twice, this makes no sense."

Bellic sings softly and then leans forward. "Is this about grid 227?"

Levy stares at her. "I didn't know I was that obvious."

"Levy." Bellic's tails twists around Levy's. "I've known you for over two of this planet's years now and I have never, ever seen you more excited than when grid 227 came up on your

plan. So what if he’s a human, their biology isn’t even that different from ours anymore. I heard some of them develop scales now.”

“Jake doesn’t have scales. I think. “

She trills thoughtfully. “I admit, it is a bit weird, but whatever, I’m sure there’s been weirder things before.”

“Your encouragement is — “

“Alert.” Levy’s communicator interrupts him with an alarm. “Alert, immediate action required.”

“What is it, SAM?” Levy activates the holographic display on the table’s surface and it fills with images and graphs and blinking numbers. “What am I looking at?”

“Volcanic activity in grid 227.” SAM’s voice is cold, fitting for an AI but unlike what Levy is used from him. He hides his sentience well. “A fissure has appeared, spreading rapidly. Lava is threatening local wildlife and settlements.”

Levy runs. Bellic calls after him, but he doesn’t hear what she says.

The engine of his ship is already running, a dock worker hastily pulls the charger away when he sees Levy approach. SAM starts the slow rise from the dock before Levy even sits in his chair.

“Tell me.” Levy hits the displays, enlarging the map of grid 227.

“Volcanic fissure, lava is actively flowing out.” SAM shows a map on the primary screen that looks terribly familiar to Levy. “We need to get closer for me to scan for Jake and his keldas. I’m sorry, Levy, there was no warning.”

“It’s not your fault, you even told me of the temperature increase.” Levy watches for the edge of the dock and accelerates to full speed as soon as the markers are past them. He stares at the map, watching his own indicator approach the grid so very slowly. The ship is screaming from the engine running at full speed, the sound vibrating in his head.

“The fissure is visible now.” SAM enlarges the camera image. “This is where we landed the last time.”

What used to be a fairly even area with brambles growing out of genk holes, is now a yellow glowing crack in the planet’s crust. The main fissure extends far beyond the woods, trees spontaneously exploding as they watch the screen. Several cracks expand to the sides, curving around the woods where just a few days ago they’ve shorn Jazzilyn.

Levy snaps his tail tight to his leg. “SAM.”

“I’m scanning.” The display flickers as SAM converts power to the scanners. “I found several life signs.”

“Where?” Levy stands up, leaning all the way over the cockpit interface, his tail holding him as he stares out of the window. The lava keeps bubbling out of the fissures, covering more and more of the area they’re flying over.

“In the woods.” SAM marks the area on the window with a holographic circle.

Levy strains his eyes, trying to make out movement among the trees. More fissures appear in the ground as he watches, and soon the cluster of trees is surrounded on all sides by burning lava. “Can you land here?”

“Yes. With a certain risk.”

“Do it.”

SAM turns the ship, range scanners beeping as he brushes branches of the trees and several alarms blink on the interface because of the increased heat. He lands on a tiny section of uneven grass, the nose of the ship pointing at the angry red fire of molten stone. The air about the fissure shimmers from the heat, bubbles of lava exploding, spitting glowing lava in the air. The ship’s system throws out a warning of a hazardous environment.

Levy runs towards the back, waiting for SAM to lower the ramp. As soon as he fits through the gap, he jumps out, running towards the cluster of trees. The heat is unbearable, the normally warm wind now carries the burn of molten rocks and flakes of glowing ash with it. The hot air dries his nose out and his skin feels like it’s shrinking in the heat, like his scales are crumbling. He ducks his head, hurrying towards the protection of the trees.

He dives into the dense vegetation under the trees. Branches and brambles cling to him, ripping at his arms and legs, tearing at his clothes.

A screech carries over the noise of the burning wind, guiding him towards a pile of branches. His eyes catch the movement and as he looks, a kelda crawls out of the pile and comes straight to him, yelling at him.

“Jazzilyn?”

The kelda meows, running towards him. Several other keldas follow her out of the bushes, looking at him expectantly.

“Where’s Jake?” Levy asks, as if the keldas could answer him. He stands up to yell into the dense undergrowth. “Jake? Jake!”

The heat is suffocating, the leaves on the trees wilting in front of his eyes. The smell of ash and glowing metal burns in Levy’s nostrils.

Jazzilyn rubs his leg, pressing herself against him with a worried look. Levy tries calling for Jake one more time but all he can hear in answer is the hot wind blowing through the trees and the rumble of the fissure eating into the land. Levy retraces his steps, trying to find a way deeper into the cluster of trees. The keldas cry behind him, following Jazzilyn, who still presses herself against Levy’s leg.

“Jake! Answer me, Jake!”

But instead of Jake’s voice, he hears a raspy growl and a kelda jumps in his way. She is older and Levy recognizes her critical look. It’s Janina, the pack leader. Her fur is singed, she limps, favoring one side of her legs, but she still looks quite capable of attacking him.

Levy calls out Jake’s name again, Jazzilyn joining in with a loud meow. Another vibration runs through the ground, the orange glow of the lava creeping closer to the trees. It gets even hotter, glowing flakes of ash fly past his face. He can’t stay here much longer, already he can hear the cracking of wood where the lava gets too close to a tree.

“Levy.” The sound is almost too quiet to hear over the hissing of the wind and the fire.

“Jake?” Levy bends down, crawling towards the sound he can just make out over the noise. Something moves in the undergrowth, as he comes closer he can make out a tarp under a pile of dead wood and someone is lifting it up.

“Levy?” Jake peeks out from under the tarp. “Oh, thank fuck you’re here.”

Another gust of wind blows burning hot air into Levy’s face, he has to shield his face with his arm. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m okay.”

Levy holds out his hand, making sure that his claws are detracted. “Come out, we have to go, it’s not safe here.”

“But — “

“Jake, the lava is getting closer, we’re going to get burned alive.” Levy creeps closer, peering into the barely protected area under the tarp. He can make out Jake and something lying in his lap.

“It’s Shrilla, she’s in pain, she’s got a burn on her side.”

“It’s not safe here.”

Jake looks at him with pleading eyes. “I can’t leave her.”

Levy holds out his hands. “Give her to me.”

“She’s in pain, she’s gonna scratch and bite you.”

“That’s alright, I can deal with a few scratches.” Levy crawls closer, pushing his hands into the darkness under the tarp. The scales on his back burn from the burning air but he calms his breathing so that he doesn’t project his on tension onto the kelda. She still hisses at him when he touches her, yelling when his hands slide under her body.

She keeps hissing, her claws digging into his arms, but she stays surprisingly calm as he pulls her out from under the tarp and presses her to his chest, careful to not touch her wound.

“Jake, come on, we have to go.”

Levy watches Jake crawl out from under the tarp. He seems to be unhurt except for a few scratches on his arms and legs. He’s not wearing any protection, just a shirt and short trousers.

“Go in front of me,” Levy says. Maybe he can shield Jake from the heat if he keeps the red glow of the lava behind his back. The keldas gather around Jake, running and jumping over the undergrowth, occasionally looking over their shoulders at the wall of fire that seems to follow them.

Levy’s communicator pings, and SAM’s voice sounds out over the howling of the burning wind. “The ground is getting unstable.”

“We’re coming, SAM, keep the ramp down.” Levy runs as fast as he can, stumbling and almost dropping Shrilla sometimes.

A blue light shines between the trees and Levy turns towards it. “There’s the ship, SAM put on the light for us.”

“Very clever, your SAM,” Jake presses out between coughs. He holds an arm to his face and his eyes water. Twigs and branches scratch him as he runs, and how his skin doesn’t get torn to shreds, Levy can’t begin to understand.

Jumping over a fallen tree, the cluster of trees opens up, the blue light of the floodlights shining around the open ramp. The ship is hovering, its front legs already too close to the fissure to provide stability.

“Kee, kee, kee!” Jake calls out, waving at the keldas. They look at the ship, halting in their steps, and turn to Janina. The old kelda goes to Jake and rubs her head against his leg. “Kee, kee!” Jake calls out again and jumps up on the ramp. He kneels down and helps Janina up and as soon as her feet touch the metal, the other keldas jump up too and run into the ship.

SAM’s voice comes from Levy’s communicator. “Tell the keldas not to jump on the controls in the cockpit.”

Levy chuckles, which turns into a cough from the ash in the air. “I don’t think they’ll listen. Turn off the controls and start as soon as we’re all inside.”

The last kelda, a tiny ball of fluff, jumps up and down in front of the ramp, too small to get up. Before Levy can reach the little thing, a kelda jumps back down, grabs the baby at the neck with her teeth and jumps back on the ramp with her. Levy follows her, ignoring the pricking of Shrilla’s claws as he rattles her.

“Go SAM, go go.”

The ramp closes as SAM raises the ship up. Burning flakes of ash blow into the ship until the ramp is finally up and the ship is sealed. The filters whine as they clear the air of particles and cool it down.

Levy kneels down, placing Shrilla on a pile of clothes. Jake is by his side in an instant, checking the wound at her side.

“You’re gonna be fine, girl, it’s alright.”

Shrilla whines, her hind leg twitching.

Levy hands Jake a disinfectant and a spray with gel wound covering and watches Jake’s slim hands cleaning the wound. He ignores Shrilla’s hissing and crying, and Levy holds her legs to stop her from scratching Jake.

“I know you’re hurting, girl,” Jake says, that sing song melody in his voice again. “Just a little bit more, we’re gonna get you all covered and then you can go. It’s going to be alright, girl, Levy is here, it’s gonna be alright.”

The singing voice calms Shrilla down and when Jake gives him a sign, Levy lets go of her legs. She stays calm, letting Jake finish spraying the gel on her wound.

“All done,” Jake sings, stroking over her head. He leans back on his heels and lets out a sigh. In the next moment, he throws his arms around Levy’s neck and buries his face in his neck. “Thank you, thank you for coming.”

Levy needs a breath to react to Jake crying into his neck. But then, before Jake can move away from his lap, he puts his arms around his torso and lets his tail stroke over his back.

“I’m...” Levy’s tongue is stuck in his throat, his thoughts a jumble. It feels so good to have Jake in his arms and tail. He expected it to be strange, to hold this small, soft body with his delicate skin and his too many fingers. But it feels right. It feels like he has been waiting for this all his life.

“I’m glad I found you,” Levy says, pressing his nose into Jake’s hair. “Are you unhurt?”

“Just a few scratches,” Jake mumbles, his lips moving against the skin of Levy’s neck, making him shudder.

“We should check those scratches over,” Levy says, making no move to let go of Jake. His tail glides up Jake’s back, tangling with the hair at his neck.

“I know.” Jake seems to be equally disinterested in letting go, instead he presses closer to Levy, moving his lips over his neck.

Levy can’t stop a trill rising from his chest. His scales flutter with his voice, he can feel them shimmering.

Jake leans back, looking at his chest, where the shirt reveals some of Levy’s scales. “You shine in different colors. And you vibrate.” He looks up at Levy’s face. “Is that a good sign?”

Levy laughs out. “Yes it is, and I think you know that.”

Jake grins at that. “Yeah, I read up on that.” He slides his fingers up Levy’s neck, towards the edge of his head-scales. “I also read that you’d like to be touched there.”

Levy grabs Jake’s wrist before he can touch the highly sensitive edge of his scales.

Jake’s face falls. “Or not, I’m sorry, I just assumed — but I shouldn’t have, I know, this is not — “

Levy pulls him forward and presses his scale edge against Jake’s forehead. “You assumed correctly. But we have to check those scratches first and I cannot think if you... if you do that.”

“Oh.”

Levy can hear the smile in Jake’s voice.

“You mean if I do this — “ Jake changes the angle somehow and brushes his lips over Levy’s face — “you’ll be alright?”

Levy growls, holding onto his last shred of self-control. “No, please, let me just — “

Jake slides off his lap and grins. “I know, I know.” He grabs the disinfectant and a sterile pad and starts to clean the scratches on his arm.

Levy holds out his hand. “Let me do that.” His tail swings carefully behind him.

Jake hands him the pad and stretches his arms forward.

Levy shakes his head. “You have to take off your shirt, I need to treat your back too.”

Jake takes off what is left of his shirt and then stands up to drop his shorts. He is completely bare, and Levy can’t stop himself from staring.

“I swear this is not a come-on,” Jake says, “but I know the shit got me everywhere.”

Levy stands up and stares at Jake’s cock, nestled in red hair and looking not all that different from his own. Shorter, at least in its softened state. Veins run along it and the skin looks incredibly soft. He stops himself from touching it, dragging his eyes away. “Turn around,” he manages to say.

One look at Jake’s back sobers him up quickly. Jake’s back is covered with bleeding marks, deep cuts that look like he’s been viciously whipped. One cut runs all the way over his back and down his thigh. There’s a mark on his side where the skin looks burned. Levy takes a breath, puts more disinfectant on the pad and wipes over every cut and burn.

Jake hisses through his teeth, his fingers clenching at his sides.

“Sorry,” Levy says.

“It’s alright.”

The ship sways, and Jake puts a hand on the bulkhead to keep his balance. Levy links his tail to one of the support beams and continues cleaning the various cuts all over Jake's body. At last, he dabs at the burn at his side. As expected, Jake hisses again, his fingers clenching so hard that it looks like he tries to dig into the bulkhead.

"Sorry."

Jake lets out a groan. "It's not too bad."

"It'll be better when the gel covers it." Levy puts the disinfectant away and uses the gel spray on the burn. Jake visibly relaxes when the gel cools on the wound. Levy adjusts the nozzle and sprays over the cuts on Jake's back and thighs. "Turn around."

Jake turns slowly, keeping one hand on the bulkhead. He keeps his head low, his hair falling over his face.

Levy sucks in a breath, desperately avoiding to search for Jake's eyes. If he sees anything in his eyes that meets his imagination, he won't be able to stop himself. His tail swings close to Jake and he actively snaps it back, keeping it pressed to his leg. It takes all his focus to apply the gel to the cuts and scratches on Jake and to not find unmarred patches of skin to touch with his fingertips.

"I think I'm done," he says, putting the spray away, very much not looking at Jake. "How does it feel?"

Jake is silent for so long that Levy slowly turns back to him, trying to see the expression he hides behind his curtain of hair. "Jake?"

"It's fine, it's..." He finally lifts his head and looks at Levy. "I know this is the stupidest moment of time for this, but — can I kiss you?"

Levy's tail snaps forward, the momentum dragging him forward a step. He stares at Jake, at the hopeful but careful smile on his soft lips. "But you're hurt."

"I don't care." Jake stretches upwards, closing the distance between them. "Can I?"

Levy's tail touches Jake's leg, soft, warm, strong, soft, so soft, soft — "Yes."

Jake slides his hand behind Levy's neck and pulls him down. Their lips touch, gently, just a careful brush, but then Jake tightens his grip and opens his lips, pressing forward, his blunt tongue dipping forward, ignoring Levy's sharp teeth. As their tongues touch and their lips press against each other, Levy's thoughts come to a complete halt.

His hands strain towards Jake's body but he hovers, not daring to touch his injured skin. His tail brushes against Jake's leg and he flinches.

Jake moves back, causing Levy to strain after him, until their lips don't touch anymore. "What is it, did I hurt you?" Jake asks.

Levy trills urgently. "No, I'm afraid of hurting *you!* You are injured, everywhere."

Jake laughs out and bows his head. “Not the time, I know, but I — “ He puts his hands on either side of Levy’s face and pulls him down until his forehead presses against Levy’s scale edge. “I’ve been dreaming about this.”

Levy hums, his scales shimmering. “Since when?”

“Since you waved back and landed.”

Levy hums again, his song forming to Jake’s touch against his scales. “It was actually SAM, who landed. I may have never gotten brave enough.”

“Thank you, SAM,” Jake says.

“You’re welcome.” SAM’s voice fills the ship, causing the keldas to look up and search for him. “I wanted to make Levy happy.”

“Well, you made me happy too.” Jake lowers his voice. “SAM is not your usual AI, is he?”

“No.” Levy lets out a soft trill, pressing his scale edge against Jake again. “No, he isn’t.”

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“Approaching Sector Geron 12, grid 227.” SAM flies a curve, giving Levy and Jake a view over what used to be the pasture for the herd.

Levy wraps his arm around Jake’s waist and holds them both anchored with his tail as they lean towards the window. The landscape under them looks like a foreign planet. What used to be a harsh but fertile landscape is now just black with cold lava, bulging from the ground like giant pustules.

“Is that the woods where you got us out?” Jake points at burned trees, sticking out of the black mass like chopsticks in frozen pudding.

SAM’s voice sounds through the ship. “Affirmative. I’m at the exact coordinates where I waited last time.”

Jake presses closer to Levy, his small body somehow fitting perfectly to Levy’s. “I would have died here without your help.”

Levy calms his beating heart with a hum, singing, filling the surrounding space with sound. It’s the sound that represents Jake to him, how his laughter feels on his scales. The keldas purr along with the song, huddling together and grooming each other.

Jake looks up at him. “That is a song for me, isn’t it? You sang this yesterday too, when I healed.”

“I thought you were sleeping.”

“I was. But then I heard you.” Jake slides his hand up over Levy’s neck, just barely touching the scales as they flutter under his many fingers.

A shudder runs through Levy and he closes his eyes as the sound of his hum dances around them, brushing over his scales. “That song, that is you.”

“This is me?” Jake looks around, as if he can see the waves of sound traveling through the air, reflecting and bouncing off the bulkhead.

“Yes, this is how you feel to me.”

Jake listens and then grins up to Levy. “I’m catchy.”

Levy laughs out and Jake’s laughter joins in, changing the sounds that dance over his scales.

“Approaching grid 228,” SAM announces. The speeder sinks lower and SAM lands the ship in the middle of an open field. This area looks similar to grid 227. The trees are younger and smaller, just barely reaching over the bramble bushes. But the ground has the familiar unevenness and holes from genk tunnels.

“I think the keldas will be happy here,” Jake says.

The keldas are nervous, meowing, filling the small space with more sounds. They feel that something is happening. But they all watch Janina and Shrilla, waiting for their reaction.

“I’m detecting many small life forms underground. Most likely genk-beetles,” SAM says.

“You hear that, Shrilla?” Jake walks over to Shrilla and scratches between her ears. “Tasty, tasty genk-beetles.”

“I’m lowering the ramp now.”

Jake strokes over Shrilla’s back. “Is it safe?”

“Yes,” SAM says with a gentle undertone. “This area has been scanned several times, no volcanic activity has been detected.” The ramp touches the ground and fresh, warm wind fills the inside of the ship.

Jake leans down to Shrilla and Janina and whispers. “Off you go then, girls. Show your pack around.”

Janina makes a croaking noise and Shrilla meows and jumps out. The pack follows her; the keldas spreading out between the bushes. Janina follows them slowly, taking her steps carefully. At one point she halts, waits, and then jumps forward with extended claws. She straightens again and looks back to the ship, a genk beetle in her mouth.

“I think they will be happy here,” Jake says.

“Closing ramp,” SAM announces.

“What?” Levy turns to the controls, watching the readout of the external sensors. “Why are you closing the ship?”

The light inside the cabin changes to a soft orange, and a gentle hum fills the room.

“What are you doing, SAM?”

“Human senses are attuned to light, equivalent to how villeks are attuned to sound,” SAM says.

“It’s certainly cozy,” Jake says. He comes back to Levy, a smile on his lips. “Is SAM trying to seduce me?”

“It looks like it,” Levy says, struggling to sound serious.

“I am not,” SAM says, putting an indignant trill under his voice.

Jake grins even wider and steps closer. “You look good in this light.”

Levy’s scales shimmer. “Some privacy, SAM?”

“External sensors only.”

Jake steps closer with a chuckle, putting his hands on Levy’s waist and pulling himself closer.

Levy trills, his tail snapping around behind him. “Is this really okay for you?”

“I would prefer the shirt and the skirt to be gone, but yes, this is okay for me.” Jake slides his hand under the hem of Levy’s skirt, mapping the patterns in Levy’s scales with his fingertips. “Is this okay for you?”

Levy holds out his hand, palm up, his claws extended. “Are you not afraid?”

Jake looks at the hand and grabs it firmly with his soft and surprisingly strong hand. Keeping his gaze on Levy, he extends his tongue and licks up his longest finger to the tip of the claw.

Levy sings out with a breath, his tail twisting up and around Jake’s arm. “Can I see you?”

Jake strokes over Levy’s tail around his arm and carefully peels it off him. He slides his hand to the tip of it and raises it to his mouth. Looking at Levy, he wraps his lips around the tip and sucks on it.

Levy draws in a desperate breath, a growl rising in his chest under his hum. “Jake, please. Let me see you.”

Jake lets the tail glide from his hands and unceremoniously shrugs out of his shirt and trousers, standing naked in front of Levy in seconds. “Now you.”

Levy pulls his shirt off with equal urgency and almost rips his skirt as he pushes it down.

Jake steps closer again, putting his hands on Levy’s chest. “Does the sound feel differently now?”

Levy looks at him, extending his hum and feeling it dance over Jake’s skin. “Yes, it does, how do you know?”

“Without the clothes, with the sound waves reflecting off skin, the sound should change, I think.”

A happy trill sings out of Levy, touching and reflecting on Jake’s skin. “I wish I could explain how beautiful it sounds.”

Jake trails his fingers over Levy’s chest. “Maybe it’s like how beautiful your scales look to me? How the light dances over them and they move with it, shimmering in different colors, a wave of glittering light I can chase with my finger.” He follows a pattern on Levy’s scales, up his sides and towards his shoulders, pulling himself against his body so that his naked chest touches his scales. “All this light on you, and I can touch it.”

“Jake.” The longing in Levy’s chest is almost painful, a need rising in him that no song can accurately convey. He leans down and trills over the curve of Jake’s neck, following the sound dancing along the elegant dip with his tongue. He licks up to Jake’s ear, tasting the saltiness of him.

Drawing in a sharp breath, Jake presses closer to him. “I want to touch you everywhere,” he whispers.

Levy shudders. He keeps his mouth over Jake’s neck, his lips brushing against the skin. “I want that too.” He never wanted anything more in his life.

“Can we lie down?”

A pile of blankets, where the keldas had been resting, looks comfortable enough and Levy sits down, watching Jake from below for once. A smile spreads on Jake’s face as he steps between Levy’s legs. He is a glorious sight, all skin and hair and his hard cock beautifully bending upwards, which is at least comparable to Levy’s own hardness.

“Close your legs,” Jake says, and steps to the outside of Levy’s thighs when he does. He lowers himself down, straddling Levy’s legs, and leans forward. He kisses his chest, soft lips brushing over scales, while his body presses against Levy’s cock. His whole body seems to be made of liquid moving against Levy, touching him everywhere.

Levy fills the room with a keen, a needy sound that should embarrass him but doesn’t. This is real. His desires are real, and Jake’s touch is real.

Jake kisses over his stomach, his hands pressing into Levy’s waist. Levy strains towards his touch, pressing his hips up to feel more of him. His tail twitches, brushing over Jake's head. But Jake scoots lower and a sound of loss leaves his chest.

“Wait,” Jake says. “Let me just — “ He lies flat on Levy’s legs, his many fingers stroking over Levy’s thighs. He leans down and after one look up at Levy, licks a long, slow trail up Levy’s hard cock. And then he wraps his lips around it.

The sound rising from Levy’s chest tells the whole universe what he’s feeling but he doesn’t care. He cries and sings as pleasure rises in him, Jake reducing his thoughts to the wet heat around his cock.

With a pop, Jake lets go and slides up Levy’s body. “Hey, are you okay there?”

Levy comes back to his body with a startled breath, searching for Jake’s eyes. “Yes, I am, why?”

“Those are good sounds?”

Levy trills softly and presses his nose into Jake’s hair. “Yes, they are. Very good sounds.”

“Ok good, I had to ask. Then I love hearing them.” Jake puts his leg over Levy, pressing his erection against Levy’s. He wraps his hand around both their cocks. “But I also love seeing you, how your scales twinkle.” He moves his hand up and down, his many fingers silky and firm.

Levy’s scales shimmer, and Jake smiles at him. “So beautiful. Those sounds, I want to hear them again.” His grip gets firmer, and he moves his hand faster. His eyes flutter closed as he moans.

Levy keens again, his voice filling the room. Pleasure rushes up his back, his scales fluttering and shimmering. Jake’s moan brushes over his scales, weaving into his own keen, making a sound that is only *them*. It touches them, dances over them, filling the space around them as they both spill over Jake’s hand.

For a while, only the sound of their breathing can be heard. Jake cuddles up to Levy, pressing his cheek against Levy’s chest. "I have to thank SAM."

Levy brushes over Jake's hair, wiping it away from his face. "I have to tell him he was right."

Jake turns his head upwards to look at him. "About what?"

"Back then, he said that maybe this one isn't afraid of villeks."

Jake smiles, caressing Levy's neck with his fingers. "No, this one isn't."

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